

Yaron Schwartz

My Experience at Camp Szarvas

One of my friends from camp celebrated their birthday over the summer. The camp policy is for all campers to sing happy birthday to the birthday boy or girl. That may be simple to do at most camps, but at Camp Szarvas, an international Jewish Camp in Hungary, co-sponsored by the Ronald S. Lauder Foundation and the Jewish Distribution Committee, singing happy birthday is not the easiest of tasks. First, the campers had to sing the song in English, then in Hebrew, then Hungarian, then Russian, then Lithuanian, then Latvian, then Estonian and so forth until every country represented at the camp had a chance to sing happy birthday in their native language. The international environment I experienced at Camp Szarvas was an amazing one to be part of, and it enabled me to make long lasting friendships with other Jewish teenagers from all over the globe.

My Szarvas experience began a few days before I arrive at camp, when I spent a weekend in Budapest, Hungary with the 18 other American Szarvas Fellows and our three counselors. The backgrounds of the American participants were extremely diverse, differing not only geographically and by family type, but also by the level of our religious observance and personalities. We were all chosen to represent the United States at Camp Szarvas because each one of us provided different perspective of Judaism and life to the group and the camp.

The weekend in Budapest was an opportunity to explore one of the major capitals of the world, and see all it had to offer, from a tourist and Jewish perspective. Some highlights were visiting the National Parliament and the largest mall in the country, seeing the Doheny synagogue, the second largest in the world, as well as touring the Jewish ghetto that once existed. We recited havdala as a group on the boardwalk along the Danube River and met with different speakers who shared with us their views of what it means to be a Jew in Hungary, both secular and religious. I began to gain a deep appreciation of the various ideas I would be exposed to as I developed a close camaraderie with my peers.

Arriving at camp, I was a bit nervous as to how I would meet and speak with kids from all over the world. Yet I quickly learned that I would have a plethora of opportunities to interact and develop close relationships with teens from all the different countries represented. Every day the group of 18 Americans had a “*mifgash*”, an official meeting of campers from two countries, where we played games and ice breakers to get to know each other and learn about the other countries. After *mifgash*, the campers from the two countries ate lunch together, building upon the meeting we had and continuing to get to know each other. But true friendships developed more spontaneously during free time and at other camp programs. From performances in the Israeli Academy Awards, listening to songs and poems at Café Night, dancing the night away at Disco night, discussing important Israeli issues during a mock Knesset night, playing with or against each other during color war, riding together on horses, and singing together on Friday night and in the lunchroom, I had the opportunity to make life long friendships while overcoming the language barriers and finding common interests.

For most of non-American campers at Szarvas, the two weeks they spend at camp are their one Jewish experience of the year. It is where they are able to develop a connection to Judaism, to meet Jews from different backgrounds and observance levels, and to learn more about their heritage. It is a unique open experience, and they know that regardless of their education or knowledge of Judaism, there will always be a place for them at Szarvas.

One of the amazing programs that had a particularly deep impact on me was the Holocaust program at which each group had to prepare a holocaust exhibit. The American group made a banner with a picture of an Israeli flag over a concentration camp holocaust theme. In contrast, Latvia's exhibit was a black paper mache menorah atop a black box which in gold glitter read "Latvia 90,000", honoring the 90,000 Latvian Jews who perished during the Holocaust. To these campers, the Holocaust is not a horrific event that occurred on the other side of the world to some members of their family; rather it is a horrific event that occurred to their families in their hometowns. It was an eye opening moment, to think about how my background could have been different depending on my family's decisions. Had my family and those of the other American campers decided to stay in Europe, I could be living in the same communities as my friends from all over the world.

My connection to Judaism has been greatly deepened by my participation as a Szarvas Fellow. Instead of viewing Judaism only through an American lens, I now have an international perspective. My interaction with campers who live in Eastern Europe and only have one Jewish experience a year have made me further appreciate my vibrant Jewish community and the privilege of attending a Jewish day school and having Jewish friends. Seeing how campers with different levels of observance and educational from different countries were able to form incredible friendships with kids who do not sing the same national anthem as they do is astounding. Even with the differences that existed between us, we were able to put aside language barriers and learn from one another what life is like in different countries both as a citizen and a Jew. I know that my new friends and fellow campers learned from me about American Jewry, as I did from them about Hungarian or Lithuanian Jewry.

The location of the camp and diversity of the participants were just one part of this not typical teenage Jewish summer. The opportunity to go to camp in a different country and environment and to experience something completely outside of my normal realm was an opportunity of a lifetime, one that I will never forget. As I begin the school year, I know that my perspective of the world and my Judaism has been enhanced and shaped by these experiences, and I will continue to benefit from the relationships I developed this summer as I keep in touch with my friends from all over the world.

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