

## Summer Experience Teaches Life Lesson

By Belinda Heiman

Szarvas, Hungary was a town I had never heard of, in Hungary, in a country I had never desired to visit. In the summer of 2005, all that changed for me. I applied earlier in the year to the Szarvas Fellowships, an international Jewish summer camp and a prestigious program founded by the JDC, Lauder Foundation. Although the application was rigorous, I was eager to discover what the camp had to offer. When I received the highly anticipated response in the mail, I was delighted, to have been accepted. Soon enough, I was on a plane to New York, and I was alone. Free of expectations, I was anxious to embark on my journey halfway across the country in search of the unknown.

After a series of canceled flights and tedious taxicab rides, I finally met up with the rest of my group that would be joining me at the camp. With my newfound company, I set out for another journey. Our next stop was Budapest, Hungary's capital. This time, I did not feel so alone. When we arrived, I gathered Budapest to be an architectural phenomenon of castles and monuments. We saw more than half of the city in a day. I knew that the next two weeks were going to be a non-stop journey – compact, but cultural.

Standing over a castle's balcony, I overlooked one side of the city. I learned that this was Buda, the hilly side of Budapest. Pest, on the opposite side of the River Danube, was the smoother, flatter side of the city. I learned that these regions were once separate towns. I related this to humanity – everyone has a smooth side and a rather hilly side, but the equal balance of the two makes a person whole.

I absorbed much of Europe's history that day, about communism and the falling and uniting of empires. After learning of the dismembering of the Soviet Union and the joining of parliaments, I was even more intrigued with European politics.

The next day I stood outside of a very old synagogue. The tour guide explained that it had been the temple where the Jews gathered for death marches. I allowed for a moment of reflection while the rest of his words went unheard. I pictured the scene from "Schindler's List" in which thousands of Jews marched away from their homes towards the unknown. This was not the unknown that excited me; this unknown only led to negative consequences. I couldn't fathom how this man could mention a fact so nonchalantly and without hesitation. At that moment, I

realized that the Holocaust was a reality for the Jews living in Hungary today. They had been affected by the aftermath for their entire lives, whether it was through stories of grandparents, passing by a synagogue, much like the one I was standing in front of, or the huge decrease of numbers in their communities. The assimilation of their parents through the communist regime or the skinhead standing on the street forcing them to wear their Jewish stars inside their shirts was this reality.

Although it was emotionally difficult to depart from Budapest, we finally migrated to Szarvas, the small town where the camp was set up. I was enlightened by the realities of Eastern European youth, while some of the participants attended the camp in order to escape from reality. Many of my conversations related to sports, movies, music, and even food differences among the international group.

My group leader encouraged me to converse about cultural differences, the quality of life, and different experiences. On the second to last day at camp, I sat down with a boy no older than 18 and discussed his family's history. He resided in Budapest and appeared to fit in quite well.

Through lengthy conversation, I learned that his mother and grandmother were both not Jewish but had married Jews. Assimilation was very common in the Communist times, however, he seemed very confused about what he believed in and who he was. I recalled this to be much like a story told by a young Polish man at the camp who learned of his Jewish decent at age 13 when his mother was no longer afraid of the Communist regime. One day he overheard an anti-Semitic remark at his school and stood up to defend his newfound identity. He was even offered the assistance of another boy stood up next to him to defend his Jewish Heritage. He had made his first Jewish friend and realized he was not alone.

The first weekend I spent in Szarvas was a great time. My group walked out of the gates of camp toward the river where we built a bonfire, sang songs, and shared stories. That night our Program Director/friend recited a quote that I will never forget: "Sometimes we find ourselves in the middle of nowhere. Sometimes in the middle of nowhere we find ourselves." I thought it applied perfectly to my experience there. I spent the weekend with kids similar in age from across the world learning debating about European life. Before we met, I was a little skeptical of what they would be like, but that night, sitting around the campfire, I was ashamed I had ever felt that way. I realized that I can be in the middle of nowhere or in my hometown of Beachwood,

Ohio and as long as I had the essential tools of structure, guidance, and knowledge, I would not feel lost. Through the structured discussions and debates that took place that weekend, I had learned so much, not from professors or in a classroom, but by kids my own age. The plane ride to Hungary that was only 3 days prior now felt like 3 weeks ago.

A compressed, amazing two weeks taught a life lesson-- it's not the length of your life that's important; it's the depth of how you live it. I went to a camp where a fresh orange felt like gold, where a shower felt like heaven, and I was happy. I had never expected to build such strong bonds with people ranging as far as Holland to New Jersey. We spoke about politics, the human mind, and hundreds of other topics that were fascinating to me.

This experience helped me to see how truly blessed we are as Americans in the supportive communities in which we have grown. I attained this knowledge only after witnessing lives of the less fortunate. I am writing about my experience solely to educate students on the opportunities that are out there. Whether you apply to the Szarvas Fellowship or another program, these are advantages that should not be overlooked.