



Anna Israelevna looks at a photo of herself with her baby – found on her husband’s body when he died.

Photos: ©The Survivor Mitzvah Project Holocaust Educational Archive

## Ukraine’s forgotten survivors

An actress-director, affected by the Holocaust herself, creates the Survivor Mitzvah Project

By EVE GLOVER

Long Island-born comedic actress, producer, director and humanitarian CNN hero Zane Buzby has appeared in movies such as *This is Spinal Tap*, and directed hit TV shows like *The Golden Girls*, *Married... with Children* and *Blossom*.

In 2001, she traveled to Eastern Europe to visit the birthplaces of her grandmothers, one of whom lost her family in the Holocaust.

She attended a lecture in Lithuania by American Yiddishist Prof. Dovid Katz. He handed her a list of eight names of Holocaust survivors who needed help. It was a serendipitous encounter; while looking to find out about the family she lost, she met survivors who were desperate to be found.

Most lived in remote areas and were destitute and sick with no friends or relatives left to care for them. Over 70% of Eastern European survivors do not have enough food, and cannot afford doctors, medication or surgery.

Buzby brought money, food, clothing and medical supplies to their homes. One



SMP founder Zane Buzby

survivor said she felt like she was in a fairy tale when she opened the door and saw Buzby’s translator unexpectedly standing

there, holding packages of bandages for her while she was recovering from cancer. Another survivor was lying in bed with

one leg, completely alone. He was the only Jew in his village and had no one to help get him food and water. He died shortly after Buzby met him.

She tells *The Jerusalem Post*, “So many people say to me, ‘I thought everyone was taken care of, I thought everyone was in Israel, I thought everyone was in the US.’ I did, too. I had no idea when I went over there. None. I thought this was just going to be one isolated person, or two, and then you find out there’s hundreds and thousands of people who are in dire need of help, people who are alone.”

Fira Isaakovna, a Ukrainian survivor, was the last Jewish woman to live in Ivankiv, a town near Kyiv. She wrote to Buzby, “The letter with your photograph is on my table. I live alone in my apartment and I converse with you. Your joyful smile looks at me, and it’s as though you are talking to me. How wonderful it is.”

Buzby corresponded with Isaakovna for three years before meeting her. “She was always very cheerful in her letters... She was so sweet. She was one of these people who never complained. I always thought she was maybe a little more okay than some of the other people, until I got there.”



Fira Isaakovna wears a Star of David necklace Buzby gave her.



Fira Isaakovna’s house; she was the last Jewish woman to live in Ivankiv.

Buzby describes being shocked when she saw the dilapidated hut she lived in. “The kitchen didn’t work... there was snow on her bed. The windows were cracked; there was a hole in the roof. In the front of the house, she had all these big pots and pans to catch the water that was coming in... We got her a caregiver to come in and clean and make sure she had food.”

When Buzby offered Isaakovna a sweater, she wouldn’t take it and said, “Give it to someone who really needs it. I’m not naked.”

In 2007, after six years of traveling to Europe to meet with survivors, Buzby founded the Survivor Mitzvah Project (SMP), a 501c3 nonprofit ([www.survivor-mitzvah.org](http://www.survivor-mitzvah.org)).

She says, “It’s based on kindness and compassion, something these survivors never really had. They will tell you themselves that this is the most important thing in life.”

In 2017, Buzby was honored with the Anti-Defamation League’s Deborah Award for her humanitarian work with survivors.

SMP currently sends emergency aid to 2,500 survivors in the Baltics and Eastern Europe, 348 of whom are in war-torn Ukraine. Survivors in Ukraine are especially vulnerable right now, as many of them suffer from PTSD and are reliving the terrors of World War II.

Buzby explains, “We have delivered \$8 million to survivors, raised mostly from individuals... We are the only organization that gives 100% of every dollar donated for survivors directly to survivors in need.”

Buzby refers to survivors of the Holocaust in the East as “the unluckiest generation.” They grew up in Eastern Europe during some of the darkest and most violent periods in history.

The oldest of them survived World War I and the Russian Revolution. Buzby elaborates, “They experienced civil war, displacement, evacuation and violence. They survived this, and then come the pogroms of the 1920s and the enforced famines of the 1930s, and then thousands more were murdered or died or starved to death. If they survived that, came the rise of Nazism and the full-blown Holocaust. Families killed, homes destroyed; there was starvation, ghettos, slave labor.

If they survived that, after the war they’re caught behind the Iron Curtain, where again, it’s a crime to be Jewish... If they survived that, came Stalin’s purges of the 1950s... Then Chernobyl – radiation, cancers, relocation, death, and then Perestroika... They went to sleep one day, they woke up the next morning and the banks had seized all their money.”

These are the forgotten survivors tied to our heritage by a silent and traumatic past often overlooked in Jewish history.

“Most of the world only knows half the story of the Holocaust,” explains Buzby.

Of Eastern European Jews, 2.7 million were killed outside of Poland and the major Nazi concentration camps by mass shootings, starvation and town burnings. Holocaust museums often display artifacts from Auschwitz, but there is nothing to show from burned down villages where almost all historical proof of

a Jewish community’s existence has been decimated.

SMP’s Holocaust Educational Archive is a compilation of over 20,000 letters and 500 hours of video focusing solely on the Holocaust in the East, through Buzby’s communications and interactions with survivors.

