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Mina S. with Zane Buzby in Belarus. Photo by Ludmila M.

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Americans don't forget Eastern Europe's survivors

By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor

Galina Isakovna's life has never been easy.

She was 3 months old in 1922 when a pogrom broke out in her Belarusian village. As a band of anti-Semitic thugs stormed her family's home, her mother quickly stashed her under a bed. When the intruders entered the room, cutting up the feather pillows with bayonets, her mother prayed that her baby wouldn't cry. Miraculously, the entire family survived.

During World War II, Galina served as one of the Russian army's first women aerial gunners and as a bombardier mechanic. She fought on the Second Ukrainian Front, and when her arm was mangled in an attack, part of a bone was replaced with a metal plate.

Today she's confined to a wheelchair, disabled with multiple ailments, and she rarely leaves her apartment in Brest, Belarus, because she can't navigate the staircase.

Despite her infirmities, she has cared for her bedridden husband -- feeding, washing and repositioning him; changing his linens; and reading to him from Jewish newspapers -- for the last 13 years. She is ill herself, yet she cried to God to stay alive so she could continue tending to him.

But when she received $300 and was able to buy a washing machine, her life improved; she was no longer exhausted from washing all her husband's clothing and soiled bed sheets by hand. And when he died last August, after languishing in a coma from a second stroke, she got another $600, enough to pay for his burial and tombstone.

"I didn't think I could survive it, but now I want to live a little," she said.

Galina's renewed sense of hope for her future -- for the chance to relax and to read and memorize her beloved poems about Victory Day -- comes as a result of the work of comedy director/producer Zane Buzby and the Survivor Mitzvah Project, a nonprofit humanitarian organization that brings direct financial assistance to about 700 elderly and ill Holocaust survivors in Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Lithuania.

"These are people who have fallen through the cracks and have nowhere to turn," said Buzby, who is determined to drastically improve as many lives as she can.

Buzby is accomplishing her goal with the help of philanthropist and fellow Angeleno S. Chic Wolk, with whom she co-founded the Survivor Mitzvah Project in 2004, and with Russian translator Sonia Kovitz, who lives in Columbus, Ohio, who joined them in 2005. All are volunteers.

The three malokhim fun Amerike (angels from America), as the survivors call them, assist not only by sending money but also, and even more critically, by providing friendship and hope to people who are among Eastern Europe's poorest, loneliest and most forsaken Jews.

Additionally, they are helped by Ludmila M., a Belarusian non-Jewish English teacher "with a heart of gold," according to Buzby, as well as an aging survivor in Moldova, who is destitute himself and asked not to have his identity revealed.

Many of the survivors, currently ages 70 to 100, are ill with such ailments as heart disease, diabetes, digestive disorders and thyroid cancer. Many never married, others have outlived their spouses and children and some are caring for disabled or mentally ill offspring.

Additionally, many have limited or no vision, and most have no teeth. And almost all experience numbing loneliness, some because they are immobile and confined to a walk-up apartment, and some because they are the sole surviving Jew in their family or village.

Since they are not officially Holocaust survivors -- they were not imprisoned in ghettos or concentration camps -- they are not eligible for reparations from the German government. Nonetheless, they were forced to flee their homes and lost everything, often including parents, siblings, a spouse or fiancé, children and all personal belongings, even photographs.

"I don't remember what my mother looked like. I don't remember her face," Taya S. of Ukraine told Buzby.

Whatever pensions or savings accounts they had accumulated were obliterated when the communist regimes of the former Soviet Union collapsed. Prior to that time, depending on their ages, they also suffered through the Russian Revolution, World War I, the famines of the 1930s, World War II, Stalin and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

"These people have not gotten one break since the day they were born," Buzby said.

What the Survivor Mitzvah Project does for these survivors -- and what other Jewish social service organizations, such as the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), cannot do because monetary gifts are taxable, according to JDC CEO Steven Schwager -- is provide direct cash allotments, enabling them to supplement their meager pensions, often as low as $16 a month, to purchase essential and specific foods, medications and services.

