2 The Crucial Decade in Jewish Camping

Jonathan D. Sarna

Editors' Note: Jonathan D. Sarna's essay provides readers with a general overview of Jewish camping in America, and in doing so it places the nascent Reform Jewish camping into a larger context. Sarna reminds us that the founding of Union Institute in 1952 was one chapter in the overall history of Jewish educational camping in America. Some of those who participated in the founding of the camp in Oconomowoc sensed the historical significance of their efforts. Their personal reminiscences demonstrate that the process of creating educational camps for Reform Judaism in America was both a personal and a communal achievement.

The opportunity to work on the development of a permanent camp came when the late Rabbi Eisendrath asked me to become the director of the Chicago and Midwest Federations. Mr. [Johannes S.] Ackerman, one of our lay leaders, was so convinced of the value of the idea of a Jewish Reform Camp that he spent time with me to visit area sites, all of which we had to reject as unsuitable for our camp. Then we found an advertisement about Brian Lodge, a camp in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, which was being offered for sale. We concluded rather quickly that this was the best site that we had found. The property cost us $85,000. We decided on a four-fold summer program. We declared that we would study and pray, work and play. From such simple pioneering undertakings developed rather soon the need for a permanent director. (Rabbi Herman Schaalman, June 13, 2000)

Once the property on Lac La Belle was acquired, the physical plant required a lot of repair and cleaning which, along with the actual designing
and construction of the first camp chapel, was largely undertaken by the rabbinic faculty and the staff. Camp life as we knew it in the early years had a very intimate feeling. The summer day revolved around the porches of the big house (Bayit), where, in between discussion groups, ping-pong games and impromptu song sessions seemed to always be going on. Tennis was played on cracked cement courts outside the Bayit. At the bottom of Bayit Hill stood a dramatic totem pole remaining from the previous occupants, out of place and yet memorable. The lake and chapel were the only other focal points of the scheduled activities. These were the modest beginnings of GSRUI. In those days, we called it Union Institute, or more informally and endearingly, simply "Ocononomowoc." (Stadilce G. Lorge, May 5, 2001)

As humble and unsteady as its beginnings may have been, Sarna asserts that Union Institute's founders were active participants in a new and important developmental phase of American Jewish camping.

The founding in 1912 of the first Union of American Hebrew Congregations (UAHC) camp, Ocononomowoc, Wisconsin, concluded the most portentous decade in the history of Jewish camping. Brandeis Camp Institute (1912), Camp Massad (1942), Camp Ramah in Wisconsin (1947), Camp Ramah in the Poconos (1950), and what later became known as Olin-Sang-Ruby Union Institute (1952) were all founded between 1941 and 1952, and so were a range of lesser-known but still influential camps, including Camp Aguda (1941), Avodah (1942), Yavneh (1944), Galil (1944), Lown (1944), and Sharon (1946). The decade also marked a turning point in the character of the whole Jewish camping movement. Before 1940, according to Daniel Isaacman's admittedly imprecise figures, some two-thirds of all new Jewish camps were either philanthropic, geared to the children of immigrants and the urban Jewish poor, or community-based camps founded by Jewish federations and community centers. By contrast, in the two decades following 1940 less than a quarter of all new camps fell into these categories, while almost 40 percent of them trumpeted educational and religious aims; they were sponsored either by a major Jewish religious movement, a Hebrew teachers' college, or a Hebrew cultural institution. Revealingly, fewer than 5 percent of all new Jewish camps had fallen into these categories before 1940. Indeed, until the 1940s, Hebrew-language camps (with one brief and minor exception) and the so-called denominational Jewish camps did not exist at all.¹

Understanding the transformation that took place during the crucial decade of Jewish camping, when "intensive Jewish educational camps" developed, first requires a look back at the early history of Jewish camping in America.² The original Jewish summer camps were founded around the turn of the century, just at the time that the American camping movement as a whole began to develop. Although one enthusiastic writer dates the history of camping back to "the 40 year wilderness trek of the Children of Israel led by Moses,"³ the organized camping movement as we know it usually traces its roots back to the school camp created by Frederick William Gunn and his wife in 1865. Camping (1880) and Catholic (1892) camps commenced operations; Summer F. Dudley started the first YMCA camp (1885); a few private camps for wealthier youngsters began, notably in New England (where Ernest Balch established his influential Camp Choconua [New Hampshire] in 1888); the first "Fresh Air" funds designed to bring the uplifting benefits of country air to the urban and immigrant poor originated (1887); and the first family camp (1888) and girls' camp (1892) opened.⁴

The first known Jewish camps also came into existence at this time: Camp Lehman, founded in 1895 by the Jewish Working Girls' Vacation Society, on the site of what would later become Camp Isabella Freedman; and the Educational Alliance Camp, established in 1901 in Cold Springs, New York, and later incorporated as Surprise Lake Camp.⁵ Thereafter, and until the Great Depression, camping developed rapidly in both the general and Jewish communities. Over one hundred summer camps of various types existed in the United States in 1940, and almost thirty-five hundred in 1952.⁶ Although no parallel figures exist for Jewish camps, a Directory of Summer Camps Under the Auspices of Jewish Communal Organisations, published by the Jewish Welfare Board in 1940, listed eighty-eight camps in the United States and Canada, without taking account of the many privately run summer camps that American Jews had by then established.⁷ Isaacman, in his study, enumerated seven varieties of Jewish camps, federation-sponsored camps, Jewish community center camps, educational camps, Fiddish camps, Zionistic camps, and philanthropic camps.⁸ Jewish camps (like their non-Jewish counterparts) might also be divided into different class levels: (1) private camps that aimed to turn a profit and courted the well-to-do; (2) philanthropic camps that focused on immigrants, the poor, and the needy; and (3) communal and ideologically based camps, which originated later and tended to be more heterogeneous, that served those whose immigrant parents had risen into the middle class. In many ways camps thus reflected and extended the class structure already familiar to Jews from home.⁹

