



The **Forgotten**
SURVIVORS

*One woman's mission to help elderly
Jews still living in Eastern Europe*

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MEMORIAL
STONE
FOR
J. H. HARRIS

When the Iron Curtain fell, Jews from all over the world made their way towards Moscow and Kiev to greet their brethren who had been trapped there for so many years. But one man, a Breslover *chasid*, made it his personal mission visit the far-flung villages throughout the former Soviet Union to find the Jews who were living there.

He arrived at one such town, hundreds of miles from any big city, and asked the locals to point him in the direction of Jews. “We haven’t seen any Jews here since before the war,” one villager said. “There are no Jews here,” agreed another. The *chasid* questioned a few more people until one man said, “Yes, there is actually one Jew living here,” and he directed him to an even more remote location outside the confines of the village.

The *chasid* found a small house in the middle of nowhere and cautiously knocked on the door. When it opened, he was surprised to see old *Yid* with a long white beard. The Breslover *chasid* was stunned by his discovery—but not nearly as surprised as the old *Yid* himself, who embraced him and started to cry.

“What are you doing out here?” the incredulous *chasid* asked.

The elderly Jew, who said he had been a Chuster *chasid* before the war, replied, “My wife and children were murdered during the war, but I hid and somehow managed to survive. I made my way back to our village after the war ended and the local *goyim* told me that no Jews had survived. ‘Hitler killed them all,’ they said. ‘You are the only Jew left in the world.’”

The Breslover *chasid* couldn’t believe what he was hearing: this man had lived alone, in complete solitude, believing he was the only Jew in the world for over 40 years. “What have you been doing all this time?” he asked.

“I grow my vegetables. I look at the *parshah*. I say *mishnayos*. And I make Shabbos.”

“How did you manage? How did you carry on every single day?”

“I believed that I was the only Jew left, so there must be a reason why Hashem allowed me to survive. I did whatever I could. I said a lot of *Tehillim*. I don’t know how to learn Gemara so I learn *mishnayos* over and over every day, and I don’t know how to *shecht* so I eat only eat vegetables.” The man was too poor to travel and had never left the village or even seen a telephone.

“*Baruch Hashem*,” the *chasid* told the old man, who was weeping tears of joy. “There are many *Yidden* left in the world.” He brought him to Yerushalayim, where he was *zocheh* to *daven* at the *Kosel*—and died two days later.

At his *levayah* in Eretz Yisrael the Breslover *chasid* declared, “This man believed he was the last *Yid* in the world, and he held up the entire universe—by himself.”

Yet his story is not unique, not even today in 2015.

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE, but not far from the bustling metropolises and sophisticated capital cities of Europe, it is possible to cross a border and drive into the past. Moving through the remote rural countryside of Eastern Europe is like taking a trip back in time. In the most isolated tiny villages that dot the landscape there are only dilapidated, crumbling structures to be seen, no stores or restaurants or infrastructure of any kind. Frozen in time, untouched by modernity, there are only ramshackle houses with rickety fences, some of which are home to forgotten members of our nation.

"I'm a television comedy director," says Zane Buzby, founder of The Survivor Mitzvah Project, a non-profit charity that delivers emergency aid to the last desperate survivors of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe. "In 2001, during a break from work, I decided to go on a trip to discover my roots and seek out the birthplaces of my grandparents. Starting in Lithuania, I made my way towards Vishnevo, across the border in Belarus. Traveling those back roads was like going back in time 100 years. There were no cars, no shops. Only crooked little houses, with holes in the doorjamb where a *mezuzah* had once been hung, old wooden synagogues, beautiful but barely standing, empty and forgotten, and the ghosts of millions.

"The first thing that struck me was how recent the war seemed. Buildings were in great disrepair, with bullet holes visible on the façades. It was a haunting ruin of a landscape. All I could think was that I was walking down the same streets and passing the same rivers and forests where thousands had hidden and been murdered.

