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Law Students Aiding A Special Clientele

Hebrew University lawyers-to-be helping Holocaust survivors through legal morass to get reparations.

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Seven decades after she endured four years of unspeakable hunger, freezing temperatures, lice epidemics and perpetual fear of death in the Romanian ghetto of Dej Maturin, Penina Katzir once again felt naked, forced to reopen her wounds from the Shoah and answer the probing questions of an Israeli government-appointed psychiatrist.

“It was humiliation that you cannot even define in words,” Katzir said. “I didn’t file the original request forms with the Germans because they forced survivors to go to shrinks to prove that they were abnormal...When it became the Israeli government’s responsibility, I was sure I wouldn’t have to go to a shrink and undergo such humiliation. But surprisingly and sadly it was the same — or even worse. In each and every committee, I needed to sit there and open the same old wounds again and again that I had spent my whole life repressing.”



Hebrew University Faculty of Law student, Liron Mark

Katzir, now 80, and her husband Yaakov, 78, underwent this obligatory mental health evaluation in 1998, joining a new wave of Holocaust survivors who were finally reclaiming war reparations that were lost somewhere in the complex bureaucracies of the Israeli and German governments, as well as the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

Today, Katzir is one of approximately 200,000 to 250,000 Holocaust survivors in Israel, 60,000 to 90,000 of whom live under the poverty line. Only in the recent past has the government begun taking note that the money was not yet in the hands of the survivors, explained Michal Ben Attar, national coordinator of the Jewish Agency’s Project La’ad (“Forever”), launched in May 2009 to help these survivors claim their money.

“Only in the 1980s did society start to speak about the Holocaust,” Ben Attar said. “Only in the last decade was it legitimate to talk about these payments they didn’t receive.”

Israel may have recognized the problem, but getting the money into the hands of these survivors is still not easy. The process includes not only the intense psychiatric exam, but also submission of complex tax forms that require extensive legal review, which is financially prohibitive to most survivors. In an attempt to resolve this problem, the Jewish Agency established Project La’ad, which provides intensive training for volunteers around the country who make home visits to these survivors, notify them of their rights and help them fill out the basic forms.

“A lot of our volunteers themselves are second- or third-generation descendants of survivors, and sometimes they’re coming to complete a cycle that they never fulfilled,” Ben Attar said.

The volunteers include university students, Russian immigrants serving in the Israel Defense Forces and many others. They get funds from the Israeli government, the UJA-Federation of New York and the Canadian Jewish Federations. Since the launch, the project has recruited 2,500 volunteers and has reached out to 10,000 survivors, with an additional 18,000 in an unofficial pilot program the previous year, according to Ben Attar.

“The survivors are not able even to make the phone call and do the fulfillment of rights themselves,” Ben Attar said. “We need people with ambition” to help them.

And one of these groups has decided to take the project even further.

When **Hebrew University** first-year law student Liron Mark found out about La’ad from the campus volunteer coordinators, she and her friends knew that they needed to launch a branch of the project at the law school. Who better to review legal forms, free of charge, than Israel’s lawyers-to-be, she decided.

“People feel so bad about this whole situation, about how survivors have been taken advantage of by the government,” said Mark, who herself has two survivor grandparents. “Every time they need to go and fill out forms, and every time they have talk about what happened to them in the Holocaust, to prove that they experienced mental damage. It’s like a war of exhaustion between the government and the people.”

Mark, 23, had already heard about the reparations problem during her weekly visits with the Katzirs, where she taught them computer skills through the Zikhor veh Kavod (Remember and Respect) project at the university’s Hillel House.

“Project La’ad’s goal is to give knowledge to the volunteers,” Mark said. “Then they can go to the house of the Holocaust survivor and help them fill out the form” that documents the personal details of their experience.

Volunteers like Mark submit the basic form to the Jewish Agency umbrella group, who then submits the completed papers to the Ministry of Senior Services. Eventually, the survivors then receive a written reply from the ministry, advising them as to how much money they should legitimately request from the Ministry of Finance, the Claims Conference or the German government, depending on the individual. This step requires a second batch of documentation, which is much more complex and demands far more careful legal attention than the first set, according to Mark.

It is at this stage of the paperwork that survivors need a lawyer, according to Mark.

And that’s where she and her team of law students are looking to provide training necessary for law student volunteers this fall so that they are qualified to continue the process.

“The advantage of law school students is that they can do the next step, instead of the lawyers that take a 20 percent [commission],” she said, noting that Ben-Gurion University students have also embarked on a similar project called “Alpha.”

Mark’s goal is to spread this expanded version of the La’ad project to law students at every Israeli university.

Already, Ben Attar and the Jewish Agency leadership of the project are seeing the volunteer groups make significant headway with survivors who often begin the process as suspicious and completely unwilling to discuss their pasts with anyone, let alone procure the money they deserve.

“Two weeks ago one volunteer called a survivor twice — and got hung up on twice,” Mark said.

“No one trusts the government anymore so they don’t trust the people that are going to help them,” agreed Mayaan Menashe, another Hebrew University law student volunteer. “When I call them, they don’t believe me. It takes me a while to convince them to even let me come to their homes.”

Menashe, whose family came from Kurdistan and Turkey and had no direct links to the Holocaust, was inspired to get involved with the project after befriending a survivor named Moshe who became a regular at the coffee shop where Menashe works.

“I know him for years, and he had a really tough life,” Menashe said, noting that Moshe was never able to have a family of his own because he devoted years to taking care of his mother after the war. “He’s alone now because he didn’t have time to help himself. I really wanted to help him, so it really opened my eyes to the whole project.”

Typically, the survivors can expect to see their money within 10 months of beginning the process, according to Ben Attar. Those who are in the most dire straits can also apply for the more immediate Emergency Fund: SOS. Eligible survivors can get up to \$1,500 within a week of a home visit, through contributions from donors all over the world.

But without the help of the volunteers, these survivors — many of whom not only went through the Holocaust but also fought in Israel’s War of Independence, as Mark notes — could not access any of the life-saving resources available to them.

“This will let them die with honor,” Mark said. “We cannot forget them now. They have, what, five to 10 years left? It’s really sad to say. But we need to give them the physical will to live and the knowledge that the country didn’t forget about them.”

And to Katzir, this commitment of young volunteers around the world means everything.