Several factors underlay the rapid growth of Jewish camps in the early decades of the twentieth century. For one thing, Jews, like other Americans, were swept up in "the cult of the strenuous life, whose most vigorous exemplar and prophet was Theodore Roosevelt."¹⁰ Camping's primary goals in the early years, like those of the cult as a whole, were thoroughly anti-modernist: they sought

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"to restore those values of life which come from living in the great outdoors," to "find joy in the simplicity of living," and to "develop a love of nature and a study of all that God created for our enjoyment." Camp Kennebec, a private camp founded in Maine in 1907 by four young Philadelphia-area Jews, explicitly advocated Roosevelt's "strenuous life" goals. Jewish camping enthusiasts also believed that their programs effectively countered anti-Semitic stereotypes concerning Jewish weakness and also promoted the great goal of Americanization. Campers were thus supposed to breathe in the "pure sweet air of American mountains, lakes and forests" and to exude any residual foreign traits. As the summer progressed, they were likewise supposed to imbibe the manners and mores of America, and to become (as one camper recollected in his old age) "stalwart, healthy American adults." Even Jewish philanthropic camps, which, like their "Fresh Air" cousins, offered shorter vacations, less staff, and fewer amenities, promoted these goals. Besides restoring poor, malnourished, and ghetto-ridden Jews to renewed health and vigor, they also sought to build up the character of their charges and to do to what they could to Americanize them. Initially, then, camps represented something of a counter-life for American Jews; the rural camp setting, the antidemocrat values that camps championed, and the strenuous activities that filled the camp day ran counter to everything the vast majority of Jews experienced in their urban homes. Symbolically, the transition from home to camp was a move away from the weekday Jewish world and into the rural world of American gentiles. Small wonder that at most of these early camps Judaism was reduced to a whisper. For example, at Kennebec, according to its perceptive historian (herself the wife of a prominent rabbi and scholar), "The founders' policy of balancing an all-Jewish enrollment with a non-Jewish staff, aimed at enriching everyone's experience, seemed to claim that religious observances, if any, should lean in the direction of neither faith. Thus the Quiet Hour (not a service) has always been held on Sunday (not Friday) night. From this has followed a tacit avoiding of anything Jewish except in the realm of humor or self-parody." At Winslow, "cultivation of the child's Jewish interests and loyalties was not a paramount objective. There were simple Friday evening services... and that was all." At most Jewish Center and communal camps, as late as the 1930s, according to Isaacsan, the situation was the same: "they were almost completely devoid of any meaningful Jewish programming or consciousness." To be sure, there were exceptions. Noted educator and bibliophile George Alexander Kohut, the son of Rabbi Alexander Kohut, founded Camp Kohut in Maine in 1907. According to his stepmother, he remembered always that he was a rabbi sworn to a special mission so far as these boys were concerned. He had to hold up to them the light that is Israel; he had to make them mindful of the dignity of the Jewish people and the glory of the Jewish religion. In his Sabbath services conducted in a grove of apple trees, "God's temple," he frankly discussed with the boys the problems of the Jew in the modern world, the special problems of the first generation of American-born, the necessity for worshipping God and taking one's own part. He spoke to them of things that worried them, things that were generally never mentioned in their own homes. Rabbi Bernard C. Ehrenreich, ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary, and related by marriage to Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, knew Kohut and seems to have consciously followed in his footsteps. At Camp Kawagó in Wisconsin, which he founded in 1915, Ehrenreich, according to his biographer, "pursued[d] his lifelong goal of bringing youth to God, of building a new and vital generation of American Jewish youth." His camp was reputedly "a laboratory for religious education," and he served as his campers' "spiritual guide." Ehrenreich, Kohut, and a few other farsighted directors of private Jewish camps seem to have intuited camping's educational and religious potential long before most of their contemporaries did, although the extent of their camps' Jewishness should not be exaggerated. Subsequently, during the interwar years, these pioneers were joined by professional educators—both secular and Jewish—who likewise gained new appreciation for what camping could accomplish. In turn, as we shall see, they set the stage for Jewish camping's "crucial decade." The First Efforts at Jewish Educational Camping Progressive educators worked out a new theory of camping during the interwar years. Focusing on camp as an educational setting, they emphasized its role in shaping the character and personality development of campers, both individually and as part of a group. "The organized summer camp is the most important step in education that America has given the world," Charles B. Eliot, former president of Harvard University, famously declared in 1922. Fear of summer-time idleness and delinquency as well as anxieties concerning the fate of "latchkey children" further encouraged camping's development. In 1929 a volume titled Camping and Character, by Hedley S. Dimock and Charles E. Hendry (with a laudatory introduction by the renowned philosopher of education William H. Kilpatrick), brought together the central ideas of a new educational theory of camping. Based on extensive field research, it described how camps could foster the development of socially desirable ideals, attitudes, and habits. Progressive Jewish educators, notably Albert P. Schoolman, one of the worshipful disciples of the "father" of American Jewish education, Samson Benerly, had heard all of this as a student long before Dimock and Hendry's book. Back in 1929 (when he was all of twenty-five years old), Schoolman 30 Sarna
began to apply these ideas at the Central Jewish Institute (CJI) that he directed. Perhaps at the suggestion of his associate Leah Konovitz, CJI inaugurated a Jewish school camp, soon known as Cejwin, to overcome the problem of students’ forgetting during the summer what they had learned at the length of Talmud Torah school during the year. A three-year experiment under the guidance of the institute’s Talmud Torah school during the year was dedicated to this idea at the Central Jewish Institute (CJI) that he directed. Perhaps at the suggestion of his associate Leah Konovitz, CJI inaugurated a Jewish school camp, soon known as Cejwin, to overcome the problem of students’ forgetting during the summer what they had learned at the length of Talmud Torah school during the year. A three-year experiment under the guidance of the institute’s Talmud Torah school during the year was dedicated to this idea.

