

Szarvas: A place to grow and learn
by: Sarah Immerman

The night before I left for Szarvas, Hungary I wrote in my journal, "I embark on this trip without many expectations". Little did I know that the following two weeks would be two of the most transformative weeks of my life.

The group of 39 North Americans connected immediately, sitting in a huge circle in the John F. Kennedy Airport only minutes after we met. We quickly established the importance of each individual to our group as a whole. Our diversity within the Jewish world was unbelievable; participants hailed from the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements, as well as those who did not identify with any of the movements.

As a group, we spent two days in Budapest before traveling to our final destination at camp. On Saturday night, prior to *Havdalah*, we sat by the Danube River, telling each other about our family's history, sharing parts of our lives that not even our closest friends at home know. It was remarkably powerful and poignant for me that I was sitting with a group of passionate, confident and active Jewish teenagers where so many Jews had been killed during the Holocaust. Us sitting there was tangible proof that the Jewish people are still strong, despite our hardships. That moving moment was only the beginning of many emotional experiences.

The next day, we traveled by bus for a few hours out of Budapest and finally reached the small town of Szarvas. The Szarvas Fellowship is a two-week long program primarily spent at an international Jewish summer camp. Over the course of 8 weeks, 28 countries send delegations to Camp Szarvas. The main focus of the camp is to foster Jewish identity within the campers, and to create a sense of enthusiasm and excitement for Judaism as a religion and as a culture.

The time that I spent at Szarvas was shared with groups from Hungary, Russia, Poland and Kaliningrad. Poland and Russia in my mind were places painted strictly of black and white, countries of murder and trauma. I quickly learned at Szarvas that the differences between the teenagers from other countries and me were minimal, limited to our religious observances and our first languages. The window into their lives allowed me to reevaluate what I had assumed.

Each day, the American group had two time slots for only our group; one for an educational activity which differed from day to day, the other a time for personal reflection. From the very beginning, according to my journal, we were "encouraged to be ourselves and explore our Judaism". Our staff introduced us to the reflective mentality in which we would often find ourselves for the remainder of our time at Szarvas.

The terminology that we use in our everyday lives is so familiar to us that we often don't stop to think about what it actually means. Being in a group of so many Jewish teenagers, I began to question and challenge the use of the movement names for a singular word label on our Jewish identity. Halfway through camp, I wrote, "I hate how society expects us to define our Judaism in one word, when really we're so much more complicated than that." Spending time becoming acquainted with each and every one of the teenagers in my group prevented me from using only movement names to categorize each person. My realizations at Szarvas have led to me being more curious about people's Jewish identities: the intricacies, history and details that don't often surface.

Between my crying episodes on the bus leaving camp, I wrote in my journal, as I had every day since my arrival in Hungary. I wrote about what I said during our final circle of reflections. "I acknowledged that even though I've had numerous Jewish experiences throughout my life, I have never been with a group that cares as much as these 39 teenagers do. I honestly haven't felt as accepted and respected as an individual in a Jewish setting for years". The Szarvas Fellowship provided me a nurturing environment in which to question my beliefs, explore my identity, learn about others, step out of my comfort zone, and simply to grow.

The last sentence of my extensive journal reads, "this journey has truly presented the unexpected and I loved every minute of it."