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JEWISH CAMPING IN EUROPE

Your Impact on European Jewish Community Life



Prepared for:
Lisa and Victor Kohn
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Making an Impact through Jewish Camping

In the summer of 2018, Lisa and Victor Kohn, you once again brought the gift of Jewish camping to children, youth and families across Europe. JDC thanks you for your dedicated support of the *Olameinu* camps in the Baltic region, the *Jewgathon* camp in Bulgaria and JDC's Szarvas International Camp in Hungary this summer.

This report illustrates the impact you have through the testimonies of campers, staff and community leaders¹. Alongside accounts of the summer's adventures, we highlight the extended impact your gift has on Jewish communities in Eastern Europe: more than leaving an imprint on individual campers, camps impact communities, in a meaningful, ongoing manner. They engage unaffiliated Jews in Jewish life and then inspire and equip them to build Jewish life.

As Jewish camps across the globe have been proven to inspire Jewish identity and engagement among individuals, Jewish camps in Europe are building the Jewish identities and inspiring the growth and development of local Jewish communities. In the words of Maria, Youth Director at JCC Tallinn in Estonia, ***"Our communities and our camps are absolutely interconnected. They couldn't exist without each other."***

INTERCONNECTED: Jewish Camps and Jewish Community



90% of Jewish community professionals and volunteers in Estonia and Latvia are Jewish camp alumni



70% of Bulgarian campers remain involved in Jewish activity throughout the year.



20% of Latvian campers attending Olameinu this summer were first time campers



80% of Bulgarian campers return to Jewgathon camp each year

¹ Due to recently introduced data privacy laws in Europe, some names have either been excluded or changed.



Olameinu Camp: The Baltics – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania

When asked what Jewish camping gives to her community, **Vikjtorija, from Lithuania**, is pretty decisive in her answer. *“Jewish camping is a powerful force: for Jewish learning, making Jewish friends, shaping Jewish leaders and engagement in local Jewish community”*.

As coordinator for Olameinu Mishpacha, a camp created by Olameinu alumni to bring their families with young children in as a second generation of Jewish campers, Vikjtorija knows this force well. It was the strong connections Vikjtorija built at camp with the extended Baltic Jewish community that led her to Jewish communal work. And she’s not alone. **Today approximately 90% of Jewish community professionals and leaders in the Baltic communities are Jewish camp alumni.**



The Camp Olameinu wall at Riga JCC. Olameinu Jewish camp is figuratively and literally a Jewish community building block.

Inna, JCC director in Riga explains how the connection begins and grows. *“Camp alumni understand what Jewish community is all about – its principles, its values, the Jewish calendar.... After camps, young campers start coming to local kids programs and become active community members. Youth participation is always higher after camp too. Inspired by the role models (the counselors) they see at camp, youth want to become leaders too. Inevitably, a number of those leaders become community professionals later down the line. Many others remain involved.”*

Ilana, 18, from Riga, is a prime example of a budding youth leader. A camper since she was nine, she flexes her leadership skills weekly as the coordinator of Riga’s Dagesh kids program for 7-12 years olds. She believes that Olameinu and the programming that she helps run during the year are incredibly valuable. *“We give Jewish children the opportunity to make life-long Jewish friends. We offer them the opportunity to learn about their tradition and be proud to be Jewish.”*

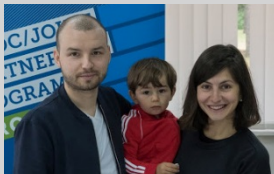
Alexandr, community activist from Estonia, and founder of the Baltics Jewish Network, describes the generational impact the camp-community connection has. *“Our generation are bringing Jewish traditions back to our parents’ generation who were deprived of it [due to communism]. At the same time as Jewish camp alumni start their own Jewish families they are creating a foothold for Jewish life and community in the region.”*



Olameinu: Summer of 2018

There is a special invisible superpower at Camp Olameinu: both the flagship camp for kids aged 7 to 25 and the newer Olameinu Mishpacha for young families. It weaves its way among the campers and staff who come from all three Baltic countries to learn about and celebrate their Jewish heritage. It permeates the dining hall, the Shabbat services, and evening activities. And, it endures well beyond the camp, strengthening Jewish identity, creating long-lasting relationships, building community, even developing new families, resulting in a second generation of campers.

Ulvia and Natan, one of many families with second-generation Olameinu campers, represent the compelling results of that superpower.



If not for Olameinu, the couple most likely would never have met. Ulvia is from Estonia. Natan from Lithuania. Their paths crossed at age 14 as Olameinu campers. They later became *madrichim*, then active members of the Olameinu organizing team, planning and running camp activities. Now married, the couple live in Vilnius, Lithuania, with their one-year-old son named Solomon. They continue their relationship with the camp, attending Olameinu Mishpacha family camp with Solomon both as participants, and as volunteer lecturers.