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Informal Jewish education became the hallmark of Cejwin; it promoted Schoolman’s successor described as “daily living activities and experimentation,” “the camp environment,” “miraculous experiences,” “the camp experience,” explaining in 1946, “gives [Jewish boys and girls] an opportunity to explore their knowledge, to make their information work,” while also fostering “an at-homeness with their Jewish cultural background.” Schoolman himself at one point described the camp as an “educational paradise for the camp director,” “an effective instrument for Jewish culture,” and “an indispensable aid to the Jewish teacher for the education of his pupils” and “an indispensable aid to the Jewish teacher for the education of his pupils.” Although after the first few years there were no formal classes at Camp Cejwin, and its standard of Hebrew fell far below what some of the more intensive Jewish camps would later demand, the camp proved highly influential. The founders of Camp Ramah, one of whom had attended Cejwin, drew directly on Schoolman’s experience, and others, whether they admitted it or not, learned much from his success.

The most immediate beneficiary of Cejwin’s success, however, was a camp that Schoolman himself had a hand in establishing. In 1932 he and his gifted wife, Bertha, joined with two other pioneering American Jewish educator couple—Isaac and Libbie Berkson and Alexander and Julia Dushkin—to found Camp Medin in Maine. Modeled on Cejwin but aimed at a different and cation of their children.” Modelled on Cejwin but aimed at a different and cation of their children.”

Three features of Camp Medin are especially significant for historians of Jewish camping. First, the Schoolmen, Dushkins, and Berkson established Medin with the conscious aim of becoming financially independent; “it would be psychologically important for us as community workers, struggling for our ideas with and against communal haile batim [community leaders], to have independent financial income.” The plan succeeded, and Dushkin reveals that he was later able to accept positions at the Hebrew University “at salaries below subsistence level,” because he had this additional source of income. In fact, economics played a role in all of Jewish camping, and private camps, when properly managed, proved to be very good businesses indeed. For example, one of the first private camps in Maine, Tripp Lake Camp for Girls, founded at the turn of the century by two sisters of Rebekah Kohut (Cyd and Eva Bettelheim), yielded a “splendid livelihood,” according to Rebekah’s recollections. George Alexander Kohut’s Camp Kohut was likewise successful, she reports, and brought him “financial security.” The profit motive also helps to explain why the educational component of Jewish camping developed so slowly. Owner-investors feared that if camp were too much like school, then campers would not want to return, and their investment would be lost. The success of Camps Medin and Cejwin demonstrated that this fear was exaggerated, but as we shall see, it was not totally groundless.

Second, women played a highly important role in running Camp Medin. According to Alexander Dushkin, “the three ladies, Libbie Berkson, Bertha Schoolman, and Julia Dushkin, were responsible at various times for the Girls’ Camp and for ‘opening and closing the camps.’” Subsequently, Mrs. Berkson essentially ran the camp. Women played central roles at other camps too, especially, of course, at girls’ camps, as the early example of Tripp Lake Camp and the charity camps of the Jewish Board of Guardians demonstrate. In 1962 two Jewish Sunday School teachers, Carrie Kahn and Estelle Goldsmith, founded Camp Woodmere. Later, during the “crucial decade” of Jewish educational camps, Rivka Shustiger worked closely with her husband at Massad, Leah Konovitz Hurwich oversaw day-to-day operations at Camp Yavneh, and in 1947 Sylvia Eitzenberg played a pioneering role in the founding of Camp Ramah. “Throughout the century,” historian Nancy Mykoff observes, “Jewish women justified their camping activities in terms of extending their child-rearing duties to a more public sphere. This enabled them to journey to summer camp without crossing traditional gender boundaries. . . . But women’s less traditional camping activities suggest that they challenged as well as confirmed contemporary ideas about male and female behavior.” Through camps like Medin, they helped to transform “pieces of the ‘great outdoors’ into prototypes of the American home.”

Finally, Camp Medin prided itself on being a pluralistic Jewish camp. Although Dushkin subsequently described it as “religiously Conservative with
leanings toward Liberal Reconstruction," it attracted young people of various religious backgrounds, including Dushkin proudly reports, the children of such Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, believed Jewish camps, like their counterparts the Jewish community schools, 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1932; it was a casualty of the Great Depression. Camp Achvah itself labored on, filling a one-hundred-acre estate in GodeTroy, New York, that Benderly had purchased in the hope of furthering his vision of what a Jewish educational summer camp could accomplish. In its reorganized state, operating as a commercial enterprise, Achvah, like Celwin and Modin, came to focus on informal Jewish education, with an emphasis on singing, dancing, and pageantry, as well as on impressive Sabbath celebrations and a memorable commemoration of Tisha B'Av (the Fast of the Ninth of Av). Even so, according to Alexander Dushkin, by 1949 the camp was deeply in debt—so much so that the fiscus nearly cost Benderly his pension. The experience serves as a reminder that the success of Jewish educational camping was by no means a forgone conclusion.

