

With the placid Danube River stretched out before us and the soft glow of the street lights illuminating the small field of grass we had sat down upon, we started to talk about our heritage. Enjoying the warm night, we told each other about our family trees, our ancestors, and where we had come from. Stories of escape and new lives were shared, Jewish identity discussed, and finally we said havdalah as the river flowed next to us. This was the conclusion of Shabbat in Budapest, the culmination of the weekend orientation for the American group about to embark on the two-week Szarvas program in Hungary. Over that weekend in Budapest, the 26 American teenagers who had applied and been accepted for the American Fellowship program had formed bonds that would only be strengthened and challenged over the next two weeks. The next day, we departed for Camp Szarvas (pronounced 'Sar-vash'), an international Jewish camp hosting groups from over 25 different countries, funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation. Given little details on how the camp works and what would be happening over the two-week first session, we had many different notions of what the camp would be like, but many of our expectations were proven wrong. Szarvas proved to be an experience both unexpected and unique.

On arrival, we were free to walk around the camp, to see the campgrounds and meet some of the kids already there. While awkwardly introducing ourselves to various Hungarian, Russian, and Lithuanian campers, we surveyed our new, temporary home. Many new bunks had just been built, and the camp was full of beautiful trees, many of which were heavy with small, ripe plums, ready to be picked and eaten. Soon it was time for our first international meal, dinner with the 8 other groups that we would be sharing the camp with for the session. Tables were divided by country. To our left was the large Hungarian group, to our right Russia, Belarus and Estonia, in front of us the Latvians and Lithuanians, and behind us the Turks and Indians. We were soon overwhelmed by the loud, spirited cheers in various languages coming from the 400 campers at the surrounding tables. Many campers had attended the camp in previous years, and were familiar with its customs and songs, unlike the American group, which includes different kids every summer. It was the loudest, most rambunctious camp meal I had ever seen, and the American group instantly loved it. Within a matter of days, we learned the layout of Szarvas, became familiar with much of the international staff and campers, and felt like we fit in.

Programs and activities, both within our group and with other groups, filled each day. Whether discussing issues of Jewish identity and pluralism within our own group, meeting other countries in *mifgashim*, or simply doing normal camp activities, like swimming, sports, camping, or canoeing, our schedules constantly kept us active and challenged. Sports tournaments between the countries, incredibly well planned out evening programs, and a myriad of other programs and events made each day unique. These elaborate, uniquely Szarvas programs surprised us with both their complex educational components and their fun creativity.

The free time in between activities were just as fun and important to the Szarvas experience. This is the time we used to hang out and talk, rest, mudslide (on one occasion), and get to know campers from other countries informally. A unique aspect of the camp was that we were not just superficially meeting and interacting with the international groups for a short amount of time each day, but rather living with them, eating with them, talking and hanging out with them, and interacting with them almost

every moment of every day. The individual friendships we made with these kids from other countries were just as, or even more important than the group interactions we had with them. This aspect truly made Szarvas a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Whether learning new things about Jewish communities around the world firsthand, learning new things about our own Jewish identities, forming bonds with kids from other states or kids from other countries, or just having fun, Szarvas was an all-around great experience. What was actually two weeks felt twice that long. By the end of the program, many of us found it hard to say goodbye to Szarvas. It truly became home to us.

The Szarvas Fellowships are available to Jewish American teenagers going into 11th or 12th grade. Applications and information can be found at www.szarvas.org.