



# The Survivor Mitzvah Project™

**Repairing the world together**



Over the past ten years I have been consumed by my involvement in the lives of people scattered across Eastern Europe who by some miracle survived the Holocaust but now struggle to survive each day. Isolated and alone, poor and in failing health, they do not get reparations from Germany because of the miles of red tape that will never be unraveled in their lifetime. These are the people the world has forgotten. These are the people who receive your donations and who could not live without your help.

This winter, while our tireless staff kept your aid flowing to survivors in Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova & Russia, I was overseas on our Humanitarian Aid Expedition, bringing dollars and supplies directly to elderly survivors in Latvia and Lithuania. I know first hand that your donations are truly life-saving.

On our expeditions we visit survivors already receiving our aid and also seek out others in need. Our ability to provide help on the spot is one of many unique aspects of *The Survivor Mitzvah Project*. We are a small but effective organization with minimal overhead, unencumbered by bureaucracy, and capable of maneuvering quickly to deliver assistance. We are sustained in this work by the donations of good people everywhere who realize that this is an emergency situation and a finite one. The time to help is now.



*Volunteer film crew Noam Osband, Laura Stella & Ryan Cooper flank SMP guide Liudmila Makiadonskaya, driver Vidas Puodzionas, and Zane Buzby – overlooking Trakai, Lithuania 2012 Humanitarian Aid Expedition*



In Riga, Latvia we found Doba, a frail woman near 90, living in one room on the upper floor of a crumbling apartment block. Malnourished, with multiple medical issues and untreated infections in her eyes, isolated and lonely, Doba had truly been forgotten. We brought her food, clothing and your dollars — enough to cover the costs of food, and medical treatment for months.

In Daugavpils, Latvia we found Zelda, also a solitary elderly woman, lacking fresh food, winter clothing, and needed medications; her deteriorating flat was cold, with an enormous hole in the wall patched with makeshift plaster. The sole survivor of her family, Zelda is still terrorized by memories of her childhood wartime experiences, continually reliving her nightmarish escape from the German bullets that killed her parents and the rest of her family. Zelda has never known kindness from strangers so it was a great pleasure to bring her aid and assure her that we will not forget her and will continue to help her always.



We visited Tevye and his wife Zina, who live in a tiny apartment in the heart of Riga without heat in the dead of winter. Their landlord turned off the heat and hot water to try to force them to move; he wants to renovate and sell the apartment. Over the years, envelopes from Tevye and Zina have arrived bursting with lengthy letters and articles from Latvian newspapers about the Holocaust or recent nationalistic (anti-Semitic) activity in the Baltic countries. Tevye insisted, despite the snow, on taking us to Rumbula Forest, the massacre site where 25,000 Jews, most of them Latvian, were murdered.



A giant tree-like menorah rises in the middle of the field, its twisted branches spanning a monument of rocks carved with the names of the people who perished and of the streets in the ghetto where they lived. Tevye, born in 1918, is the sole survivor of a large family. Kind and educated, he walked with me around the mass graves for quite some time and then shook his head, saying simply, "Beasts." He is one of the unofficial "watchmen" who to their last day will tell what happened here to all who come and listen. This 94-year-old man and his wife would not



survive the winter without your help. Your donations brought Tevye and Zina lifesaving aid in the form of heaters for the winter months, warm clothing, medications and food.

**In Lithuania we re-visited some of the people whom you have been helping over the years, and the change in their lives is miraculous. I am proud to report that because of your monthly support they are well, have ample food and medications, and live in clean surroundings where needed repairs have been made to leaky roofs and broken windows. Some who are bedridden now have caregivers and nurses. I thought back to the deplorable conditions in which these people lived when I first met some of them in 2001. It struck me that if we ever discontinued our assistance, if we ever stopped the aid flowing, they would again be overtaken by poverty and despair.**

I came back to Los Angeles with renewed strength, determined to raise as much funding as possible. **The Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance** (MOT) invited us to present a program at the museum on January 26th for *International Holocaust Remembrance Day*.

Award-winning actors **Ed Asner, Valerie Harper, and Frances Fisher** immediately volunteered to participate, lending their talents to an emotionally charged evening entitled ***IN THEIR OWN WORDS***. Based on readings from our collection of letters and life histories of survivors, the actors told of life and loss, imminent death and hair-raising escapes, friendship, love and betrayal.



*Valerie Harper, Ed Asner, Frances Fisher at SMP's program at The Simon Wiesenthal Center's Museum of Tolerance*

The program so impressed MOT that they offered to host a fundraiser for SMP in their 300-seat theatre. Again award-winning actors from stage, screen, television and performers from the music world came forward to volunteer for the multimedia presentation ***THE STARS COME OUT FOR SURVIVORS***. The evening of riveting dramatic readings from SMP's archive of letters and life histories, augmented by powerhouse musical performances, photographs and video from our humanitarian aid expeditions in Eastern Europe, was a great success both as a fundraiser and in moving people's hearts. The presentation was memorable and meaningful, chilling and cathartic.



