

Empathy and Understanding

Survivors Volunteer in the Names Recovery Project



■ Volunteers Ora Leshem (left) and Uri Sela (right) assist in Names Recovery efforts at Protea Village Residence in central Israel.

■ For Aliza Shomron, helping other Holocaust survivors commemorate their lost loved ones comes naturally. As someone who lived through the *Shoah*, Shomron has firsthand knowledge of the horrors they endured. Coupled with her instinctive empathy and understanding, this helps put fellow survivors at ease. “When I help other survivors I can look them in the eye. I don’t need to explain myself much; we already have a mutual understanding and share common knowledge. I understand their problems and their anxiety, and I feel great empathy towards them and the strength to encourage them. With me they feel more comfortable, and less threatened.”

The *Shoah* Victims’ Names Recovery Project trains volunteers in Israel and around the world

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to assist Holocaust survivors and members of their generation to commemorate victims they knew by recording their names and, when available, photos and other biographical data on Pages of Testimony. Like Shomron, many of those joining the ranks of this historic effort are themselves *Shoah* survivors. As the generation that best remembers the victims dwindles, the urgency grows to record their names and ensure their memory.

In Israel, volunteers undergo training at Yad Vashem and then conduct home visits with survivors, where tremendous sensitivity is required to guide the submitters through the painful process of re-opening wartime memories and confronting feelings of loss and mourning from over half a century ago. The Project’s Volunteer Coordinator Yeela Cooper says that Holocaust survivors continually express their gratitude to the volunteers who have helped them. “Survivors thank us for reaching out to them. Without us, they would still be walking around with a feeling of something missing, and a heavy burden.”

Dasha Rittenberg, who lost most of her family during the Holocaust, couldn’t bring herself to submit Pages of Testimony. “I have

by Deborah Berman



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too many names. It was difficult for me to fill out the Pages, despite many people encouraging me to do so." The assistance and compassion Rittenberg received from a volunteer made all the difference, and enabled her finally to tackle the task of commemoration. "I was less inhibited at home, sitting at my own table. The volunteer was

a nice warm person, and seemed genuine about wanting to help me. On one visit she brought her parents—her father is also a survivor. I love that her parents came too."

While the pain of her past losses will always be with her, Rittenberg says she has found comfort in commemorating her family members. "I will never find peace, but I am glad I have commemorated them; I think it was the right thing to do. It tells the world, 'You see—we did not forget them, we will not forget them.' Every Friday night, I try to remember their faces. I hope that they will never fade away."

Most interestingly, Cooper relates, is that the benefit is also felt on the part of the volunteers. They tell her how they cherish the close relationships they form with other survivors and are proud of their contribution towards Holocaust remembrance. "Many volunteers come back to us with a feeling of satisfaction, a mission completed. They are pleased that they have joined this vital national effort."

The process of remembrance also provides volunteers with a sense of collective relief. "At the end of the process, the people thank me warmly. I feel I am helping them cope with a difficult task," says Shomron. "And my benefit? I leave with a good feeling."

To learn more about the project, or to initiate a names recovery campaign in your area, please contact: names.outreach@yadvashem.org.il

Over 350,000 names gleaned from *Sifrei Yizkor*

by Zvi Bernhardt

■ Since the 1950s, Yad Vashem has been collecting *sifrei yizkor*—memorial books published by organizations representing the remnants of destroyed European communities. Currently the Yad Vashem Library holds more than 1,200 such books, the largest such collection in the world. Many of the *sifrei yizkor* include lists of those murdered by the Nazis and their collaborators, compiled by members of their community. In 2002, Yad Vashem's Hall of Names recruited volunteers to record these names in a digital format, in order to incorporate them into the Central Database for *Shoah* Victim's Names. Over 260,000 names from this project have already been added to the Names Database, and some 100,000 names await editing.

A new volunteer project has recently been launched, aimed at gleaning names from memoirs written by *Shoah* survivors. While each book may contain only a few names (unlike the *sifrei yizkor*, which frequently include hundreds of names) this new, labor-intensive project reflects Yad Vashem's commitment to recovering the names and identities of every single victim of the *Shoah*.

The author is Deputy Director of Reference and Information Services and Head of Data Processing in the Hall of Names.

Belarus Volunteers Join Yad Vashem in Names Recovery

■ In May 2008, a Yad Vashem delegation to Belarus joined together with local partners to collect and document the names of some 800,000 Jews killed in the region during the *Shoah*.

Left to right: Leonid Rubinstein, Head of the Bobruisk Jewish Community; Yoni Leifer, JDC representative in Belarus; Yossi Hollander, Names Recovery Project benefactor; Avner Shalev, Chairman of the Yad Vashem Directorate; Dr. Aharon Weiss, JDC Special Advisor in the FSU; Inna Gerasimova, Director of the Minsk Jewish Museum

