



The Survivor Mitzvah ProjectTM

A Drop In The Ocean

Since the beginning of **The Survivor Mitzvah Project**, we have been corresponding with the survivors you are helping. They have written thousands of letters in a variety of languages and we translate and answer every single one. After all, we are now their families. These letters, amassed over the years, have become part of the SMP's Holocaust Educational Archive. Many of them contain never before published information about wartime experiences, and many are letters of thanks and good wishes. All of them come from the heart, many so remarkable and so vibrant that they should be read by everyone. This is such a letter, an extraordinary one, written by Manya Kemerova from Belarus:



Hello, my dear American friends. May G-d protect you for simply existing in such a difficult world. Thank you for being in my life.

Zane, your letters make me turn again to face those dark days of the war that pulverized the bones of six million Jews, peaceful Jews, old people, babies, who as they died in terrible torment did not understand – why?

You say, "Write, Manya, what you remember." Of course when the war broke out, I was just four years and four months old. But my child's memory retained all the terror of the war years, which crossed out in black thread my childhood happiness and left a black stripe across my life henceforth into the present, when old age knocks at

the door. "As from the egg, so to the end," folk wisdom says. And here is my question asked into the blue: "Why is the victorious country dozens if not hundreds of times worse off than the defeated country?"

So if about the war, then about the war. We had already been traveling for three months [escaping from the killing squads]. The word "exhausted" does not begin to describe it. Five young children. We stopped in a field. Burning sun. Limitless expanse. "Run, children, stretch your legs," says Mama. And we set off at a run. Suddenly, in the distance an enormous sunflower. Visible from afar. Tall, well-formed, only its head, heavy beyond measure, bending to the ground. The wreath of yellow leaves stirred in the light wind as if it were alive. I began to make my way towards it.

At home before the war we planted sunflowers around the potato field, but they didn't grow with such vigor as this one. As if it had gathered all the juices of the earth, this one towered with its flowers high above the grass and field. Clearly no one had planted it there deliberately. And who would have thought that in this apparently peaceful field under the burning rays in the orange sky someone was lying in wait for his prey like a beast? A person? Shooting at a little girl, shouting "Jude, Jude!" I lay in front of him, a small Jewish girl with sun-bleached fair hair and grey-blue eyes. I was a "Jude" – not a person – I was subject to annihilation. He shot at me. Missed. My bloodcurdling cry carried all the way to Mama. My mama, Riva Mendeleyevna Leitus (I think she is in paradise there, as she has already seen hell on earth), in a split second, as it seemed to me then, covered me with her body. I didn't see anything else, I only heard that dear voice in Yiddish, "What mother raised you? Who taught you, a man, to shoot babies?" And curses, curses fell on his head from Mama's mouth, a Jewish mother. And he continued shooting and shooting. And continued to miss. Somehow the bullets were deflected away from Mama, who was covering her offspring with her body. Not one bullet touched us. Sudden silence. Somebody's German son was left lying dead. A single bullet shot by someone who had heard my mother's curses in Yiddish saved our lives. That bullet might have fallen from heaven. And here I am now, alive, writing to you.

Another stop. Mama filled the Primus stove with kerosene to boil water. She turned away for a minute. A seven-year-old child wanted to make the fire bigger and decided to shake the stove on which the water had already come to a boil. An unfortunate shake and boiling water poured over the little girl. The stool at the side, the saucepan on the ground, and in a puddle of boiling water, no longer screaming but moaning, twisting her entire body in pain, a little girl who did not know what childhood was. And again Mama, my Jewish mama, by then six months on the road, was called upon to heal one of her five nestlings. She turned the little body over and her lips whispered, "Let all your illnesses pass to me. Oh my G-d, why didn't that saucepan fall on me? Let all the sores on your body pass to me." This is what Mama's mama, my grandmother, used to say when her children were ill. Every Jewish mama – is simply Mama.