"I had a short list of eight names in my pocket given to me by a professor in Lithuania, Dovid Katz. He had asked me to please visit these eight Holocaust survivors, whom he called 'the last of the Mohicans.' These were people in remote villages who could use some food and a helping hand.

"So I drove around the back roads and found them living in tiny huts. I would knock on their doors but no one was ever home because they were all out in their backyards, people in their 80s and 90s, on their hands and knees digging for potatoes. If they didn't, the ground would freeze and they wouldn't have a supply of food for the winter.

"They invited me into their huts and I listened to their stories. Who were these people? Some were sole survivors of their families. Some had been partisans; others ran from the killing fields as their families were massacred. Some survived brutal evacuations to the East where their trains were bombarded by German air strikes. Most of them fled from the Germans who had roared into towns and villages on motorcycles, killing every Jewish man, woman and child in their path. Some had been slaves in the gulag for years after the war ended. All were elderly and alone and in dire need. Incredibly, they were still suffering 70 years after the war, lacking even the most basic of human necessities: food, medicine, heat and shelter. They had simply fallen through the



cracks, receiving no reparations from Germany or money from the government or any organization."

Zane returned home from her trip astonished; many of these elderly survivors had no one looking out for them. Some had never had children or the children were also elderly or ill. While most of the older people had been indoors during the Chernobyl disaster, many members of the caretaker generation had gotten sick and were unable to care for their parents; till today, some are still living with their parents in one- or two-room huts. As these countries Westernize, prices for goods skyrocket and already meager pensions go down. Just imagine what it's like to live on \$60 a month. In Moldova, some of the elderly receive a monthly

stipend of only \$10.

The situation was appalling. While the Joint Distribution Committee does wonderful work in many places, helping with goods and services, it does not provide direct financial aid, and can only help those who are lucky enough to live in an area with a JDC Hesed relief center.

"Many of these destitute survivors are religious," Zane explains. "The older ones know Yiddish and Hebrew from when they were children. But the younger ones couldn't learn about their religion until the 1970s. When I returned to my workaday world I couldn't get these people out of my head. The contrast was too stark."

That's when Zane decided to do something and mailed each of these eight forgotten survivors some money. In each envelope she included a paper with a big heart drawn around a *Magen David*; it was her only way to communicate with people who spoke only languages that were foreign to her.

"Then one day an amazing thing happened: I started to get letters back, written on tiny scraps of torn notebook paper!"

Zane had the letters translated from Russian into English. Some of the stories they told were unbelievable:

"My name is Rachel, from Grodno, Belarus. I was born in 1911. I am very, very old. I received your letter and the money; I was so surprised. I couldn't sleep all night. I can't believe there are such nice people in the world. I receive some money from the government, but only enough for bread and milk. I can't believe that someone from America would want to help me. Thank you so much. Now I am not alone."

"We are all sick here. I really don't know how to live anymore. I am sorry for this letter. My writing is so bad and I am very old. My mother and father were killed in Babi Yar. It is such a difficult life. I sometimes think it would have been better if I had died with them. I am grateful to you over and over for your help, which for me means faith that there will be another day. Tanya"

"I am touched by your attention, grateful for the help and your spiritual warmth. Life is hard. Heat is from wood-burning stoves for which firewood must be chopped, and I am so weak. But what can I do? Please write. I am very interested in how you live. Best wishes from a world far away. Celia."

"I am Misha. I am writing for my mother. She is blind. I write her words. She has endured difficulties that are not be described in a letter. But now she is surrounded by people like you who care about her fate. I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart. We do not know what we would do without your help."



"I am the only one who survived from a very big family. It is so hard to be alone at this age. If you only knew how important your help and love are for me. I feel it coming from you. I can't walk. I haven't been out in years. I am so sick it is hard to write. Forgive me. Be happy. Be strong. Be healthy. Go on creating noble deeds. Hugs and kisses, Rivva."