For Raza S., the money covered a $400 eye operation that returned her sight. For Hirsh P., the funds provided three new, well-fitting windows in his 80-year-old apartment that now protect him and his wife from the icy winds of winters past. And Nina B., who suffers from diabetes and kidney problems, can now receive insulin and other vital medications.

"A dollar or $1.50 a day can make a substantial difference to these people," said Buzby, who would ideally like to provide each one with $50 to $100 per month. But with about 700 individuals needing help, and with limited resources, this is not possible.

While Buzby is always doing triage, making critical decisions about how the funds are distributed, she stresses that all the monies go directly to the survivors, whose economic situation has been carefully vetted beforehand. There is no paid staff, and any expenses, such as postage, are covered by her or Wolk.

Buzby disperses funds through a complicated and secure network, either as checks or cash sent through registered mail or money wired to local couriers. And this past August, she herself took an emotional 16-day whirlwind trip to Lithuania and Belarus, distributing $25,000, as well as mezuzahs, Stars of David and other small gifts such as magnifying glasses and compact mirrors, to about 100 survivors, whom she met in person for the first time.

"For me to go there and for them to know someone came to see them was so astounding," Buzby said.

In Lithuania, a member of the European Union, all 25 survivors affiliated with the Project have bank accounts and can receive checks. In Belarus, Ludmila M., Buzby's "boot on the ground," delivers the funds twice a year to 50 survivors in Brest, Grodno and Pinsk. Another 50, living in scattered villages, are sent their funds in registered letters. The 80 survivors in Ukraine also receive their funds via regular and registered mail.

And in Moldova, where letters are routinely ripped open, Buzby wires the money to her humanitarian survivor, a gentleman in his 80s, who personally delivers the supplements to 320 very needy elderly Jews, traveling to eight different cities several times a year.

"It's a really sad situation," Buzby said, noting that Moldova is not only Europe's poorest country but is also experiencing a severe drought that has reduced crops and raised food prices.

For each survivor, every outgoing payment, as well as all correspondence, is logged in and tracked, and Buzby painstakingly ascertains that the intended recipients receive all monies.

But money is only one part of the mitzvah. The other, equally valuable, is the friendship and hope that Buzby, Wolk and translator Kovitz bring the survivors.

"A letter from America is just as incredibly golden today as it was in 1911," Buzby said, noting that each survivor, except those in Moldova where the mail is unreliable, receives a personal letter, written in Russian, every six to eight weeks, along with an addressed return envelope for the reply. Some have never previously received letters.

Buzby, Wolk and Kovitz send holiday greetings and share their family histories. They also send photos of themselves and their relatives, which occupy places of honor in the survivors' home. The three become family for the survivors, who read and reread their letters, admire the photographs and worry when they don't hear from them.

"I do not feel alone now. I now have, even though at a great distance, a large close family, which is doing a great mitzvah," Fira B. wrote.

"I have the honor to count you in the cohort of my life-savers, who merit the exclusively important role in saving me from death, on a par with those who saved me from the fascists and those who helped me during my eight years in the Stalinist death camp," Aron B. wrote.

"I have been accustomed to hunger since childhood. I wanted at least in old age to live in a human way. Thank you very much that you do not forget me," Raisa K. wrote.

Just six years ago, in 2001, Buzby had no idea that destitute Holocaust survivors were living in these countries. At the time, on hiatus from directing a television comedy pilot, Buzby decided to take a 10-day trip to Belarus to visit and film the former shtetls of her grandmothers, who both immigrated to the United States as young girls.

Buzby had always been passionately attracted to Eastern Europe, studying the "great immigration" and the Holocaust. Stopping first in Lithuania, she attended a presentation at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute by Dr. Dovid Katz, director and founder of the Institute and author, among other books, of "Words on Fire: The Unfinished Story of Yiddish." Katz showed videos of interviews he had conducted with aging Holocaust survivors, traveling to remote villages to document their native Yiddish language and folklore.

When Katz heard about Buzby's planned excursions, he asked her, knowing she had a car with a driver and translator, "if she wouldn't mind" making a few detours to bring food, medicine, American dollars and Yiddish newspapers to eight elderly Jews.

Buzby didn't mind. And the next day, after traveling down a dirt road in the village of Volozhin, she found herself in front of a small green wooden hut.