Many of the underlying ideas and activities later associated with Jewish educational camping took shape at Celwin, Modin, and Achvah. Yet, during the interwar years, Jewish educational camping remained a small and high-risk venture. Educators, both general and Jewish alike, recognized camping's vast cultural and educational potential. The "total environment" of the summer camp, they understood, offered what one historian calls "an unparalleled venue for the transmission of values." Meanwhile, Yiddishists, Zionists, and others demonstrated how camps could shape the "total environment" available to them to offer campers a taste of utopia, a seemingly realizable vision of an alternative socialist, socialist, or Zionist way of life, complete with some educational content. Still, camping remained out of reach for most American Jews, particularly in the dark days of the Depression, and most of those camps that did attract Jews promoted recreation and Americanization above all other goals. It was only afterward, between 1941 and 1953, in what we have dubbed the "crucial decade," that the core of camping's educational potential would more fully be realized, and Jewish educational camping finally took off.

The Crucial Decade for the Growth of Jewish Educational Camping

The large-scale emergence of Jewish educational camping, including the founding of Union Institute, forms part of a dramatic expansion in all aspects of American Jewish education that began in the late 1930s. In 1937 three significant Orthodox Jewish day schools were founded: HILI (Hebrew Institute of Long Island), Ramaz School in Manhattan, and Maimonides School in Boston. In the ten years between 1940 and 1950, ninety-seven different Jewish day schools were founded across the United States and Canada (as compared to twenty-eight that had been founded in the previous twenty-two years). During the same period, adult Jewish education also experienced enormous growth. The Conservative movement's National Academy for Adult Jewish

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Studies was founded in 1949, and according to Israel Goldmark's survey, the adult Jewish education movement as a whole in America "began to emerge and develop." The Department of Continuing Education of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations was founded in 1948, the same year that B'nai B'rith began its adult Institutes of Judaism. 44 The Jewish Publication Society, which promoted Jewish education and culture through books rather than classroom instruction, also roared back to life with the waning of the Depression. Its total income increased fivefold between 1935 and 1945, and the number of books it distributed tripled. 45 Other publishers of Judaica, including university presses, experienced similar increases in Jewish book sales. 46 Finally, Jewish organizational life as a whole surged during this period. In 1945 the American Jewish Year Book reported that "a larger number of new organizations... formed during the past five years than in any previous five-year period, forty-seven new organizations having been established since 1940." "Interest in Jewish affairs," it explained, "has undoubtedly been heightened as a result of the catastrophe which befell the Jews of Europe under the Nazi onslaught."

The Holocaust, the waning of the Depression, and the explosive rise during the interwar years of domestic anti-Semitism all undoubtedly influenced the "increased community interest and support for Jewish education" that so many contemporaries noticed. 47 Jewish education represented both a defensive response to adversity and a form of cultural resistance, a resolve to maintain Judaism in the face of opposition and danger. It also promised to prepare the community for the new responsibilities that it faced in the wake of the European Jewish catastrophe. "American Jews," the American Jewish Year Book reported as early as 1941, "are realizing that they have been spared for a sacred task—to preserve Judaism and its cultural, social and moral values." That same year, Hebrew Union College historian Jacob Rader Marcus, who would soon shift the central focus of his own scholarship from Europe to America, also pointed to the American Jewish community's new historic role: "The burden is solely ours to carry," he declared. "Jewish culture and civilization and leadership are shifting rapidly to these shores." 48 The arrival of learned Jewish refugees from Europe underscored the significance of the "cultural transfer" that was taking place between the old world and the new. At the same time, America generally was placing new emphasis on education. Federal aid during the Depression brought about a "remarkable improvement" in general education, especially within the public schools. Catholic parochial schools also experienced significant growth during these years—a development, as the historian of one Jewish day school notes, that "invited imitation in the Jewish sphere."

The growth of Jewish camping followed directly on the heels of all of these developments. Perhaps unsurprisingly, formal and informal Jewish education expanded at roughly the same time and for many of the same reasons. Yet Jewish educational camping also benefited from three additional factors peculiar to the 1940s era. First, camps came to serve an important child care function. With fathers away at war and mothers working, overnight camps offered worried parents the security of knowing that their children were in a safe and protected environment. Second, land was still relatively cheap at this time, and summer camps sold for much less than they had cost to build. Many camps had never recovered from the hard times of the Depression; others could not find adequate male staff during the war years and closed down. The founders of Camp Yavneh in Northwood, New Hampshire, particularly benefited from this buyers' market; they purchased a sixty-seven-acre camp site in 1943 that met all of their requirements and cost a mere $8,000. "The owner had to sell it," Louis Hurwich recalled, "because war conditions made it impossible to find counselors and suitable help." 49 Shlomo Shulskin, the founder of Camp Massad, similarly recalled how "many camps were for sale at good prices" in the early 1940s, since "many camp directors had been drafted, and those who hadn't couldn't keep up their camps for lack of manpower and food supplies." 50 A decade later the market had improved and Union Institute in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin, cost more—$65,000. 51 But given the rapidity rising cost of land, it too proved to be an excellent investment. Finally, all Jewish educational camps enjoyed a special (and rarely mentioned) advantage during eras of conscription. Many of their best male staff members were rabbinical students, who were exempt from the draft. This gave them a distinct staffing advantage over other camps that had trouble, during wartime, finding sufficient male staff for their operation. 52