"As a child I ran from the killing squads three times. Even now I still dream that I am running. Thank you for responding to someone's pain and suffering. Life becomes warmer and more cheerful with your kindness. It's impossible to imagine the unbearable situation of old, unhappy people forgotten by everyone. Yours are noble actions. We wish you bright days. Reuven."

"It is difficult to live now. Only one thought dominates, that it does not get worse. A person lives through hope, and I hope it will get better. Sleima."

"I am 96. Thank G-d, I have lived to see this bright day. In my situation, desolate and lonely, old and in poor health, not having a single good friend to talk to and unburden my broken heart, you brought me joy. Your faraway friend, Dora."



NO ONE WAS EVER HOME BECAUSE THEY WERE ALL OUT IN THEIR BACKYARDS, PEOPLE IN THEIR 80S AND 90S ON THEIR HANDS AND KNEES, DIGGING FOR POTATOES.

Zane calls these people “the unluckiest generation,” and it isn’t hard to understand why. “The oldest ones, born in 1905, experienced the Russian Revolution and World War I as children. Then there were the pogroms of the 1920s, upheaval, starvation, dislocation and widespread death. Then came Stalin’s famines, when thousands perished. If they survived that, then came the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, with Eastern Europe suffering the greatest losses of all the countries combined. If they were still alive they were trapped behind the Iron Curtain, where it was again a crime to be Jewish. If they survived *that*, then came Stalin’s purges of the 1950s, where thousands were sent to the gulag, followed by a few good years by Russian standards, which is not really all that good. Then came the Chernobyl disaster, which affected Ukraine and Belarus. Many people had to be relocated and came down with cancer. Then came perestroika, which we thought was wonderful but for them meant that their country’s infrastructure collapsed. Every penny they had saved was confiscated. The banks seized everything.”

While life is difficult for most people living in remote areas of Eastern Europe, survivors are faced with an even more challenging reality: most of them lack the support system of their neighbors, without relatives or a Jewish community with its charitable organizations and infrastructure. Liberation wasn’t as sweet as we might imagine; for many of the survivors it was the turning point when they first discovered that their previous lives had been

obliterated and they had to start from scratch.

“And there was no reason for it,” Zane says. “There was plenty of money designated for them. Germany keeps paying reparations, but thousands of survivors aren’t getting it.”

Zane met one woman who is in her 90s. “Her granddaughter takes care of her, but she’s a nurse making \$30 a month who can barely support herself.”

Moved by their letters, Zane continued to send more money and went on several expeditions to search for more survivors. Her list grew from eight to 80, to 100 and then to 200. She reached out to everyone she knew, asking them for help. Corresponding with people on the ground, more survivors were discovered in countries like Ukraine, Moldova and Slovakia, and the list grew to over 1,500, all of whom were living in terrible conditions. It was impossible for one woman to help them all.

And so, she established a grassroots 501(c)(3) organization, The Survivor Mitzvah Project, for the purpose of providing them with aid. The money is spent on staples and life-saving medicines, and for those who are bedridden, to hire a neighbor to look in on them and act as caregivers.

With the help of a translator, Zane started to write back to the people she was helping, asking them questions about their past. “It was as if the floodgates had opened. We started getting five-page, ten-page, 15-page letters in which they poured out their hearts and told their stories. For many, it was the first time they were opening up. There had been no one to tell them to.”

“Hearing from you tells me that in distant America someone remembers me, a person practically from another dimension. Running from the enemy we left behind our comfortable dwellings, our photos and all our belongings. And about this sorrow nobody ever speaks: We left behind our old people, who met all our pleas with refusal, saying, ‘Who would touch us old people?’ But of course, they did touch them. They burned them alive. Parents grabbed their children and fled. Our lives were spared, but our roots were destroyed.”