"Hello, hello?" Buzby called out as she knocked on the door. No one answered. She called out again, "Shalom Aleichem."

Presently, coming around the house from the backyard, a diminutive old man appeared. He was disheveled and dirty, with no teeth, and he carried gardening tools in his hands.

"I'm digging up my potatoes," he explained to Buzby and the translator in a mixture of Russian, Yiddish and Hebrew. "I am 80 years old."

The survivor, Zeydl Katz (no relation to Dovid Katz), invited them inside, to a place that "looked like it had never been cleaned," according to Buzby. He was grateful for the gifts and the company, telling them that he had once been a yeshiva student.

Buzby went on to visit the others on Katz's list and was amazed to see people and life like this.

"I had seen pictures in books, but from 100 years ago," she said, adding that in those villages, where cars were a rarity, she saw barefoot girls leading the family's cow through the streets. She also witnessed residents digging up potatoes and storing them in their root cellars for the winter, along with nuts and berries they had collected in the forests.
Once home, Buzby, who could not get these people out of her mind, began sending them small amounts of money. Not knowing Russian, she would ask anyone who spoke with anything resembling a Russian accent -- strangers at the gas station or the refrigerator repair shop -- to translate a few lines for her. Usually her notes read, "Best wishes for your good health," and she would add a hand-drawn heart and a Star of David.

Eventually the list of eight grew to 35. Dovid Katz, who was continuing his academic expeditions, came across more and more survivors living in dismal poverty. While he would empty his own pockets out on the spot, it was "just an awful frustration" because he knew they'd have nothing afterward. He began forwarding their names and addresses to Buzby.

"I was always looking for someone to take over the humanitarian component and couldn't find anyone till fate and her wonderful hand brought me together with Zane," Katz said.

For two years, with the list continuing to increase, Buzby was essentially running a one-person show, using her own money and what she solicited from friends and relatives.

But fate played a part again when Buzby found S. Chic Wolk, a supporter of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, who was also greatly concerned about the survivors' welfare. They agreed to team up, with Wolk providing the funds and Buzby carrying out the work. Wolk, 81, the Project's biggest benefactor, now contributes $7,000 every three months.

"I contribute more every time I read one of their letters," he admitted.

Fate also played a hand when Buzby found Sonia Kovitz, who has a doctorate in Russian and who now speaks of the Survivor Mitzvah Project as her "calling."

She and Buzby compose the letters primarily via e-mail, with Buzby printing out the translated copies in Russian and assembling the mailings. Kovitz has also organized an extensive and searchable database of survivors and is compiling online files with copies of all the correspondence, in Russian and English.

There also continues to be, according to Dovid Katz, a "wonderful and inspiring symbiotic relationship between the Survivor Mitzvah Project and the Vilnius Yiddish Institute," with Katz carefully vetting each survivor's financial status and determining need.

The Survivor Mitzvah Project also complements the work of the Lithuanian Jewish Community, which is supported by the Joint Distribution Committee and which provides food as well as home care and other services to survivors in Vilnius and four other towns. But the Lithuanian Jewish Community must balance welfare programs for the elderly with educational, religious and cultural activities for the country's entire population of 5,000 Jews, with $250,000 of the Community's annual budget of $740,000 earmarked for social services. (The Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles provides direct funding, amounting to $350,000 in 2007, to the Jewish communities of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia for specific cultural and educational activities.)

"We cannot cover all the needs," said Simon Gurevich, 26, executive director of the Jewish Community in Lithuania. He noted that out of 1,387 Holocaust survivors registered in Lithuania, 1,075 require some kind of assistance. Of those, 103 people are currently on a waiting list for food.

The total number of Holocaust survivors in Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova is unknown. "We can't even give a decent estimate," said Aaron Breitbart, senior researcher at Los Angeles' Simon Wiesenthal Center.

But according to Katz, who has been conducting expeditions since 1992, there are thousands, with most living in abject poverty.

"What are we waiting for? We can't wait," Buzby said.