Given the rapid increase in antisemitism across the world, it is especially crucial for these untold stories to be heard.

Buzby states, “It is cathartic for these survivors to finally tell their stories after 80 years of silence. It is their legacy for future generations.”

Eighty-six-year-old Ukrainian survivor Rita Geinkhovna was too afraid to tell her painful story to anyone, until she revealed it to Buzby.

In 1945, when she was nine years old, she and her brother were liberated from Pechora, a little-known concentration camp operated by Romania during the war in the village of Pechora, now in Ukraine. It was the day she was scheduled for an injection of typhus as part of a Nazi medical experiment. Her life was spared, but her father was killed by Nazi officers at the camp, and her mother died of starvation after giving every morsel of food she had to Geinkhovna and her brother.

Geinkhovna stumbled out of the camp weak, starving and alone. Her brother was drafted into the Russian army, and she had no one to protect her.

As she walked toward her hometown, she knocked on the door of a farmhouse where she smelled baking. Unbeknownst to her, the farm was owned by a Nazi, and when he saw her, he beat her mercilessly with the back handle of his ax. It took her over a year to recover from her wounds and learn how to walk again.

This Nazi became the mayor of her town, so she never spoke of what he did to her, due to fear of repercussions.

Geinkhovna married and became a nurse. Throughout the years, she tended to five of her childhood friends who also survived the Pechora concentration camp.

Buzby came to visit Geinkhovna in 2009, when her husband was still alive. She still lives in her hometown in Ukraine.

Buzby remembers, “The minute she saw me, it was hugs and kisses... She was upset because she didn’t have anything in the house that she could give us. She made tea and she gave us tiny pieces of bread, like three inches by an inch. She must have cut up her last pieces of bread and given it to us with some jam.”

When Buzby gave her a Star of David necklace, as she does all those she visits, Geinkhovna put it back in the box at first, thinking it was too nice to actually wear.

Buzby says, “We gave them both warm socks; we gave them whatever we had. I gave her a sweater... we gave her husband a pin that had a Chai on it. We gave them money, which was more money than they had ever seen.”

SMP calls survivors in Ukraine daily to let them know they’re not alone and ask them what they need. Unfortunately, Buzby has been unable to reach Geinkhovna by phone since the Russian invasion.

Survivor Anna Israelevna grew up on a communal farm in Kalininskoye, a ▶



D. Itzhovna, a 102-year-old survivor presently in Ukraine

► tiny rural Ukrainian village that is now part of Russia. She met her husband at college, and right after she became pregnant, he got drafted to the front. She sent him a picture of their newborn baby, which was found on his body when he

was killed in battle.

A few days later, Israelevna's father reported that the Nazis were conducting mass killings in the neighboring town. Israelevna and her parents, her baby, her sister, her sister's baby and another young

child who was a relative immediately fled for their lives to the Dnieper River.

Hordes of people were surrounding the river, trying to get across it in boats, as the Germans pelted bombs at them. Fuel from the boats caught fire, and the river

went up in flames.

Shrapnel pierced Israelevna's father's chest, instantly killing him. Israelevna and her mother and sister quickly buried him in the wet river bank.

A farmer felt compassion for them and hoisted them onto his raft. Israelevna always regretted not getting his full name so she could thank him.

She swam part of the way with the babies on her back, as bombs went off in the distance.

By the time Israelevna and her family reached the other side, they were so desperately thirsty that they drank from the river poisoned with gasoline. Farmers saved their lives by giving them porridge and milk.

Israelevna came back to Ukraine after the war and remarried, had two more children and became a teacher.

Israelevna hosted Buzby and her team when they came to Ukraine.

When Israelevna was very sick and could not see, she received a donation from Buzby. To thank her, Israelevna wrote, "You brought me back to life... Because you helped me, I was able to have the operation on my eyes, and now I can see."

Israelevna died in 2018 at the age of 99. SMP continues to support her family.

Israelevna's granddaughter lives in a Russian-occupied town with her family, including her autistic young daughter who has been extremely distressed hearing bombs going off.

On March 3, she told Buzby's translator in Poland, "Russians took our city. They are leveling everything we hold dear, bombing everything - schools, libraries, homes, theaters, all places of our culture, bombing even our gardens. We are running out of food. We are afraid to go to the one store still open because Russians are shooting us, also firing into windows of apartments to kill us."

Regarding the possibility of evacuating, on March 17, she reported, "No one can leave the city, as they can't cross the front line. No one is allowed in or out, but we do have our bags packed."

In addition to continuing to send aid to survivors and their families across Eastern Europe, Buzby is also currently trying to help Ukrainian survivors escape the war.

She states, "So many women after the Holocaust shut down and didn't have children... so the ones who did have children, to see that incredible heritage line, that lineage be killed by this Russian invasion after all that they went through... We cannot let the next generation die from the Russian invasion. It's that tiny spark of a Jewish person living on that's going to be extinguished unless we get them to safety."

SMP was finally able to get through to 83-year-old Ukrainian survivor Rita Borodanskaya, while she was hiding in a bomb shelter. She heard a familiar voice and exclaimed, "Your call is as if I found a diamond!"

Borodanskaya managed to cross the border and, by a twist of fate, spotted her daughter, granddaughter and great-grandson, who also escaped to Poland, and they all boarded a plane to Israel together.

SMP gave her money for her new life in Israel.

"Miracles do happen," says Buzby. ■