THE STERN'S LOOK



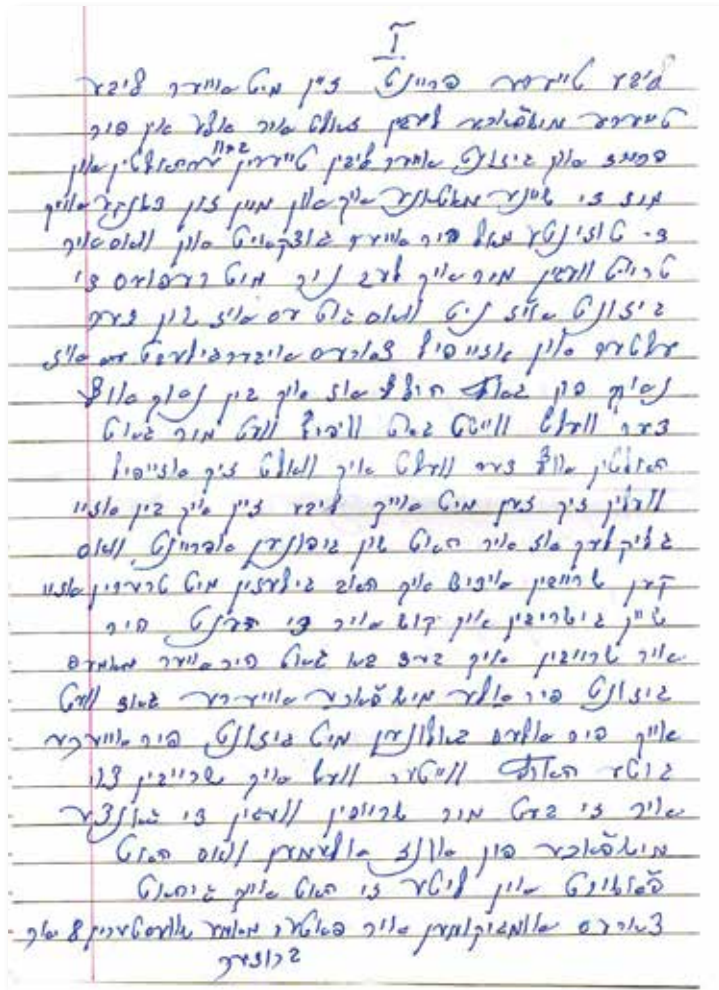
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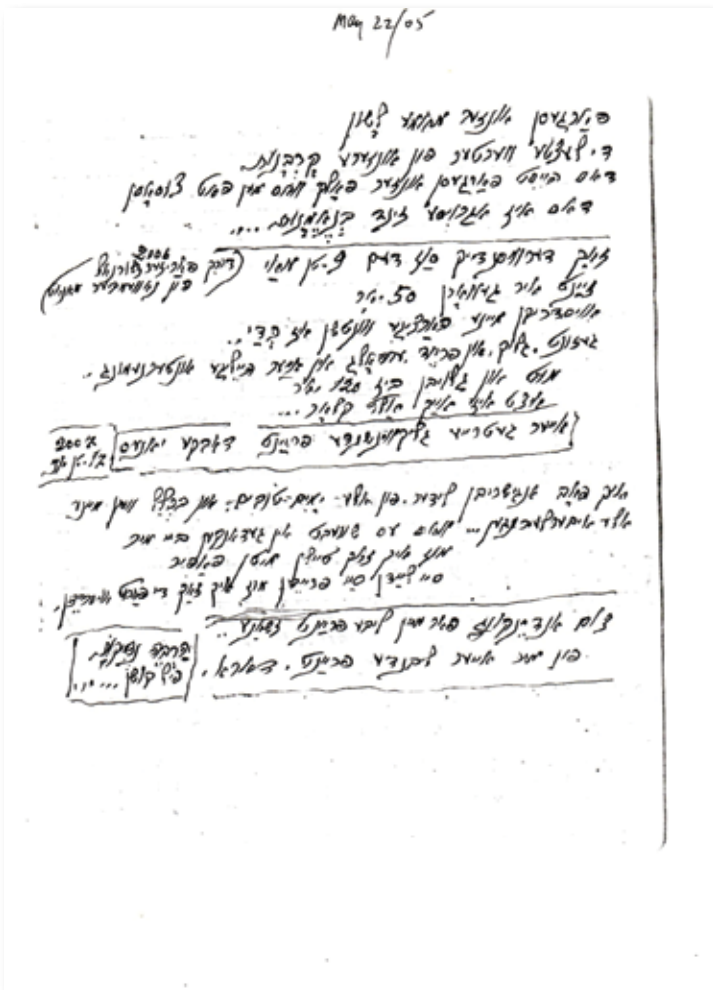
Nothing was left of the Jewish community, not a memory, no language, no holidays, no schools, no synagogues, but above all no old people, the roots who could raise the young ones, like the Earth feeds offshoots and leaves. These shoots and leaves had to begin from nothing. This nothing did not remember its G-d because it didn't even know its own language. It didn't know how to pray and there was no one to teach. No one to guide. Nothing.