Against this background, Jewish educational camping came into its own during the "crucial decade." Indeed, the slew of remarkable and influential camps that were founded between 1941 and 1952 charged the face of Jewish camping and transformed camps into important components of Jewish educational and religious life. Educators recognized this at the time. "Not long ago the summer was considered a complete liability to Jewish Education," the editor and educator Arziel Eisenberg admitted in a June 1946 lead editorial introducing a special issue of Jewish Education devoted to summer camping. Comparing the summer to the Psalmist's "stone that the builders rejected," he predicted that, thanks to the advent of Jewish educational camps, the summer might in time "become the cornerstone in the future structure of American Jewish education." 53

Brandeis Camp Institute (BCI), which opened in 1941 in Amherst, New Hampshire, embodied many of the strengths of this new "cornerstone." It began, much as Union Institute did, as an experimental summer leadership-training program. Founded by the charismatic Columbia Teachers College-trained Jewish educator Shlomo Bardin, then-director of the American Zionist Youth Commission, it evolved into a Los Angeles-based program for college-aged young adults (more than twice as many of them women than men) that...
combined recreation with experiential learning and placed a heavy emphasis rather than transforming them in college. Thus, unlike BCI and Achvah, Massad did not focus chiefly on leadership development. Nor did it offer formal classes. Instead, it sought to create what Shushinger described as "a little He- brew world," a kind of Hebrew utopia that was at once staunchly American in its activities and celebrations, profoundly Zionist in outlook, "positive" toward Jewish religious traditions, and fanatical (especially in the early years) about the Hebrew language. Given its Hebrew emphasis, the camp proved especially attractive to Jewish day school students; they formed its primary clientele. The camp's influence, however, extended far more broadly. "Over the years," Walter Ackerman has observed, "Massad set the standards by which all other Hebrew speaking camps were judged." It also attracted a number of future Reform rabbis, including Balfour Brickner, who served on its staff as a lifeguard. Although Massad does not seem to have directly influenced the founding of Union Institute, its rapid growth attracted notice from all Jewish educators. Its impressive rise from 47 campers in 1942 to 210 in 1945, and from over 600 campers in 1956 to over 900 in 1966, demonstrated that full-scale intensive Jewish educational camps could succeed both culturally and commercially.

Both Massad and BCI were initially established by Jewish organizations (the Histadrut Irit and the American Zionist Organization) to further broad ideological aims: Hebraism and Zionism. By the 1946 special issue of Jewish Education devoted to summer camp, however, it was already clear that more limited, locally based Jewish educational camps were also starting up. In 1944, for example, the Boston Hebrew College established Camp Yavneh as an extension of its supplementary educational program. Not only was the camp committed to Hebrew (though not quite as single-mindedly as Massad), but it also featured ten to fifteen hours a week of formal classes—complete with tests. One former director recalls that "it was not at all uncommon for youngsters to awake at five in the morning, or earlier, to prepare." The same year witnessed the founding in Cleveland of Camp Galli, an educational camp established by the director of that city's Bureau of Jewish Education. A year later, Chicago's College of Jewish Studies, in cooperation with the Chicago Bureau of Jewish Education, inaugurated plans for Sharon Camp, a small "summer camp institute" of "intensive Jewish studies" for college-aged students who were interested in becoming Jewish educators. This was the second camp that Chicago Jewish educators founded in the "crucial decade" of Jewish educational camping; the first, Camp Arvoh (1943), had combined farmwork and Jewish living. While neither of these camps were particularly significant, they helped to build local community support for the institution of Jewish camping. The next two ventures in Jewish educational camping that began in Chicago—Ramah and Union Institute—would change the face of Jewish educational camping forever.

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The Advent of Educational Camping in the Reform and Conservative Movements

Both Camp Ramah and Union Institute developed from the same concern for safeguarding America's Jewish future that animated the educational revival of the late 1930s and 1940s. Reform and Conservative Jews alike developed significant new youth groups at this time: the National Federation of Temple Youth and the B'nai B'rith Youth. These groups, which included both religious and non-religious elements, sought to engage young people in Jewish life. Reform and Conservative groups developed youth programs that were designed to appeal to a broader audience than had been traditional. These programs included sports, arts, and cultural activities, and were intended to provide a meaningful Jewish experience for the next generation.

Camp Ramah, founded in 1947, was one of the first organized youth camps in the United States. It was established by the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, which had been formed in response to the need for a national Jewish education organization. Camp Ramah was designed to provide a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. The camp was located in Wisconsin and quickly became one of the most successful and influential Jewish summer camps in the country.

The success of Camp Ramah led to the establishment of other Jewish summer camps, including Camp Newman, which was founded in 1947 by Rabbi Nathan M. Baruch, and Camp Kalsman, which was founded in 1950 by Rabbi Morris M. Kalsman. These camps were designed to provide a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. They were also intended to provide a meaningful Jewish experience for the next generation.

In addition to the development of Jewish summer camps, there was also a growing interest in Jewish education in the community. This was reflected in the establishment of Jewish day schools, which provided a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. These schools were designed to provide a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. They were also intended to provide a meaningful Jewish experience for the next generation.

