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A Very Special Camp

Herman Wouk's Special Zionist Camp and the Canadians Who Comprised It

By Amy Neustein

My mother, Shirley Friedberg Neustein, became friends with Herman Wouk as a child and kept up her friendship with him until she died in 2001. They met as children at a very special Zionist camp in the 1920s and 30s situated on the picturesque Lake Champlain in Milton, Vermont. The boy's division was called "Keeyuma," and the girl's division was known as "Carmelia." The camp was comprised of hand-selected campers coming from very prominent Jewish homes both in the US and Canada.

Sam Bronfman would send his children there, soon becoming an ardent supporter of this Zionist camp. He teamed up with Louis Lipsky and Meyer W. Weisgal, whose children likewise attended the camp. My mother shared a bunk with a very special girl, Miriam Wolofsky, the daughter of Montreal publisher Hirsch (Harry) Wolofsky. When I visited Montreal as a youth in the summer of 1976, I had the great pleasure of meeting with Miriam Wolofsky Cooperberg who gave me a tour of the city. I will never forget how she proudly pointed to the bust of her father at the entrance to the Jewish museum, regaling me with stories of his amazing efforts to form the first Yiddish weekly in Montreal.

Every morning at 6am the campers awakened to "Oh, say can you see," and "O Canada," broadcast over the camp loud speakers. My mother never forgot those wake-up calls: she found it jarring to awaken to the chilly New England weather, and admired her Canadian bunkmates for being able to handle the cold. She would describe, perhaps with a tinge of envy, the supple woolen blankets brought by the Canadians campers, claiming at the beginning of every camp session she would know right away who were the Canadians by simply looking at their beds.

In May of 1962 my mother made a monumental camp reunion in midtown Manhattan bringing together the Zionist youths that had now become household names in literary, operatic, theatrical, political, business, and philanthropic circles: Arthur Miller, Moss Hart, George London, Joel Carmichael, Michael Wager ("Mendy" Weisgal), Norman Lear, Paul Goodman, Bob Treuhaf, Andrew Goodman (founder of Bergdorf Goodman), Edgar Bronfman, just to name a few.

My mother would describe the reunion to me years later as an "alchemy in the air." Having all these special people in one room was "a force greater than life." She told me of Mendy Weisgal, who came to the reunion with a full face of makeup. He was performing in a Sunday matinee. He came across town to the reunion and dashed back to Broadway for a later performance that day.

George London, a Montreal native who migrated to California as an older child, made a point of coming to my mother's camp reunion as well. When he got up to say a few words, his fellow campers were quick to ask him to sing a few lines from one of his operas. By this time he was a celebrated bass-baritone operatic singer, having already made his debut at the New York Metropolitan Opera as Amonasro in Aida.

Herman Wouk, who at the time of the reunion was immersed in Youngblood Hawke, secluding himself in the Virgin Islands so as to devote full concentration to his novel, sent my mother a tape to be played in his absence. My mother brought a scissors with her, and out of respect for Herman's sensitivity she cut the cassette tape immediately after it was played. The room stood still, as the former campers listened closely to Herman's reflections on his camp days: stories, commentaries, and humor about life among an oasis trees for a Jewish boy growing up in the Bronx.

I've never stopped hearing my mother's stories about her camp days. She would say "Amy, this was one camp that didn't stress athletics, they stressed lectures instead." Sam Bronfman helped to pay the travel expenses of speakers who would come every weekend to talk to the young campers, instilling in them the importance of forming a Jewish state. They were encouraged to keep their heads high during an era when Jewish identity was kept safely (or cravenly) in the closet. This common interest brought the children from different backgrounds, Canadians and Americans, together. And they kept up with each other throughout their adulthood as a result of the mooring of the camp. In remembering Herman Wouk and how he made every Jew feel comfortable in their skins (Inside, Outside, This is My God, The Will to Live On), the effect of this very special Zionist camp, fostered by Canadians and Americans, must not be forgotten either.

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