"That is why our correspondence is so dear to me, personally, my dear American friends. You are my roots. I save all the letters I have received from you and reread them often. From the past I have only one thing, one photograph: my grandmother and grandfather on my father's side. This is all that remains of my life from before the war. I don't know a thing about them, who they were, where they lived, what they did, what they laughed about and whom they cried over.

I will bring this conversation with

you to a close. I am simply speaking with you about whatever comes into my head. Be happy, my dear ones. Mariya."

"I've written letters to you in my head. My health, heart, eyesight and depression have prevented me from writing. Forgive me for this. I keep all your letters... The Nazis left me lonely and wounded. I was the youngest in the family. They were all brutally murdered. My mother, with all the old ones, was buried alive. I will never forget and never forgive. They bombed my village, and on that first day of war, the 22nd of June, I lost my youth, my closest friends, my home. In your letter was a photo of you, my American friend. It became warm and joyful in my soul, though it is snowing outside and not very warm in my room. In your envelope I found a check for \$400. Many thanks. You have become like my own family. I await your letters as a gift from destiny.



"I was born on October 25, 1922. In the winter when I was three months old, Mama was bathing me in a small tub. Suddenly there was a pogrom happening. Horsemen came from Poland. Mama and the children hid between the stove and the kindling wood. They put me in the tub under the bed. The bandits tore the blankets with bayonets, searching for babies to kill. Mama prayed that I wouldn't cry. When they left she found me sleeping peacefully in the water, so she got the rabbi to give me a second name, Chaya, to live. I am infinitely indebted to you. For the rest of my life I will never forget this. What a pity that I cannot get about. I would give my life to see you. Chaya Ginda."

"I am Fanya from Vilna. Dear Zana, I received a letter from you with such warm wishes. I survived the Holocaust in the Vilna Ghetto. I was a member of the underground, then a fighter in the Avengers, a group of teenaged partisans who fought the enemy to protect the honor of our people.

"Today is a very hard day upon my heart. It is over 70 years since the Vilna Ghetto was liquidated. That was the last time I saw my parents and my sister. I was only 17. I ran to the woods, to the partisans, not knowing that it was to be forever. But I am the only one left of my big family.

"Today, as every year on Remembrance Day, I went to the mass graves where 100,000 people were killed, young and old. There are just a few of us left, just a few. We stood there by the pits and our hearts were torn to pieces, eyes full of tears. We sang the Jewish partisan song as we remembered our family members who perished and those who survived and protected our people with weapons in their hands. I am proud to have been among them. We didn't just die; we protected the honor of our people. Someone asked me what I would say if I could see my family again. I would tell them, 'I fought for you.'

"I am sorry for such a long and confused letter, but the recent events have stirred my memory. I am sometimes asked if it is difficult for me to go to the pits and the killing fields. My answer is that those who are lying there cannot say anything, so it is my duty to tell their story. I hug you all. At my age I have a right to do this. Kisses, gratitude for your warmth and attention. Be happy, my dear American friends."

Yehudah."