Buzby would like to work more closely with established organizations. In the meantime, she is desperately seeking increased funding for everyday essentials like food and medicine as well as for cataract surgeries and other procedures. If possible, she would like to enlist the aid of dentists to make false teeth and pharmaceutical companies to donate arthritis creams, aspirin and other medicines.

She would also like congregations, havurahs and b'nai mitzvah students to adopt individual survivors. And she is always seeking Russian translators to assist Kovitz and volunteers to help her so she can continue to make a difference in survivors' lives.

"I want them to know before they go that there are people on this earth who are not bad," Buzby said.

For more information about the Survivor Mitzvah Project or to make a donation, call (800) 905-6160 or visit http://www.survivormitzvah.org

Also see:

* The Lower East Side Restoration Project
* The Vilnius Yiddish Institute
* The Jewish Community of Lithuania

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Cover Story

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These are the faces of the fighters, the survivors
By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor

S. Chic Wolk

For S. Chic Wolk, studying at the month-long Summer Program in Yiddish in 1988, then held in Oxford, England, was "a rewarding but expensive" experience.

The Los Angeles resident, who had been raised by Yiddish-speaking immigrant parents in Chicago, was gratified to have his love of Yiddish rekindled. But it cost him, he said, laughing, because he fell under the sway of Dovid Katz, the program's director.

Wolk remained in touch with Katz. And in 2001, when the Friends of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute was created as an independent, nonprofit educational foundation to support the Vilnius Yiddish Institute, Katz invited Wolk to serve as chairman.

Katz also wanted to find ways to financially assist the elderly survivors in some systematic fashion. Wolk tried, even placing a small ad in The Jewish Journal, but he quickly realized such an undertaking presented too great a logistical challenge.

Eventually he received one call, from Buzby, with each hoping the other would provide a solution. Instead, after much discussion, they agreed to co-found the Survivor Mitzvah Project.

Last spring, Wolk, a retired businessman and the honorary consul of the Kyrgyz Republic, cruised down the Ukraine's Dnieper River. Along the way, he had the opportunity to meet 10 of the survivors. "To see some of them breaks your heart. You want to send more and more money," Wolk said.

Sonia Kovitz

The warmth of Sonia Kovitz's Lithuanian grandparents sparked in her a powerful and lifelong fascination with Eastern European Jewish life.

At 17, Kovitz began learning Russian, eventually earning a doctorate, and also creating collages depicting shtetl life. Later, she studied with professor Dovid Katz at his month-long Summer Program in Yiddish at the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

Kovitz began volunteering for the Survivor Mitzvah Project initially as a favor to her Los Angeles-based sister, who had taken the family samovar to Buzby to be repaired and had learned about the project's need for translators. After nine months of occasional help, she was suddenly struck by the immensity of Buzby's undertaking and its significance for the survivors, and decided to make a deeper commitment.

Fluent in both English and Russian, Kovitz successfully bridges the two cultures and can actually feel the survivors' level of formality give way to intimacy over time. "They realize we're not going away," she said.

Now, about to retire from her job as faculty data project liaison at Ohio State University, she plans to volunteer full time on the Survivor Mitzvah Project, continuing to work via computer from her Columbus, Ohio, home. "This is why I got my doctorate," she said.

Raisa P.

To save money, Raisa P. moved from Grodno, Belarus, to a village near the

Lithuanian border. She lives alone in a hut with three small rooms and broken windows. There's no indoor plumbing; she trudges outdoors to pump her water from a well or use the outhouse, no matter what the weather.

She saves even more money by growing all her own foods, mostly potatoes and squash. She also raises chickens, collecting the eggs and killing the birds for Shabbat dinners.

But her health is poor. Even though she is only 70 and one of the youngest survivors, she suffers from a bad heart condition and kidney disease. Walking, as well as all that physical labor, is difficult for her.

Raisa does not talk about her family history; she is still clearly traumatized by the war years.

Mera A.

Mera A., 82, is one of only six Jews still residing in the small Lithuanian village of Mariampol and the only one who was raised there. She lives with her son and severely retarded adult daughter, who receives no social service assistance. Her

husband died of liver cancer in 1992. Mera suffers from lung and heart problems and walks unsteadily, rarely venturing outside.

