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Brooklyn

Passover volunteer group brings comfort to Holocaust survivors

BY [ELIZABETH LAZAROWITZ](#) / DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

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ELIZABETH LAZAROWITZ FOR NEWS

Holocaust survivor Esther Zorger gets regular visits from Yousef Sionit through Brooklyn-based Connect2 program, which pairs survivors with volunteers.

It takes a moment before [Esther Zorger](#) recognizes her visitor.

When she does, though, the 95-year-old Holocaust survivor's face brightens into a smile.

"He's a nice man," Zorger said of Yousef Sionit, a volunteer

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who drops in on her weekly to chat and bring food. "He explains things, does this and that."

Sionit, 67, steadied Zorger as she walked to a chair, asking about her recent move to a [Sheepshead Bay](#) senior home. "Esther, it's good here, yes?"

Sionit is one of about 50 volunteers in Connect2, a [Brooklyn](#)-based program that provides companionship for the city's survivors of Nazi concentration camps.

And as the Jewish holiday of [Passover](#) begins on Monday at sundown, these special relationships take on an added meaning for the thousands of survivors living in Brooklyn.

"Just having some people in the house for a short period of time usually for elderly people is a good thing," said Zorger's son Mark, 58, adding his mom's memories of her time in [Auschwitz](#) remain vivid. "It brightens the day."

About 60 Holocaust survivors in Brooklyn and [Manhattan](#) are involved in the program, which was launched a decade ago by the JCC of Greater [Coney Island](#).

"A lot have already outlived their spouses and relatives, so they can be very isolated and lonely," said Connect2 director Elisheva Lock. "It's definitely a social outlet for them."

In her [Borough Park](#) apartment, Tova, 82, often serves up homemade cakes and cookies for Rebecca, 55, a [Long Island](#) attorney who has been visiting her weekly for about two years.

They rarely speak about Tova's days at Auschwitz, where her mother and niece were killed, or her time in German work camps - but will talk on the phone Monday to wish each other a happy Passover.

"By this time, we've really developed a friend-type relationship," said Tova, who exchanges recipes, chats about her great-grandchildren or goes on walks with Rebecca, who both asked to be identified only by their first names.

Another Connect2 volunteer, [Alexis Whitehead](#), knew little about the Holocaust before she began visiting [Rosa Chinsky](#), 96, she said. The [East Flatbush](#) resident and stay-at-home mom signed up for the program out of a desire to help elderly people like her own beloved grandmother.

She and Rosa often listen to music together.

"I start clapping my hands. You should see her dancing, too," Whitehead said. "I feel that she's teaching me something - that I should take life seriously and enjoy every bit of it."

elazarowitz@nydailynews.com

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