The success of these efforts led to the establishment of the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, which was established in 1945. The seminary was designed to provide a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. It was also intended to provide a meaningful Jewish experience for the next generation.

In conclusion, the development of Jewish summer camps and Jewish day schools was an important part of the Jewish education movement in the United States. These efforts were designed to provide a Jewish education experience for children who were not able to attend regular Jewish schools. They were also intended to provide a meaningful Jewish experience for the next generation.
By the early 1930s Ramah was a movement. A (short-lived) Ramah in Maine had opened in 1938. A (still-broaching) Ramah in the Poconos opened in 1939. The most successful of all the Conservative movement's postwar initiatives. Reform Jewish camping, meanwhile, was developing in a quite different direction. Beginning in 1947, and probably at the instigation of the new and highly creative director of the youth department at the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Samuel Cook,77 NFTY initiated a series of short conclaves and Leadership Institutes that it held at various camp sites (Camp Henry Horner in Painesville, Ohio; at Camp Lake in the Woods in Decatur, Michigan; etc.). The program of the 1948 Leadership Institute featured "classes," "service," and "study," in addition to "sports," "dramatics," "campfires," "dancing," and "fellowship," and it aimed to "create a strengthened movement for Reform Judaism." The program was described as a "huge success," and Rabbi Ernst M. Lorge, one of those who directed the program, expressed the conviction "that conclaves and other camping programs are essential to Jewish education."78

Lorge was no stranger to Jewish camping. He and Rabbi Herman Schaalman, then-director of the Chicago Federation of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, along with several other German-born Reform rabbis, had experienced Jewish camping in Germany, where, according to Lorge, it had "an incredible effect . . . on Jewish education and living."79 Rabbi Alfred Wolf, who played a central role in the establishment of Camp Hess Kramer (1952) and other Reform Jewish camps that operated under the auspices of Willимoniu Boulevard Temple in Los Angeles, similarly credited his German experience with stimulating his interest in camp: "You might say that Camp Hess Kramer began when, in my teens, I was called upon to organize Jewish youth groups in Heidelberg, in a Germany just shaken to its roots by the Nazi take-over. It was then that I realized how much of Jewish values I could get across to young people as we were hiking or camping together under the open sky."80 These rabbis subsequently witnessed the impact of both Jewish and Christian camping in America, and their resolve to create a movement of Reform Jewish camping was reinforced. But though the German experience was an important underlying factor in the development of Reform Jewish camping, it was not (as some claim) determinative. As early as 1938, the American-born Sam Cook had attempted, unsuccessfully, to acquire a permanent camp site for the Reform movement.81 That same year, Rabbi Joseph L. Baron of Milwaukee (born in Vilna), who thought he had actually found a camp donor, described in a letter, "how anxious we have all been to develop a stimulating religious educational program for our youth during the summer months, how particularly important such a program is in this post-war era, and how much the success and growth of our summer activities depend on a suitable site in the country."82 In the immediate post-war years, the development of a Reform Jewish camp was thus on the agenda of a wide range of Reform Jewish leaders, natives and immigrants alike. In the end, though, no project made real headway until 1951, and then the project took shape at the Good Level, spearheaded by rabbis and lay leaders in Chicago.

On March 29, 1951, the UAHC Chicago Federation, headed by Rabbi Schaalman, unanimously approved "the project of building a camp for our youth." The Chicago lay-leader who headed up the project, Johann S. Ackerman, knew that the national body was already "exploring the field for a camp" so that NFTY conclaves would not continually have to wander, but he argued that "the Chicago Federation does not need to wait, it could be first." The example of Camp Ramah, which had so recently been purchased for the seminary by Conservative Jewish lay people in Chicago, was presumably a factor here, but the minutes are (probably purposefully) vague.83 They disclose only that "Rabbi Lorge explained other camp programs for Jewish youth in which he had participated" and that Rabbi Arnold Wolf "explained that other Jewish camps combined study and sports." Whatever the case, the meeting was a resounding success, "with all present enthusiastically endorsing the project."84 The executive board of the UAHC agreed, and by July 1951 an appropriate site had been identified for possible purchase: a private Jewish camp known as Briar Lodge in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. The details of the purchase and the proposed use of the camp had been ironed out by November, and what UAHC president Maurice Eienbrod enthusiastically described as "the first Union Institute of the U.A. C." even to be officially and actually established" was announced to Midwestern area rabbis on February 26, 1952. It was to be known, simply, as Union Institute.85

The new camp differed markedly from Ramah, Massad, and in fact from all of the other Jewish educational camps that had been established in the "crucial decade" of Jewish camping. First of all, Hebrew played little role in the camp. There was no Hebrew in the camp's name and hardly any Hebrew in its curriculum; and, for that matter, there was no emphasis on Zionism at all.86 Second, most campers attended the camp for two weeks or less. In the initial year, there were "2 two-week Institutes . . . primarily for young people from Chicago and the Midwest," a one-week Adult Institute, two ten-day Leadership Institutes sponsored by NFTY, and a three-day Labor Day Conclave of the Chicago Federation of Temple Youth. Some 442 people participated in camp activities during that first year, but none of them devoted their full summer to Jewish living and learning.87 This same pattern of short "institutes" rather than a full summer of "immersion" became a feature of Union Institute. Its program, like Reform Jewish education as a whole, was essentially supplementary; it left a great many summer weeks open for secular pursuits.

