

The Szarvas Fellowships- a life changing experience

Guest Voice – The Canadian Jewish News

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Friday, 27 February 2009

The dispersed from the four corners of the earth are all gathered. Everyone lives in perfect peace and harmony.

Am I talking about the coming of the Messiah? No. I'm talking about a summer camp. But not any camp, this camp is so unique that a comparison to the former is, I think, justified. I'm not a heretic- really. But there is really no other way that I can think of to express the magical, unique and even sometimes holy feeling one feels while walking around this utopia of a camp in the middle of the Hungarian countryside. I've been to sleep away camp and various summer programs/ trips since I was a very small kid, but no experience has even come remotely close to the impact this past summer has had on me.

Szarvas is the name of a picturesque town in Hungary (approximately a three hour drive from Budapest). More importantly though, it is home to the International Jewish Summer Camp that Ronald Lauder's foundation established in 1990. This camp is more than a camp but a place that builds Jewish identity and bursts with Jewish pride. At the camp, during the session I attended, there were American Jews, Canadian Jews, Israeli Jews, British Jews, Irish Jews, Dutch Jews, French Jews, Polish Jews, Romanian Jews, Hungarian Jews and Russian Jews. The Jewish “cultural diversity” was unparalleled. For some this camp was their first time being exposed to any form of Judaism, but, for others, numerous past, positive summer experiences at Szarvas turned them on to a quest of discovering their Jewish identity.

One counselor (and former camper) told me that she believes Szarvas is responsible for a “Jewish Renaissance” in Hungary. With just about 100,000 Jews in Budapest, this is a rather large community, which, in having a “renaissance”, can have enormous and positive ramifications for the entire Jewish people. Thanks to Szarvas, people are discovering their Jewish roots and living life with a whole new added meaning. I remember talking to this boy from Poland who told me how after discovering his Judaism he has decided to become “frum” and study at YU. I was also particularly surprised hearing about the quality of the Jewish education many Romanians receive thanks to the Lauder school there.

The exciting things I got to do and people I got to meet and hang out with at Szarvas continuously amazed me. I mean, where else could one approach a new Russian friend, as I did, proudly showing off my new Russian vocabulary: “Dobrei Utra Matthew”, I say,

to which he responds, even more proudly: “Shalom Aleichem Adam” eagerly showing off and using his newly acquired phrase. Szarvas is a true mosaic- it's the only place I know of where upon return campers have accrued an entirely new lexicon. I made new friends from around the world. We discussed each others cultures, views and day to day lives. For some, Judaism was foreign, with Szarvas being their only connection with it.

There was diversity even among the American group. Some came from yeshivas: while others had never set foot in a Jewish school. Some considered themselves atheists: while others were shomer shabbos. We came from Boston, Tallahassee, Montreal, Teaneck, Manhattan, Calgary, Virginia, San Jose, Washington and Houston- to name but a few. People came from different backgrounds but everybody selected for the American trip was remarkably intelligent. We all explained our beliefs and then questioned them, debated them and then questioned them again. We learnt about all sorts of denominations of Judaism. We researched our heritage and shared our family histories (my mom's side happens to come from Hungary making the experience even that much more meaningful).

In two short weeks, we forged such deep relationships with people that were once strangers that some in the group decided to share parts of their life they never shared with anyone else. Rabbi Seth Braunstein, the director of the American program, was successfully able to create an environment filled with respect and openness among all participants yet an environment that was never too serious and always kind of crazy and fun. Rabbi Seth is a truly remarkable leader who I look up to immensely.

On a personal level, he was able to help me shape what my Judaism means to me and refine my personal Jewish identity. He created an environment where pluralism truly flourished, he guided many people to discover meaning in their Judaism and each others' Judaism. In the scheme of things, we understood that despite our small differences (amongst the Americans and the other countries) we are truly all just one people. This feeling pervaded the entire experience. I sensed it especially when the whole camp wholeheartedly participated in shira. We all had our arms around each others' shoulders and we were huddled in a circle. Next to me was one of my Russian friends and on the other side was a 'reform' friend of mine from Tampa. But we all sang together at the top of our lungs “Shalom, Shalom... Yavo Shalom Al Yisrael”. That is an image that is indelibly imprinted on my being. The fact that I am back in the same country where my grandmother and her family were persecuted some mere sixty odd years ago, and now I return brimming with Jewish pride and singing and dancing is a deeply emotive and meaningful experience.

Camp was full of deep Jewish pride and a dose of nationalistic pride as well as a charmingly wacky feeling that constantly filled the camp. To quote one of my friends, Szarvas is probably the only place it's natural to have a debate about women's role in Judaism while brushing your teeth. At the same time, as deep and intense as conversations often became there was a streak of unpredictable craziness that ran through the camp that ensured that no one took himself or herself too seriously. One minute you might be discussing whether there can be morality without religion while the next minute a crazy European techno dance party emerges. I guess you can say Szarvas is just one big dance party.

At camp no one had any inhibitions, everyone felt comfortable being themselves. Szarvas inspired pride in being Jewish as well as pride in simply being who you are. Cultures are not only talked about they are lived. For example, at a normal camp you might have a soccer or basketball tournament and play against say, Bunk 2. At Szarvas you play against a country on the other side of the continent. We saw, firsthand, how passionate Europeans are about soccer and how little they know about basketball (the reverse of what we, from North America, are used to). I'm pretty sure I saw one Hungarian dude trying to headbutt a ball into a basketball net!

Birthdays were marked by the entire camp singing to the birthday boy or girl in his or her respective language (I can now sing 'Happy Birthday' in Hungarian). At Szarvas, wake up is even fun (well...almost). I looked forward to hear the different music they're going to play from different countries. On several mornings, I was given the opportunity to do wake up. I'd have to prepare phrases in all the different languages as well as collect popular songs to play from different countries. Even though I'm sure I mispronounced almost every foreign word I tried to say I enjoyed every moment of this cultural experience.

Mr. Ronald Lauder did something remarkably right with this camp. He deserves to be applauded for his tremendous work. The camp's unique formula for instilling a deep sense of what it means to be Jewish urgently needs to be reproduced in America and Canada where assimilation is rampant. In North America, our brand of "continuity" through Jewish camps falls severely short of the Szarvas measure. But more than that, this camp is just simply an amazing place- like nothing I've seen before. Throughout Szarvas an awesome, ineffable aura radiates constantly. This was an experience I will always treasure and am very thankful for. Szarvas successfully fosters a meaningful connection between all different types of Jews. Szarvas epitomizes *am echad, lev echad*. It was the summer of a lifetime, to say the least.