Teenage hooligans frequently target Mera and her family in anti-Semitic attacks. Two years ago they destroyed the front door of her first-floor apartment, and she was forced to buy a $500 armored door on credit, later reimbursed by the Survivor Mitzvah Project. The teens also regularly throw eggs at her windows.

When Mera was 8, her mother died. At the start of World War II, her brothers were shot. Mera escaped into Russia, returning to her village in 1959. The Jews who didn't escape, 8,000 in total, were massacred and thrown into one mass grave. Mera wrote, "Those who witnessed this told us that after that, for three days, the earth in this grave was raising up and down and there was moaning coming out of the grave."

Mera has money for some food and essentials, and her adult son, who is not working, runs errands for her. But she dreads the anti-Semitic attacks, especially in the winter when the hooligans hurl icy snowballs at her windows on a daily basis, breaking them and letting the snow and cold winds blow inside.

"We wait for the winter with horror," she said.

Eva K.

Eva K. was 12 years old when her parents and other relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. She suffered through the remaining war years an orphan, still barely able to speak about that period.

Now, 80, and ill with diabetes and other ailments, she can hardly walk. She is alone in her apartment; her daughter, who previously cared for her, died several years ago of leukemia, and her granddaughter, who is studying medicine, moved far away.

Eva has lived in the same apartment in Grodno, Belarus, for 50 years, the entire time without gas or hot water. The landlord promises to install both, but Eva is certain she won't live to see that day. Meanwhile, the electricity is very costly, as are all her medications.

After receiving her first letter from the Survivor Mitzvah Project two years ago, she wrote: "I am sitting and crying that total strangers care about me."

Chaim K.

Chaim K., age 91 and a decorated war veteran, is almost totally blind but still regularly leads prayer services at the synagogue in Pinsk, Belarus. His wife, also a decorated veteran, wrote, "He knows the prayers well, like a rabbi."

Chaim's entire family perished in 1942. Fifteen years ago he filled out papers to receive reparations from the German government. He is still awaiting a reply.

Professor Meir Shub

Born in 1924, Meir Shub studied at the Yiddish-speaking Shalom Aleichem school in Kovna, Lithuania, graduating just two days before the start of the war. He managed to flee to Russia ahead of the advancing German Army. After the war, Shub earned a doctorate and taught philosophy. In the 1980s, he wrote to people in the West requesting Jewish history books, devouring works by Dubnow, Graetz, Zinberg and others. Then, in 1991, with Soviet tanks ensconced in Vilnius, he bravely began building the Jewish Studies Department at Vilnius University. Later he became a founding faculty member of the Vilnius Yiddish Institute.

Now, retired, very ill and almost totally deaf, Shub, 83, needs medications that cost many times what he receives as a pension. His wife, Katya, is also sick.

During World War II, Shub fought in the Russian Army's 16th Lithuanian Division, also called the "Jewish Division." He was severely wounded, but he managed to reach Berlin, where he carved on the Reichstag wall, "And here in Berlin am I Meir Shub the Jew from Lithuania."

Talk about this article it in The Jewish Journal Reader Forums

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Meet the multitalented, endlessly energetic Zane Buzby

By Jane Ulman, Contributing Editor

There are not enough hours in the day for Zane Buzby.

At 5:30 a.m., fully awake, she sits in her home office atop Mount Washington, with a view of downtown Los Angeles' skyscrapers, checking the news and drinking from a large mug of coffee. Her husband, Conan Berkeley, and their 15-year-old Blue Russian cat, appropriately named Blue, are both still asleep.

Once she is confident that the world didn't explode overnight, she immerses herself in the Survivor Mitzvah Project -- reading translations of the survivors' letters and composing replies. A stack of envelopes sits on a nearby desk, a High Holy Days mailing to survivors in Ukraine and Moldova that was halted when she ran out of funds. Now she's aiming for Chanukah.

She also worries -- about Fanya K., who is borderline blind and needs an eye operation, and Elke F. who is now living alone since her husband's death. She finds $80, emptying the Survivor Mitzvah Project's bank account, to send to Elke to reimburse her for the burial.

