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THE NEEDIEST CASES

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## Getting a Helping Hand After Giving Back to the City

By N.R. Kleinfield



Cassi Alexandra for The New York Times

Sami Steigmann, 72, whose family was imprisoned in a Nazi camp, came to America in 1968, and to New York in 1988.

Sami Steigmann gave the Australians fair warning. He told them that he grew up in Transylvania.

“So I’m going to punish you,” he said. “It’s in my blood. I’m going to make you walk a lot.”

They capitulated. The mileage mounted.

Mr. Steigmann was doing what he did with natural élan: he greeted. This time, it was a retired couple, here in New York City for the first time.

He ticked off a torrent of recommendations, made them promise to go to Tiffany’s and see the big yellow diamond, said they must visit Snug Harbor on Staten Island. He told jokes, like the two words of a husband that explain how a couple can be married for 50 years: “Yes, dear.”

Mr. Steigmann is 72, a peppy man with stingy hair, anecdotal, prime greeter material.

He volunteers a lot, one of the regular recipients being [Big Apple Greeter](#), which welcomes visitors to the complicated city. He also intermingles his time at about 10 other places, including [the Museum of Jewish Heritage](#);

the [Big Apple Circus](#); Governors Island; [the Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum](#); and [the Make-A-Wish Foundation](#). Some weeks, he puts in a preposterous 60 hours volunteering.

Mr. Steigmann gets by on disability benefits. The cost of making it to his duties adds up, so he has received transportation stipends from [the Community Service Society of New York](#), one of the seven agencies supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund. Since 2006, he has received a total of \$337.50.

He likes to tell the city's story, but Mr. Steigmann, well, he has a story of his own. He was born in Czernowitz when it was in Romania (it is now in Ukraine); his father was a bookkeeper. From 1941 to 1944, the family was imprisoned in a Nazi camp in Mogilev Podolski, in what is now Ukraine. His parents told him he was near death when a kind German woman who brought food to the guards smuggled milk to him. The family got out when the Red Army liberated the camp.

For years afterward, the same nightmare tormented him: "I was in a city that was completely dark. I was in a corner, naked. I heard shooting and bombing. And no one to help."

His attitude, though, is positive. "I teach to forgive," he said. "Not to forget, but to forgive."

After leaving the camp, his family lived a spare existence in Transylvania, before moving to Israel in 1961. He served in the Israeli Air Force and then became an accountant.

His parents nagged him that a young man ought to travel. To halt the nagging, he came to the United States in 1968, settling in Milwaukee, where he had a relative.

Mr. Steigmann spoke no English, but he had an ear for languages. He said he picked up English largely from watching television commercials, deciphering words from the repetitive sales pitches, with soap and car advertisements bringing him fluency. To this day, he is fond of commercials.

(Over the years, he has learned German, Yiddish, Romanian, Hebrew, English, Latin, Hungarian, French and Russian.) He became a pharmaceutical representative. He got married and had a son, but after a bitter divorce, he returned to Israel in 1983. A second marriage also dissolved.

Feeling more American than Israeli, Mr. Steigmann came to New York in 1988, working again as an accountant. With borrowed money, he bought an apartment, but a bad investment cost him everything. He lost his job. For six months in 1996, he lived in a homeless shelter, a broken man bereft of hope.

"I was a proud man," he said. "At that point, I didn't have any pride."

He made a decision. He had been a heavy smoker, three and a half packs a day. "I said if I can quit smoking cold turkey, then I can rebuild my life," he said.

On Dec. 13, 1996, he had his last cigarette and began to rebuild. The emotional toll put him on disability, and he was offered subsidized housing in Murray Hill.

"The city was very good to me," he said. "I wanted to give back. I felt a need to teach and to show."

And so he volunteered.

"I have never felt like a victim," Mr. Steigmann said. "Even when I lost all the money, I felt like a survivor."