"I have lived a long and very hard life, and I always thought that everyone lived this way. But you opened my eyes to the fact that elsewhere people live completely differently, and they are happy. Even now I am afraid to express my feelings because I have always lived in fear. You live in a land I can only dream of. Tzilya"

"If fields were sheets of paper and I possessed gallons of ink, I could never relate all that happened to us. Zita-Feige."

"I am Galina from Belarus. Thank you. I won't be able to repay you. The only thing I can do is pray for you. Relatives would not do what you are doing. You are helping total strangers, and with so many warm words. May G-d give you health and all His blessings. Your attention and help make it easier for me to bear my grief. My husband has been lying in bed for the last 11 years after a stroke. He is 93. He cannot move and it is terrible for me. I am in a wheelchair, and it is hard for me to feed him and to wash him. I cry every night. I have very high blood pressure and heart problems. May G-d not let me die, for what would happen to him? My nerves can hardly stand it. Your letters are like medicine for me. Every day I pray for you. May G-d protect you."

Zane has been to Ukraine, Lithuania, Latvia and Belarus several times since that initial journey, and other volunteers have gone to Estonia, Moldova and Slovakia. On their many expeditions they visit not only the survivors but the places where thriving Jewish communities once existed and are now gone, their buildings in ruins, their graveyards sinking. "Unless some of this is preserved



The Łódź ghetto

it will all soon live only in memory," Zane cautions.

Why are these survivors still living in these far-off places? Zane explains: "Some are too sick to leave or they were caring for someone else. Some didn't know *how* to leave; they tried and got stuck behind the Iron Curtain. Some insisted that they would never leave. 'I will stay and tend the graves of my ancestors just as my parents and grandparents did. And I will tell everyone who listens what happened here.'"

Among the "last Jews" Zane has visited are two people living in Bazaliya, Ukraine (her grandfather's *shtetl*) who are 93 and 92 years old. They are 600 miles from the nearest Jewish community.

And it's not as if they would necessarily be better off elsewhere, she says. "In Israel, 40 percent of survivors live below the poverty line. Some of them are eating out of garbage cans. The billions of dollars Germany gave Israel were used to build the Jewish State, but there was no provision made to take care of the survivors. There's an ongoing court case to get money for them. There's no welcome wagon waiting for these people. A lot their children went to Israel but returned to Europe. It's too late for many of the elderly to relocate anyway. In 2013, one of the survivors in Ukraine wanted to leave but he died before he could do it, at 91. It should have happened back in the '60s and '70s but it didn't."

And there are many struggling survivors in the United States as well. "They petitioned the government and have even reached out to Joe Biden in an effort to get their money released by the Claims Conference [Jewish Material Claims Against Germany]. This is money that is designated for survivors, money that Germany has already paid but is not being released. It's an ongoing struggle,

and most survivors will die waiting because of red tape, dysfunction and controversy. At least there are support systems here like Social Security, Jewish Family Services and health insurance—crucial things that impoverished survivors in Eastern Europe lack. While in America, Medicaid and Medicare pay for medications, a \$5 pill is unaffordable in Belarus, so people are denied insulin and drugs that can save their eyesight and their lives. It's a terrible situation that can only be relieved if all of us become involved."

Tragically, Zane says that many of the survivors with whom she is in contact in Eastern Europe have told her that after the war they returned to their villages and met every single train that arrived *for years*, hoping against hope that one person they knew, a relative, friend, son or daughter, would step off that train.

Volunteers at the project have now extended their efforts to creating an educational archive of hundreds of hours of videotape and thousands of letters received from survivors finally telling their stories, possibly for the last time.

"Everyone knows about the concentration camps, but not many are aware of Operation Barbarossa or the *Einsatzgruppen*, the mobile killing squads that decimated the Jewish population in thousands of towns and villages and then burned them. Most of the survivors we help weren't in the camps. They were hiding in forests, starving in ghettos or fighting as partisans, or else they were evacuees who became slaves in Central Asia, where they were often starved and worked to death. When the war ended, they came back to rubble.

