

Christian and Jewish groups form partnerships to care for Holocaust survivors

by [Michele Chabin](#) in the [March 15, 2017](#) issue

When Ya'akov Edelstein, an 86-year-old Holocaust survivor, agreed to a bar mitzvah ceremony he never had as a child, he asked that it take place at Haifa's Home for Holocaust Survivors.

Although Edelstein and his wife live in a comfortable senior citizen residence in this northern Israeli city, he wanted to celebrate this milestone—73 years late—at the survivors' home: "I wanted to mark this day with people who experienced what I experienced. No one can appreciate this the way they can."

The home, which provides housing to 75 survivors and hot meals and services to 200 others, was founded through a collaboration between an Orthodox Israeli philanthropist and the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem, an evangelical Christian organization based in Israel.

While the vast majority of survivor funding comes from the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany, which negotiates for compensation and restitution for victims of Nazi persecution, several Christian organizations assist Holocaust survivors in Israel and elsewhere.

That assistance is more vital than ever, say survivor advocates. A quarter of survivors in Israel live below the poverty line, and the percentage is even higher in the former Soviet Union.

The survivors' advanced age and financial challenges "have given us an even greater sense of urgency," said David Parsons, ICEJ's senior spokesman.

Parsons said the thousands of mostly evangelical Christians from dozens of countries who donate money to ICEJ have two motivations: "They want to bless the Jewish people and they want to pay the moral debt we Christians owe to the Jewish people because of the atrocities committed against them in the name of Jesus."

More than 26,000 Christians have been honored by Israel's Holocaust museum, Yad Vashem, for saving Jews during the Holocaust, but many more actively collaborated

with the Nazis, some of whom were Christians.

In an attempt to make amends, tens of thousands of Christians, especially from European countries that embraced the Nazi regime, have volunteered in Israeli hospitals and homes for the aged and have donated tens of millions of dollars to organizations that help Jewish people with financial needs, especially survivors.

These Christians are working in other nations, too. Christians Care International, for example, just opened a senior center in Ukraine that will help hundreds of impoverished Jews, many of whom are Holocaust survivors.

Survivors are typically in worse physical, emotional, and financial shape than others their age, said Yudit Setz, assistant director of ICEJ's aid department. The effects of starvation, frostbite, torture (including medical experimentation), and lack of medical and dental care when they were children have followed the survivors into old age. Many lack the familial support other seniors rely on.

While Holocaust survivors from some European countries have received financial compensation for loss of property and enslavement, others, especially in the former Soviet Union, subsist on tiny state pensions and some assistance from the Claims Conference, said Yechiel Eckstein, president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews.

The fellowship, which has been assisting elderly Soviet Jews for two decades, supports roughly 110,000 survivors, "but there are 60,000 to 70,000 we can't help due to lack of funds," Eckstein said.

Amy Wexler, the Claims Conference's public relations manager, said the organization has distributed \$8 billion directly to survivors since 1980 through compensation programs. "Our funding for social services, including home care, food, and medicine for poor survivors, has drastically increased year after year."

Shimon Sabag, the Israeli philanthropist whose aid organization, Yad Ezer Le'Haver, runs the Haifa home with the ICEJ, said the home receives no funding from either the Claims Conference or the Israeli government. That makes the Christians' contribution that much more important, he said.

"They are giving the truest form of charity because they ask for nothing in return," Sabag said. "We are proud to be their partners."

The fellowship recently earmarked \$52 million over four years to expand its services to elderly Russian Jews, including tens of thousands of survivors, in partnership with the Joint Distribution Committee, the leading Jewish humanitarian assistance organization.

The fellowship, which like the ICEJ says it does not evangelize to Jews, also distributes supermarket vouchers to 20,000 Israeli survivors and sends volunteers to visit the lonely.

Avraham Marek, 103, who has lived alone in his Jerusalem apartment since his wife died ten years ago, recently welcomed a visit from Jancy Benvenishti, the fellowship's Jerusalem coordinator.

Marek's parents and all ten of his siblings were murdered in Czechoslovakia during the Holocaust; he managed to survive because he enlisted in the Czech army. He moved to Israel in 1949 with his wife, a survivor of Auschwitz.

In his apartment in a working-class Jerusalem neighborhood, Marek expressed his appreciation to Benvenishti, who had come to check on his well-being. At the visit's end, Marek took her hands and gave her a blessing.

"May God give you a life as long as mine, with health as good as mine," he said. "And may God give you the ability to continue your holy work to those of us who need it." —Religion News Service

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