... And now we are home. The burned ruins of our home. One stone from the stove, like a gravestone, is all that remains of our nest. And five small children thrown out of the nest by the war. And lying on the ground – Mama, who from grief had lost the strength to stay on her feet. She pressed her hands, filled with ashes, to her face. She lay there a long time. Then she summoned the strength to stand. For her children stood there encircling her. She had to find food. But we did not find food soon. We walked in single file to the stable where they had chased the Jewish old people and the children – there too were ashes. That was all that remained of my grandmother and grandfather and five relatives. Not even a little bone. Perhaps dogs had dragged them away. Raising trembling hands to the sky, Mama shouted in Yiddish: "Why? Who arranged Judgment Day on earth for infirm old people and angelic children? Who turned this mad world upside down?" and we cried out in voices not our own.

As if sprung from the earth an old man appeared. Later Mama told us he wasn't even 40. He stretched out his hand to Mama. On his palm lay a gold dental crown. His toothless mouth whispered, "This is Mendel's crown, only your father had this kind. Do you recognize it? There are hungry children standing behind you. This crown will save them from starving to death." And so it turned out. Mama exchanged the crown for a pood (16 kg) of potatoes. Every day each of us received a hot steaming potato. You could burn your fingers on it. And from the peels we cooked soup spiced with nettle. I have never eaten tastier soup in my life.

The 40-year-old old man, wiping away the tears that streamed down his face, put his arms around Mama and whispered, "And yet you are happy, Riva, you brought all your children back. It is truly a miracle. Of my three children nothing remains but ashes." They stood holding each other and their tears spilled on them both.

And then neighbors began to come forward and rivers of tears flowed. The first to approach us was a woman in rags. Gazing at my mother attentively, not believing her eyes, she turned her gaze to us children and then, convinced that it was really us, the words broke forth from her: "Riva, is that you? All grey?" And she started to wail, cursing those who had turned my beautiful mother into something like an old woman. And she, the other "old woman in rags," was only 35.

As if sprung from the earth, others who had remained among the living began to come forward. It seemed that all of them wanted to pour out in the communal choir of tears and wails everything that weighed upon their chests—the pain of losing their near and dear, for one's own grief when part of the communal grief feels as if it is just a bit divided and shared among everyone, so that it does not weigh so heavily, and something there, under your heart, begins to release. They began hugging, kissing, touching each other, looking at each other as if not believing their eyes that others were alive and not burned, killed, dead of cold or hunger, or fallen down as if dead from receiving a notice of someone killed in action. The heart could not bear that.

There were 28 Jews remaining in our fairly large regional capital. Previously there had been 800 adults. Later they all were listed name by name. Only Mama and her sister survived from their family, there had been nine. Mama's sister saved a photo of her nephews and nieces. Now this photo is on my table. I look into their faces for the thousandth time. Such beautiful children, of the same blood as mine. They did not reach adulthood. Dark Jewish eyes, curly hair. Not one smiling face. However long I look into their eyes – all I see is sorrow. Or it maybe it was a presentiment.

On my father's side only one person, his brother, my uncle Khatzkel, survived. Before his eyes his wife and two children were murdered. He was saved by a miracle and later made it to Berlin. How many relatives I would have now. How rich I would be.

Closing my eyes, I picture this great wealth of mine. All my relatives gathered around the big round table that stood in our house before the war. No, there wouldn't be enough room for all of them. They are all happy and alive. Some would be 120 now, some 80 or 90, some 40, and some sitting on their great-grandmothers' knees. Children's laughter would be heard like tinkling bells. And raising glasses of champagne, turning our happy faces to each other, we would say, "How many of us there are! And in this is our happiness on this beautiful earth!"

But I am sitting at a small table and going deaf from the silence. Let at least a fly enter!

Once I saw a cat by the road. On one side her kitten, her little son, sat quietly, and on her other side was her other kitten, dead. In the mother's eyes there was so much grief. Why was her child run over? Why? — six million Jews risen from ashes would ask. Who of those who did not turn into ashes could answer me?

This is a drop in the ocean of what my memory preserved. I chose these episodes in memory of our mamas, our Jewish mamas.

Zane, my dear American friends, be happy. This is very fragile word – happiness. Let it be eternal. I await your letter.

The last time I visited Manya in Grodno, Belarus, I left her sitting at her table, the frayed photos of her family set out before her. She shuffled them and laid them out again, studying each face. She looked up at me, wordless, but her expression asked simply, "Why?"

Now more than ever, the elderly survivors of the Holocaust, alone and lonely, ill and destitute, need your help. Please be as generous as you can. - *Zane Buzby*

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