**Consul General of Israel David Siegel** joined our cast to read a letter from Reuven of Vilnius, Lithuania, who as a child ran from the killing fields three times, and even now dreams that he is still running. **Rabbi Moshe J. Kushman**, a member of SMP's Board of Directors read his haunting, *Echoes of a Generation Lost*, which he wrote for the occasion.

*L to R: Alan Rosenberg, Elliott Gould, Frances Fisher, Rabbi Kushman, Lainie Kazan, Arnold McCuller, Brenda Russell, Randal Keith, Zane Buzby, Valerie Harper, General Consul of Israel David Siegel, Ed Asner*

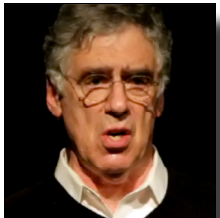
**Ed Asner** mesmerized the audience as Aaron Bitter of Ukraine, who as a teenager jumped from the train carrying him to Auschwitz. Deeply grateful for our help, Aron wrote "I count you in the cohort of my life-savers, who merit the exclusively important role in saving me from death, on a par with those who saved me from the fascists, and helped me during my eight years in the Stalinist death-camp."



**Frances Fisher**, defiant and strong, so embodied 90-year-old Fania as she told about her years as one of "The Avengers" a unit of teenage Partisans in the forest near Vilna, that I was transported back to that same forest which we visited with Fania just a few months before. I could clearly see Fania's smiling face as she walked us around this fairyland forest that was her safe haven for years, proud that she fought for the "honor of our people, with guns in our hands!"



*Fania from The Avengers*



**Elliott Gould**, as Fima from Ukraine, gave an emotional reading describing his childhood during the war. Fima had never told anyone any of this before because it was "too terrifying." He wrote of the bombardments, and how his mother starved to death. His entire village was reduced to ashes and rubble. He survived but nothing from his former life did. He wrote, "Zane, you ask for pre-war photos of my family but they are gone, everything is gone."

**Valerie Harper**, in an impassioned performance as Marya of Grodno, Belarus, told of the remnant of surviving Jews from her village returning after the war and having to rebuild their lives "from nothing," beginning with crude earthen huts they made in which to live. Her heartbreaking pleas to keep our connection, to keep writing to her, because now we are her only family, still ring in my ears.



**Lainie Kazan** brought us the warmth and heartfelt yearning of Ginda of Brest, Belarus, who survived a pogrom as a baby and then at age 23 was wounded on the Second Ukrainian Front as a mechanic on a bombardier-aircraft received through Lend-Lease. Now old and confined to a wheelchair, Ginda is so appreciative of your help she wrote, "It's a pity I cannot get about, I would give my life to see you!"

**Alan Rosenberg's** poignant reading of the harrowing memories of Tsile of Bucha, Ukraine brought a chill to the house as he told of how her family was slaughtered by the Einsatzgruppen, the mobile killing squads that roared into towns and villages killing every Jewish man, woman, and child in their path, then quickly moving on to the next town, the next massacre.





Joining our award-winning actors were the voices of angels: Broadway's **Randal Keith** (*Les Miserables*), and **Brenda Russell** (*The Color Purple*), and **Arnold McCuller** (vocalist with James Taylor, Aretha Franklin, and Bette Midler). They brought down the house with performances of songs illuminating the plight of the survivors and their emotional journey through the Holocaust. This was an evening to remember.

The survivor's stories were brought to life. The audience was swept up by the power of words and music to transmit at least a measure of the inexpressible – the suffering of those who directly experienced the Holocaust. The story of The Survivor Mitzvah Project itself was narrated, accompanied by video and photos of the survivors.



**THE STARS COME OUT FOR SURVIVORS** was covered by major television networks, as our celebrity performers appeared on news broadcasts publicizing the efforts of the SMP and bringing the plight of the survivors to national attention.



Thanks to the hard work and efforts of our staff, the many volunteers who came forward to help, and the dedicated performers who so enthusiastically donated their time and their talents to this cause, we raised emergency funds for immediate delivery to our friends in Eastern Europe. We hope to do a similar program on the East Coast in the future.



*Elliot Gould & Frances Fisher are interviewed*

*Valerie Harper meets the press*

These readings are an important tool in raising awareness and educating people about the Holocaust survivors still suffering over 70 years after the start of the War. Because when good people learn about this, just like us, they are compelled to help. And we need everyone to get involved, we need everyone to help. Time is running out.

The survivors call you "The Angels from America." Your help enables *The Survivor Mitzvah Project* to reach out and save lives. In joining together in a rare grass roots effort to help the last survivors of the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, we are changing history. Together we form a lifeline of continuous financial aid and caring friendship to these aging survivors in their final years. It is an honor for me to serve as the ambassador of your generosity, kindness and goodwill.

Sincerely and with great thanks, Zane Buzby

*The Survivor Mitzvah Project is a 501c3 non-profit organization. All donations are tax deductible to the full extent allowable by law.*

**Watch our humanitarian expeditions at: [www.youtube.com/user/SurvivorMitzvah](http://www.youtube.com/user/SurvivorMitzvah)**

**Contact us: (800) 905-6160 [survivormitzvah@gmail.com](mailto:survivormitzvah@gmail.com)**

**Donate online at: [www.survivormitzvah.org](http://www.survivormitzvah.org) or send a check to:**

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