

Summer camp brings bonding, lifetime of memories

BY DANIELLE L. RUBIN

As my St. Louis teenage peers begin thinking about how to spend their upcoming summer, I wish to share my experience from last summer and encourage others to consider participating. Although many teens spend summers at Jewish overnight camps, not many attend Jewish overnight summer camp in Eastern Europe with 600 Jewish teenagers from over 25 different countries. Last summer, another friend from St. Louis, Abby Siwak, and I were part of a group of 24 U.S. teens selected to participate in a Jewish overnight camp in Szarvas, Hungary, sponsored by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC). Although many of the U.S. teens were from day schools and many were from the New York area, all branches of Judaism and many parts of the United States were represented.

Despite our differences, our group bonded literally "overnight". After having spent almost 48 hours awake en route to our destination, we felt close to each other by the time we arrived. Proceeding directly to Friday night Shabbat services in Budapest without having showered or slept in almost two days, we already felt comfortable napping (during services) on the shoulders of our new-found friends.

Even more amazing than the quick bonds we formed with the U.S. teens were the friendships we made with a large number of the 600 teens from other countries. Although we participated in a daily "mifgash"/get-together with campers from most of the other 25 countries, our U.S. group seemed to get along especially well with the teens from Hungary, Lithuania, Turkey, and Serbia, as well as the few campers from India, probably because they were closest to us in age.

It's hard to explain how although our U.S. group spoke none of the other campers' languages, we all got along so well together. Surprisingly, many of the campers knew some English, but many wouldn't speak it in front of the U.S. campers because they were embarrassed and thought we wouldn't understand them. In fact, one boy from Hungary didn't even tell us he knew English until the last day of camp, and then spoke to us almost fluently. We all played the same sports, especially basketball and soccer, and liked the same music — we actually created and recorded a camp rap song that the entire camp performed together the last day. We had a great time watching the World Cup competitions together, although no one could tell who anyone was rooting for because we didn't understand each other shouts and cheers.

Meal time was especially interesting as we all sampled foods from each others' countries. Some of the other campers' favorites such as cherry soup, and pasta with cinnamon and sugar seemed especially strange to us, but everyone had fun making and eating challahs together.

Although we didn't expect many of the campers to know Hebrew or about Jewish customs, some surprisingly knew more than we did. Apparently the JDC has set up Jewish day schools in some of their countries over the last several years, for example the school where our Lithuanian friends attend. Sadly, however, most of the teens admitted they couldn't practice their Judaism publicly because of anti-Semitism in their countries. Some of them said they can't even tell their friends they are Jewish.

Saying goodbye to our friends was especially sad as we knew we probably wouldn't ever see them again. However, six months later we still exchange e-mails with our friends from around the world; my Russian friend occasionally calls my cell phone (at the strangest hours); and my friend from Lithuania keeps writing and asking me to come visit next time I am in "his neighborhood."

The Szarvas program is available to U.S. students who will be entering 11th grade in the fall of 2007 and applications are available at szarvas.org.

Danielle L. Rubin is a St. Louisan and former participant in the Szarvas program.