HELPING THE SURVIVORS SURVIVE

The Survivor Mitzvah Project has opened a Chicago chapter to join in the effort to care for the last Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe, most in their 80s and 90s, many isolated and alone.
HELPING THE SURVIVORS SURVIVE
The Survivor Mitzvah Project has opened a Chicago chapter to join in the effort to care for the last Holocaust survivors in Eastern Europe, most in their 80s and 90s, many isolated and alone.

By Pauline Dubkin Yearwood
Managing Editor

What TV director Zane Buzby found on a trip to visit the birthplace of her grandparents was as far from glitzy Los Angeles and the world of sitcoms as she could imagine.

In fact, she discovered something no one could imagine: elderly Holocaust survivors in remote areas of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union living in primitive villages, often without needed medicine, heat or sufficient food.

Buzby met eight of them on her first trip, and it changed the direction of her life. The experience led her to found a nonprofit organization called the Survivor Mitzvah Project designed to help the struggling survivors. Now a group of Chicago women are taking the effort local.

Zane Buzby began her career as an actor, appearing in such iconic films as “This Is Spinal Tap” (she was the Rolling Stone reporter) and “Cheech & Chong’s Up in Smoke.” Eventually she moved from acting to directing and has worked for years seeking out the last remaining shtetl Jews in Eastern Europe, studying their Yiddish dialects and documenting their life histories on film.

The Survivor Mitzvah Project founder Zane Buzby with Eva Semyonovna in Kalgina, Belarus.

On a brief break from shooting in 2001, Buzby, who is Jewish, took a “roots trip” to see the birthplace of her grandparents in Belarus and Lithuania. In the course of doing research, she met a professor, David Katz, who has worked for years seeking out the last remaining shtetl Jews in Eastern Europe, studying their Yiddish dialects and documenting their life histories on film.

He urged Buzby to visit several and bring along food, newspapers, medications and cash. She agreed.

What she found in the survivors’ villages shocked her. “It was as if I had gone back in time 100 years,” she wrote on a Survivor Mitzvah website. “There were no cars, only horse-drawn wagons, little slanted huts, no shops or restaurants, only endless fields, ancient apple orchards left fallow and the ghosts of millions.”

“These people were alone and forgotten,” she said in a recent telephone conversation from her Los Angeles home. “They were alone, ill, living in small villages. They didn’t have proper food, heating, medication. They were twisting in the wind with no help.” For various reasons, she explains, they do not receive any reparation funds from Germany as other survivors do.

When Buzby got home, “I couldn’t get these people out of my mind,” she says. “I was thinking, what about that woman lying in bed? That guy with no leg? They lived the old way. How were they going to get their firewood chopped?”

She did the best she could to help, sending out 10 and 20 dollar bills wrapped up in paper on which she drew a heart with a Jewish star on it and enclosing a return envelope.

“I sent these off to eight people hoping they got it, not caring if they knew who it was from, just to know that someone cared,” she says. “I started to get letters back, small notes in Russian on ripped pieces of notebook paper.”

Buzby kept the letters in her car and, she says, “whenever I would pass a refrigerator repair truck – in Los Angeles every repair man is a Russian rocket scientist – I would hail them and press a wish to me. “I received back, the survivors expressed a wish to meet her. “I looked at the birth dates – 1907, 1910, 1911. I thought, if I don’t go over and meet these people now, I never will,” she says.

She made another trip and met more survivors.

“I call them the unluckiest generation,” she says, noting that the oldest among them lived through the Russian revolution, pogroms and the enforced famines of the 1930s, then the invasion of their countries by the Germans and the Holocaust. Most lost all of their family members.

Those who endured then lived under the harsh Soviet regime, where “it was a crime to be Jewish. They might have had a few good years by Russian stan...
alone even if all their family was killed. They are being penalized because they survived. There is no support system for them."

She says that in founding the Survivor Mitzvah Project she wanted to get across the idea that when we honor those who perished, we should honor (these survivors) too. There is always money to build another memorial museum. We should be helping the people who tell these incredible stories. It wasn’t easy to be a rescuer (during the Holocaust) but it’s so easy to help them now. Just write a check."

As the organization grew, several Chicago women found out about it and decided to work towards starting a local chapter. It will be launched with a private event on Oct. 25, with actors from Steppenwolf Theatre Company and “Chicago Fire” reading survivor stories to an invited group of donors. A public event will follow shortly afterwards.

Jill Cahr of Chicago is among those spearheading the project. She became interested after a trip to Israel for a cousin’s bar mitzvah earlier this year, she says. The Israel trip “was a kind of life-changing Jewish experience for me,” she said in a recent Salon event, which is not open to the public but will help to launch the organization among Chicanos, Cahr says. "Most people don’t know what the charity does and what it means to the survivors. The reason: Her father, who died this past January, was a survivor.

He was in Auschwitz,” she says. "He lived 84 years and he lived a brilliant and wonderful life. His life was a miracle. He was the only boy and the sole survivor of five children."

Baker says she is helping to plan the event in memory of her father. "There are at least 2,000 survivors out there, and I feel this is where I want to put my time, effort and money,” she says. "I love that this charity provides direct aid to these elderly people. They literally go to the towns and give them arthritis cream, eyeglasses, Jewish stars. I love the fact that (the survivors) want to feel Jewish.”

The fact that these men and women represent the last generation of survivors is poignant, she says. "I feel we need to take care of this last generation. I feel an affinity to them; I took care of my father at the end,” she says.

In addition, she says, "This program will continue to alert people to the fact that there was a Holocaust, that survivors still exist and they are still trying to make a life for themselves. It’s the survivors that keep the memory alive, that this really happened. Mainly we want people to realize that the aged survivors “lack basic human necessities; it’s almost like they are still in a concentration camp,” she says.

The aged survivors “lack basic human necessities; it’s almost like they are still in a concentration camp,” she says.

"Ifeveryone helped a little more they would be more widely known to Chicago. It’s important to make people aware that this is part of our history, and we should never forget. This is helping to keep survivors alive and also keeping alive in me the memory of my father. I’m honoring him,” Baker says.

Buzby would like more of those friends to be children and has started a new initiative of the Survivor Mitzvah Project, called “I Saved A Life.” Each child who participates will be matched to a specific survivor and will raise funds for that survivor through projects the organization suggests or that they create themselves. The goal is to provide each survivor with $1,800 a year – less than $5 a day, Buzby says, enough to make a life-changing difference.

"This is the last generation of Holocaust survivors and this is the last generation of children that can help them,” she says. "The Survivor Mitzvah Project is about life,” Buzby says. "These people want to live. They even write it in their letters. They are going blind because they don’t have $29 for eye drops for glaucoma. They don’t have insulin so they’re getting their legs amputated (from diabetes). It’s not necessary. To get them a cataract operation, or even to get them heat for the winter, it changes their lives forever.

“If everyone helped a little bit, the problem would be solved.”

To find out more about the Survivor Mitzvah Project, watch videos of survivors and donate funds, visit www.survivormitzvah.org. To get a child involved in the “I Saved A Life” program, call (213) 622-5050 or email survivormitzvah@gmail.com. To find out more about the new Chicago group, email jillcahr@gmail.com.