Third, Union Institute served a different age range than the other camps;

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the bulk of its campers were teenagers or adults. An "experimental one-week's session for 11- and 12-year-olds" was only initiated in 1954 (later in the 1950s, a "junior session" was created for children aged 9 to 11). Like Brandeis Camp Institute, which, as we have seen, focused on the college-aged, Union Institute initially sought to transform its campers. Massad and Ramah, by contrast, sought to mold them.

Fourth, more than at any other Jewish camp, Union Institute emphasized direct contact with rabbis as a central feature of its program. Visiting rabbis were treated as celebrities, akin to the "professor-in-residence" at Camp Ramah. They taught the ninety-minute study sessions, led regular "bull sessions" with participants, and were the camp's dominant personalities. Each summer more rabbis offered to come to Union Institute, some of them sacrificing a portion of their vacations in order to do so. Union Institute thus promoted closer relations between rabbis and young Reform Jews. Over time, it also stimulated many young people to enter the rabbinate.69

Finally, and perhaps as a consequence of the deep rabbinic involvement in the program, Union Institute placed a much heavier emphasis upon any other Jewish educational camp on promoting spirituality. Indeed, during the opening summer of 1953, religious activities were described in a report to the board as "probably the most successful single facet" of the camp. In addition to regular morning and evening prayers, which were "creatively developed by a committee of young people," there were "cabin prayers at night, and a recitation of prayers before and after each meal. "Very frequently," according to this same report, "a genuine mood of religious devotion was generated at these occasions, and many of the participants were deeply moved by them."70 Later these creative services and the whole informal mode of camp worship would have a major impact on the Reform movement as a whole.

Within a few years, Union Institute, like Ramah, became a full-scale camp movement. Camp Saratoga (later "swig") opened in California, and three more camps opened by 1958, all of them guided by the Youth Division of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations. Unlike the Ramah camps, however, which were centrally directed from New York, the Union camps operated under a considerable degree of local autonomy.67 Just as individual congregations enjoyed a great deal of latitude under the UAHC structure, so too did the individual camps. In this respect, as in so many others, the camps reflected the character of the movement that sponsored them.

The Lasting Influence of Educational Jewish Camping

The establishment of Union Institute rang down the curtain on the most creative and influential decade in the whole history of the American Jewish camp movement. Between the early 1940s and the early 1950s a wide range of exciting and innovative camps opened their doors, including, as we have seen, The National Camp Institute, Camp Massad, Camp Ramah, and Union Institute. This unprecedented proliferation of Jewish educational camps reflected critical developments taking place within the larger American Jewish community, notably: (1) a dramatic expansion in all aspects of American Jewish education; (2) a new focus on young people and their leadership training; and (3) a perceptible shift over time from the "ideological" emphases of the early 1940s, seen in the Zionist, Yiddishist, and Hebraist camps, to the "denominational" identities of the 1950s, when Ramah and the Union camps expanded. Beyond merely reflecting critical developments, however, the new camps also came to have a shaping influence upon them. A whole generation of young, impressionable American Jews came under the spell of these camps—some young people were "molded" by them, others "transformed"—and from their ranks the next generation of rabbis, scholars, and lay leaders emerged. This was the return on the crucial decade's investment in Jewish educational camping, and during the second half of the twentieth century the investment continued to pay rich dividends across the spectrum of American Jewish life.

Notes


2. The term "intensive Jewish educational camp" is borrowed from Burton Cohen; see his "The Jewish Educational Summer Camp," in Judaism and Education: Essays in Honor of Walter J. Ackerman, ed. Hayim Marotz (Beer Sheva: Ben Gurion University, 1998), 26-33.


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6. Gibson, "History of Organized Camping," presents these figures in his fourth chapter (unpaginated).

7. 1956 Directory of Summer Camps Under the Auspices of Jewish Communal Organizations (New York: Jewish Welfare Board, 1956); Isaacman, Jewish Summer Camps, surveyed only half as many camps from this period (see p. 118).

8. Isaacman, Jewish Summer Camps, 118.

9. Jenna Jostell argues that "Unlike other youth-oriented institutions like the Boy Scouts or the YMCA which offered an alternative, competing perspective, Jewish summer camp co-existed amicably with the same social sphere as the Jewish home and the afternoon school. Far from supplanting or vying with domestic and communal values, it sought instead to extend and deepen them," While this may exaggerate both the subversive nature of the scouting and YMCA movements, and the social conformity of Jewish camps, the hypothesis warrants investigation. See Jenna Weisman Jostell, "The Jewish Way of Play," in Jostell and Millman, Worthy Use of Summer.


11. Gibson, "History of Organized Camping," unpaginated (italics added). There is, of course, a parallel here to the European youth movements of the time that similarly entailed the counter-culture over the city and promoted the value of communing with nature. The Judenburger Wunderland Blau-Weiss (Jewish HIkers Association Blue and White), founded in 1912, reflected this same back-to-nature ideology; see Steven Lowenstein in German-Jewish History in Modern Times, ed. Michael A. Meyer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), v. 148.


17. Isaacman, Jewish Summer Camps, 133.


20. Albert P. Schoolman, writing in 1946, recalled that even "the very best Jewish camps" in 1930, even if they served kosher food, had a Friday evening service and a "Shabbat meal with Kiddush," failed to observe the Sabbath thereafter. "Saturday, in preparation for Sunday visiting, became clean-up day for the camp," Jewish Education 17 (June 1946): 7.

21. Turner, 500 Years of YMCA Camping, 48-50; Irwin, Theory of Camping, provides a later summary of educational theory concerning camping.


