

Jewish camp builds pride, leaders in heart of Europe

BY: [DOUGLAS J. GUTH](#) Senior Staff Reporter

The girl may have been from Turkey. Avital Pessar doesn't remember exactly. What she does remember from her time at the JDC-Lauder summer camp in Szarvas, Hungary, is the girl's story.

"This was her seventh or eighth year at the camp, and every year she went home" with hopes of practicing Judaism, relates Avital. At the very least, the girl wanted to keep kosher. But the nearest kosher butcher was a two-hour trip from her home.

"That was eye-opening," the Fuchs Mizrahi School senior says of the girl's tale. Avital spent two weeks last year at the Jewish summer camp with hundreds of children and teenagers from all over the world. The camp features a full range of summer camp activities in an atmosphere meant to bolster Jewish identity and nurture future Jewish leaders.

After meeting so many teens whose only real Jewish connection was the camp, Avital felt "lucky," she says, to live in a tight-knit Jewish community where you can find five kosher butchers within a ten-minute drive.

Camp director Zsuzsa Fritz, 41, knows the camper's story is not uncommon. Many teens who come to bucolic Szarvas hail from Eastern Europe and other parts of the globe where Judaism has been nonexistent for generations. There is simply no Jewish infrastructure to support them, she says.

Ultimately, these young people are the ones who will have to build that infrastructure, notes Fritz, who visited Cleveland last week under the auspices of The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland.

Szarvas can be a way station on the road toward that lofty goal, Fritz believes.

The camp director's own story is not unlike that of many of the teens who come to Szarvas every year. As a girl growing up in communist Hungary, Fritz had no idea she was Jewish until age 17.

When friends in elementary school inquired about her religious identity, she blurted out "Protestant" because she knew the word and couldn't think of anything else to say.

Fritz discovered her true identity after her father died and was buried with a Jewish funeral service. Soon after that, she began participating in whatever Jewish communal activities she could find.

This meant getting together with other young Jews to discuss poetry, literature and politics.

"Suddenly I had a lot of new friends," relates Fritz, sporting long brown hair and designer jeans



Avital Pessar, second from right, with friends she met at JDC-Lauder summer camp.

during a Feb. 6 visit to The Jewish Education Center of Cleveland (JECC). “It was pretty overwhelming.”

It was also exciting and a little scary, as communist strictures stifled any Jewish observance. “It’s like we all shared a secret,” she says.

With the end of communist rule in 1989, Fritz traveled to Israel as a counselor for a Jewish youth group. The trip further energized her connection to Judaism, leading her to decide upon a career in Jewish communal work in Hungary.

At 24, Fritz was named Jewish education and youth program coordinator in her native Budapest. She taught at Budapest’s Jewish University and at the Scheiber Jewish secondary school.

Bereft of Jewish upbringing, the teacher still had plenty to learn herself: “If I wanted to teach kids about Chanukah, I had to find out what Chanukah was,” she quips.

In 1996, Fritz became program director of the JDC-Lauder summer camp, which opened in 1990. The camp is nestled on the banks of a river in the resort town of Szarvas, a two-hour drive southeast of Budapest. It is run by The Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and JDC and is funded by the Jewish Community Federation’s annual Campaign for Jewish Needs as well as private donations.

At Szarvas, Jewish children ages 8 to 18 from 23 countries (including the U.S., Canada and Israel) sing Hebrew camp songs around campfires. Arts and crafts projects employ methods and materials common to summer camps around the world, but they have a Jewish flavor, as children are encouraged to draw and model Jewish symbols.

Campers learn about Jewish holidays and history. Skits, pageants and other participatory events also revolve around Jewish themes. Campers and staff pray in the camp synagogue, eat in the kosher cafeteria, and even celebrate joint b’nai mitzvah.

As much fun as the kids have at camp, the challenge is in deepening the children’s Jewish experience outside Szarvas, says Fritz. For many kids, the camp experience is their first, and sometimes only, encounter with Jewish life. They come from isolated communities and suffer from the lack of Jewish knowledge among their parents.

Judaism is often the “great unknown” for many campers, continues the director. Some children are fearful of being “exposed” for knowing next to nothing about their Jewish background.

With knowledge and experience comes confidence: Young people have left Szarvas to become Jewish community professional and lay leaders. Fritz cites the example of two former campers who came to Szarvas with little Jewish background and are now running the camp.

“We can be an incubator for future Jewish leaders,” Fritz remarks, to ensure the future of communities that have little or no Jewish past.