"The Germans destroyed almost all of the historical records, the *pinkus* that for centuries had recorded the deaths, births and marriages in the Jewish towns. Today, there are only a few syna-



gogues and graveyards left, but they all need to be restored so that when someone in the future tries to find his roots there will be something to see. Sadly, in most areas, all signs of the Jewish life that once flourished there are being obliterated. They are literally paving over our ancestral homelands.

"An unforgettable thing happened today. I traveled to the town where I was born. But how painful it has been to have lost everything there. I didn't recognize the streets or even one building. Every trace of what once was is gone. All that remains are the dark graves in the valley behind the town. I get a shiver in every part of my body. It hurts my heart. The murderers turned my happy Jewish town into a mass grave. Everything stands before my eyes as if it happened yesterday. I knew all of the inhabitants, every person. It is now more than 70 years since everyone was killed. How immeasurable is our tragedy? I can't forget for even one minute. I think of how our neighbors were only too happy to kill the Jews. I ran because my heart propelled me to run.

"But I am the only one who survived and am duty-bound to remember everyone. I am 99 years old and weak. When I die, who will mourn? I cannot travel there again. My heart is too weak. I curse the day I was born into such an era of sorrow. There should be peace in our land. Your wishful friend, Dobke."

"This woman lived to be 102 years old and recently passed away. She basically refused to die because of her 'responsibility' to remember everyone."

It's been more than a decade since Zane visited Eastern Europe for the first time. Today, The Survivor Mitzvah Project is helping some 2,000 Jews scattered across eight countries.

"In 1939 the world turned its back on these people, but today we can do something to help them. It is an honor, and the very last opportunity we will have."

The project aims to provide every survivor with \$150 a month, the very minimum necessary to sustain life. "But with 2,000 people on our list, we don't always have enough funds. Every month we try to figure out what qualifies as an emergency. Should we save someone's eyesight or feed another? If enough people donated money we wouldn't have to make these decisions."

Zane has seen a great improvement in the lives of those being helped. "When I went back to Lithuania I saw that many people

now have adequate food and clothing and even new windows. But I know that if we don't keep helping them, they will spiral right back down into poverty."

She has also learned many important lessons about life. "These people don't have pictures of their parents or any possessions from before the war. While we as a society value *things*, the survivors don't. They know that objects can be taken away from you. One woman told me, 'When you're on your deathbed, you won't be wishing you had bought another couch. You'll be thinking about all the times you didn't speak to your sister or have a conversation with an old friend. It's all about people.'"

One survivor she visited had no plumbing or hot water and the windows of her hut were broken, but when Zane offered her money she refused. "There are others who are much worse off," she insisted. When she was finally convinced to accept it she asked if she was permitted to share it with someone who was even more needy in the next town. Zane wondered how that was possible, and asked to be taken to her. It turned out that the other woman couldn't even get out of bed; she had to wait days for a neighbor to bring her food. "It touches me how kind and compassionate these people are. I've learned from them that you don't need everything you have. Each time I come back to America I clean out my closets and garage and give away things others might use."

Future projects being considered include making a documentary out of the survivors' invaluable testimony. Zane, who received the CNN Hero Award for her work, is also looking for reliable and committed Yiddish, Russian and Hungarian translators who can help with the essential undertaking of translating the many letters the organization receives. "It's very hard to find a Yiddish translator. Some of the people we write to are desperate to receive a letter in Yiddish. Sometimes I can make it happen, but sometimes I can't." If one of the survivors dies, Zane facilitates payment for a Jewish burial and headstone. "Otherwise, what would happen to these people?" The thought is horrifying.

"This is the last moment in time that we actually can do something to alleviate these people's pain. Sure, they're building memorials and museums, but as long as there are Holocaust survivors who are still suffering, that is what we should focus on. We must always remember the Jews who perished, but what about their family members who by some miracle survived? Who is taking care of them? We honor the dead, but we mustn't forget the living."

One hundred percent of your donation goes directly into the hands of a needy survivor. ■