Buzby logs in all the transactions in the computerized database and files all the survivors' letters -- originals, translations and envelopes -- in sheet protectors in a large binder, filling a new one every four months. If there's time, she makes final edits on a book she has compiled of their letters and photos, which

she offers as a gift to donors contributing $1,000 or more and which she hopes to publish.

"Nothing I can say compares with their words," she said .

But the Survivor Mitzvah Project is only one of her full-time pursuits, and at 9 a.m., she turns to "Stomp the Run," a serialized live-action comedy that she and Berkeley have been creating for the past three years, serving as directors/producers. Preproduction for 100 episodes began in November.

"It's the first totally interactive show," Buzby said, explaining that it will appear on "new media" such as cell phones and Web sites. For "Stomp the Run," Buzby answers e-mails and fields calls to and from New York. Later she attends editing or casting sessions as well as other meetings and often works out of her production office in Hollywood.

Buzby, who grew up in East Meadow, Long Island, began her entertainment career as an actor, songwriter and film editor. She was also a singer and moved to Los Angeles in 1977 with Berkeley and their rock band B & B.

From there, Buzby began acting, with credits that include Cheech & Chong's "Up in Smoke," John Ritter's "Americathon" and "Oh, God!" with George Burns.

"I was always the crazy person," she said.

In the 1980s, she moved into television, training in multicamera direction under "Cheers" co-creator James Burrows. She went on to direct about 200 comedic episodes, including "Newhart," "Golden Girls" and "Married ... With Children," as well as other pilots and comedy series. Now "Stomp the Run" occupies all her time.

But along with her passion for comedy has been a passion for history -- for her own Jewish heritage and for the "great immigration" and the Holocaust. She devours non-fiction and is currently reading "Women in the Holocaust" and "Minsk Ghetto." On a trip to Hawaii, for beach reading, she brought along "The Destruction of Lithuanian Jewry."

It was family history, however, that prompted the 2001 trip to Belarus to visit the former shtetls of her two grandmothers.

In Vishnevo, where the Jewish population was completely wiped out, she set out to find the grave of her great-grandmother, Basha Ita. Buzby and a guide searched all day for the cemetery. Finally, an elderly non-Jewish lady took them to a hill outside the town to an area, strewn with garbage and overgrown that is now the town dump. Crawling underneath the dense brush, they discovered the cemetery.

Determined to restore it, Buzby teamed up with an Israeli couple, originally from Vishnevo, and together they raised enough money to have the trees and trash removed and the tombstones righted. Four hundred graves were discovered, which were all photographed and mapped, although Basha Ita's grave was never found.

Buzby's passion for Jewish history also led to her business of selling and restoring samovars, candlesticks, Kiddush cups, menorahs and other Judaic ritual items, primarily from the late 1880s to early 20th century; many of them are museum-quality pieces.

She does much of the repair work herself in a home workshop equipped with the necessary tools, including a drill press she requested for one birthday.

"I'm the only one on this planet who has parts for samovars," she claimed. Some items, such as wooden knobs and handles, she makes herself. She outsources other repairs to a few metalsmiths but laments that the profession is dying.

Buzby acquired her inventory in 1996 when she chanced upon a Judaic shop going out of business in New York's Lower East Side. Hundreds of samovars, candlesticks and other items were slated to be melted down and sold according to weight. Buzby couldn't allow it. She purchased the inventory from the shop's owner and paid his rent for two months while she arranged to ship everything to California. Two years later, she opened her own business.

"I was compelled to save these things and get them back into modern life," she said.

Buzby, who is named Zane after her great-grandmother Zipra, credits her family for her various passions and pursuits.

It was her father who told her, "You have a right to paint your dreams," and her mother who instilled in her an avid desire to read. One grandfather, an eccentric, fun-loving man, taught her the importance of eating ice cream at 3 p.m. -- every day. One grandmother, who died with a list in Yiddish of everything she planned to do for other people that day, modeled for her the value of doing mitzvot.

In the evenings, if she is not in the editing room for "Stomp the Run," Buzby is back at her computer working on the Survivor Mitzvah Project. And while there's always more to do, she tries to turn in before midnight.

"I have no problem sleeping," she said.