

A SZARVAS REFLECTION

“Sometimes you find yourself in the middle of nowhere...sometimes in the middle of nowhere you find yourself.”

This past summer has been a summer of experience for me; the most unique summer of my life thus far. Tennis camps, summer enrichment, and month long vacations described my past summers, which were amazing. However, being an American fellow for two weeks at Szarvas, an international Jewish camp in Hungary was not only unique, let me emphasize again, but truly awesome. I am a Reform Jewish American, living a free, yet busy lifestyle trying to compete academically, trying to stay as in shape as Martina Hingis, and trying to fit in an active social life simultaneously. Seeing the other side makes life a little more interesting.

Szarvas camp has been in existence since 1990, prior to the break up of the Soviet Union. The fellowships, a leadership program for American Jewish teens, began in 1999. Campers come from all walks of life, whether it be modern orthodoxy to Jewish humanism, from living in Russia to Turkey to the United States. The diversity of people provides a new meaning to the word perspective. For instance, in the United States I can freely practice my religion whereas my Turkish friends are restricted by law to even walk out of their homes wearing tfillin.

My Jewish journey began at the airport on June 29th, 2006. I met the entire group, and introduced myself. My fellows came from not only different parts of the United States, such as Missouri, Texas, and Ohio, but practiced other forms of Judaism. One enlightening moment I can recall took place Friday morning on the airplane. I woke from my hour long sleep, and saw two of the boys on my trip davening with tfillin, and prayer books. The first thought was “Wow, this is so different,” but I continued to gaze in curiosity. Later, I learned, more than half of my American group practiced modern orthodoxy.

Once landed, the American group led and organized by Seth Braunstein, spent two days touring Budapest, the capital city of Hungary. We toured the majestic Dohany, being the second largest synagogue in the world. Standing in the intricately designed schul, was very spiritual. The structure standing hundreds of feet in the air, tall and proud, reminded me of Judaism- the religion that is unshakable through tumultuous times. Throughout the weekend, we toured several other schuls, ate meals at a kosher restaurant, and observed the Shabbat- a 100% Jewish weekend, needless to say. After the tour, Camp Szarvas was my next stop.

Early that Sunday morning we kissed Budapest good-bye, and went on the road to Szarvas. On the bus, I met a few of the masterminds of this creative camp. There were two exemplary madrich at camp, Dina and Salley from Serbia. During the year these individuals work for the JDC (Joint Distribution Committee). Their work involves creating enriching activities and promoting Jewish culture in communities almost void of Jewish activity. When Dina described the activities at Szarvas, I wanted to jump off the bus and run into camp. Camp being a social and interactive experience involves meeting new people. The new people I was about to meet all came from foreign countries. I looked at the group of campers awaiting the “American” arrival. After a few stares of wonderment, we smiled at each other; a connection was made.

The next twelve days were an adventure for me. I met great friends from all over the world, simply greeting my fellow campers and asking their origin was enough to ignite a friendship. Mainly everyone spoke English, but enjoyed teaching me key words in their mother tongue. Mifgashim (meetings with campers from other countries) was by far, one of the highlights of camp. For instance, the American fellows were put to work making dhal, an Indian dish, with the Jewish Indians from Mumbai. With Turkish campers, we learned Turkish songs (which are now my musical preference), and with Russians we played “if you love me baby, smile.” Not only did positive energy flow from mifgashim, but after many meals, Israeli music blasted from the stereo in the cafeteria and all campers rose to their feet in dance. Tables and chairs were rocking from the swaying bodies on top, and floors were pounding as the five hundred campers danced around the cafeteria. I recall bending down to let a young Russian girl hold my shoulders during a dance, realizing that there are no boundaries with Judaica prayer and dance. At that moment people from different cultures came together and opened their hearts, a daily achievement at Camp Szarvas.

Additionally, Shabbat had the same language. On Friday night, all campers donned their Shabbas clothing and met in the kupelah (activity dome) for prayer. Men and women were traditionally separate, with the bimah and rabbi located center stage. Despite the fact that the service was translated into Russian, Hungarian, English, Lithuanian, and Turkish- the words shared the same meaning. Following the service, all campers ate a traditional meal, went to bed waking up to a relaxing day, shomer style. That Saturday was a day for meditation, socializing, and text study, ending with an all-camp Havdalah under the moon by the river.

The American fellowship, being a leadership program, has added benefits. Activities focused on issues from activism to learning about Russian Jewry. If advertised like so: day trips to nearby cities, a camp out, and soul-searching programs would boast all inclusive. Soul-searching programs was mainly what the camp was all about, however one important initial step was a declaration of ones personal faith. This was called a check-in. Everyone from my group, counselors included, told their Jewish story. Hearing stories about my friends’ hardships with faith truly opened my mind. One girl, for instance, was contemplating giving up pants wearing only skirts, another fellow is shomer n’giyah, raised unable by Jewish law to touch the opposite sex until marriage. This exposure to other practices of Judaism is not readily available education for any young Jew at one time, firsthand. The Orthodox fellows knew little about Reform Judaism, while everyone except the only humanistic Jewish fellow knew little about Jewish humanism.

Saying good-bye to camp was hard, as a matter of fact, it was extremely heart breaking. The last night we had a big party filled with shaving cream, international dance, slideshows, and bonding. Goodbyes were filled with tears and hopes to see one another in the future. Coming into camp, I was nowhere near as educated as coming out. Educated in body, mind, and spirit that is. I found myself, as the saying goes, truly in the middle of nowhere, although really it was somewhere. It is in central Hungary at an international Jewish camp- a place where miracles happen, where east meets west, where love meets Judaism.

-Ehle Shachter