23. On the Central Jewish Institute, see David Kaufman, Shul with a Pool: The "Synagogue-Center" in American Jewish History (Hannover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 1999), 133-59.


25. In 1953 Samuel Benderly briefly experimented with extension courses in religion and history for young people who spent summers with their parents in Arvorse, Long Island, but his biographer's claim that he thereby "founded" Jewish educational camping is baseless. See Nathan H. Winter, Jewish Education in a Pluralist Society: Samuel Benderly and Jewish Education in the United States (New York: New York University Press, 1966), 81, 185.


27. Quoted in Jostell, "Jewish Way of Play," 76.


30. Alexander M. Dushkin Living Bridges: Memoirs of an Educator (Jerusalem: Keter, 1975), 63. In an earlier telling, Dushkin described it as a plan to create a "private summer camp for children of well-to-do Jewish families"; see Dushkin, "A. P. Schoolman," 73.

31. Dushkin, Living Bridges, 64, 67.

32. Dushkin, "A. P. Schoolman," 74; Dushkin, Living Bridges, 63-64.

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33. Kohut, His Father's House, 111.
34. See Schwartz, "Camp Ramah: The Early Years," 21, where Sylvia Eistenberg recalls that in 1947 these members of the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues suggested to her that she should not mention the study aspect of Camp Ramah when she went about recruiting potential campers.
35. Dushkin, Living Bridges, 64.
40. First, "Milestones in the Development of Hebrew Camping in North America," 35 (translation mine). See also, Massad Reminiscences, 64, where Rabbi Ray Artz recalls that at Massad, "Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Hebrews, secularists—all were in that camp and I cannot remember any tension whatsoever among the groups. The camp was run on a more or less traditional basis, Y'hi safra [prayer] every morning. Those people among the counselors who had strong objections and did not like prayer did not go."
41. Inasman, Jewish Summer Camps, 30.
44. Gannes and Soskis, "Kutzrah and Camp Achvah," 68.
45. Dushkin, Living Bridges, 198.
47. Fredric Friedenreich, reading an earlier version of this essay, has persuasively argued that Yiddish camps, of which there were about twenty-five before World War II, promoted an educational agenda as early as the 1920s and were therefore forerunners of Jewish educational camping. Zionist camps such as Moshava, sponsored by the Habonim movement, likewise promoted an educational agenda. In both cases, of course, the education was distinctively ideological, as were the camps. Full-scale studies of the Yiddishist and Zionist camping movements remain to be written.
48. Abin I. Schiff, The Jewish Day School in America (New York: Jewish Education Committee of New York, 1966), 37, 45, 46–49.
53. Ibid., 214.
57. Massad Reminiscences, 13.
58. J. S. Ackerman to Phineas Snodgrass, July 7, 1932, OSUJU Papers, American Jewish Archives.
59. See Hurwitz, Memoirs of a Jewish Educator, 236.
64. Shlomo Shushinger, "Hebrew Camping: Five Years of Massad (1943–1948)," Jewish Education 17 (June 1946): 16.
70. Samuel M. Blumenfeld, "Summer Camp Institute Sharon," Jewish Education 22
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(Summer 1953): 37-43. Isaacman, "Development of Jewish Camping," 316. It is not clear when Sharam actually opened. Blumenfeld dates the initial organizational meeting to 1945, but the camp was not mentioned in the 1946 issue of Jewish Education. It likely began in 1946.


71. Ibid., 18-20.

72. Ibid., 20.

73. Ibid., 21.


75. Schwartz, "Camp Ramah," 34.

76. Brown, "It's Off to Camp We Go!" 31. 32.

77. On Cook's significance, with the assistance of Eleanor Schwartz, see Rudin, "Development of Reform Jewish Youth Programs," 20.

78. Chicago Councilor (1948); NFTY "First Annual Leadership Institutes" brochure (1948); and Ernst Longe to Sidney I. Cole (October 23, 1948), all in OSRUI Papers, American Jewish Archives (hereafter, AIA).


82. Letter from Joseph L. Baron to Maurice Eisenstadt, June 23, 1946, Joseph L. Baron Papers, in the possession of AIA.

83. Goldberg, "Beginnings of Educational Camping," 8, is less tentative on this point, but cites no sources. "Another factor that helped convince lay people of the need for a camp," he reports, "was the establishment of Camp Ramah. If the Conservative movement had a camp, then the Reform movement needed to acquire one too."

84. [Minutes of the] Combined Committee for Camp Project Meeting, Thursday, March 29, 1952, OSRUI Papers, AIA.

85. Memo from Herman E. Schaalman to J. S. Ackerman, July 9, 1950, Memorandum on Camp Institute, November 29, 1951; memo from J. S. Ackerman to Max O. Garlond and Sherman Perlstein, December 27, 1951, memo from Herman Schaalman to "All Rabbis in the Midwestern, Rocky Mountain & Great Lakes Regions of the Union including all the Rabbis in Chicago," February 26, 1952, memo from Maurice N. Eisenstadt to J. S. Ackerman, February 19, 1952; J. S. Ackerman, "History and Purpose of Union Institute," January 25, 1955; Dedication invitation, December 24, 1952; all in OSRUI Papers, AIA; Goldberg, "Beginnings of Educational Camping," 8.

86. An undated fact sheet, probably from 1952, in the OSRUI Papers reports that "no politics of any sort will be discussed (Zionism, communism, etc.). The American flag will be the only flag raised and lowered."


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