“It is very important for us to have a place where we can spend time in a Jewish atmosphere,” Ulvia says. “Olameinu has been a part of our lives for many years. It taught us to be proud of our culture.”



Olameinu Kids

Under the banner of Jewish superheroes, Camp Olameinu's hardworking team united hundreds of campers through a packed schedule of games, workshops, and group events about different Jewish heroes and aspects of heroism in Jewish history. Always looking to improve, camp leaders set a number of other goals ahead of time to provide campers with this memorable experience.

- **Improve Jewish content:** Three Jewish educators were brought in to raise the camp's Jewish content level. Struggling to find Russian-speaking Jewish educators, organizers turned to JDC who put them in contact with potential candidates. The educators they found came to pre-camp, and help madrichim choose daily themes and planning corresponding activities. Educators also worked directly with kids.
- **Incorporate more Jewish rituals:** New additions were made to the daily camp routine such as the option to wash hands before meals, reciting *Hamotzi*,² and singing the *Birkat HaMazon*. At the same time new songs for Kabbalat Shabbat and Havdalah, and guitar accompaniment for the latter served to build a greater atmosphere.
- **Cultivate mixing of kids from the three communities:** The camp aims to bring everyone together - regardless of whether they are from Latvia, Lithuania or Estonia. Nationalities are mixed within groups so that they are with diverse peers from all three countries. As one camp organizer explains: *"We try to forget where are we from, and remember that all of us are from Olameinu and we are one people,"* said a camp organizer.
- **Add new workshops:** New music and photography workshops offered campers the chance to learn new skills and a new media to learn about the topic of the day. So in music, children learned Hebrew words through singing theme-related Hebrew songs



OLAMEINU KIDS AT A GLANCE

- **Campers:** 357 kids
- **Staff:** 47 madrichim, 13 coordinators + 33 staff
- **Length:** 11 days
- **Dates:** July
- **Age:** 7-25
- **Location:** Latvia



Anna, 15, explains why she values Olameinu camp.

"Camp is important to my community because we meet here with our friends and we are like one big family. Every year we learn something new about Judaism. Camp is a good place for spending the summer."

²² View campers saying Hamotzi at <https://www.facebook.com/olameinucamp/videos/491824917914213/>



Olameinu Mishpacha

Camp Olameinu's family version welcomed returning and new families this year. Many participants originally learned about being Jewish as campers and came home to teach their parents. Now parents themselves they and their children come to camp to learn how to be Jewish family together.

- **Themes:** This year daily themes combined the historic with the recurrent. A Jewish life cycle day complemented days to mark major Jewish history events, 70 years of Israel and 30 years of renewed Jewish life in the Baltics.
- **Targeted Programing:** Understanding the importance of providing programming for children and parents, alongside family activities. Thus while parents attended sessions on parenting and Jewish topics, children enjoyed crafts, sports activities, and games. Based on feedback, parents timetable was made less dense and a field trip for kids age 7 and up was introduced. A foam party for the entire camp on the beach proved very popular.
- **Shared programming:** In the afternoons, families came together and took part in activities revolving around the daily themes. For example on the Jewish life cycle theme day, campers played a game that took them through brit milah, bar mitzvah, and wedding. On another day, Jewish history in the Baltics and in Israel was taught through an interactive stations game in which families "travelled" back in time to historic events.
- **CampApp:** A specially-developed camp app offered easy to access schedule details, program resources, and other helpful tips and information.



OLAMEINU MISHPACHA AT A GLANCE

- **Campers:** 320 including 13 madrichim
- **Length:** 5 days
- **Dates:** June 20-24
- **Age:** Families
- **Volunteer Staff:** 10 organizers plus nurse, lecturers and kitchen staff
- **Location:** Dubingai, Lithuania



Etin, from Lithuania, has attended Oleimanu Mishpacha with her husband, and children ages 2 and 6, for several years. She values the opportunity to spend time with other Jewish families.

"Our family, especially our kids, wait for the next Olameinu Mishpacha, from the moment camp is over," Etin says.

"We know we will meet our friends, Shabbat together as one big family. Olameinu makes us feel part of a Jewish community."



Jewgathon Camp: Bulgaria

In the small but flourishing Jewish community of Bulgaria, Jewish camping is known for its impact and influence on Jewish life. Indeed leaders of today's community recall a pivotal point in the community's reemergence – the summer of 1994 when a delegation of over 200 Bulgarian campers and madrichim (counselors) were sent to JDC's International Camp in Szarvas, Hungary. The group of inspired youth returned buzzing with the energy of camp, enthused to engage in their Jewish community and determined to recreate the immersive Jewish experience locally.

Today, not only is Jewgathon camp a central event in the Bulgarian Jewish calendar but camp alumni constitute the majority of active members of the 5000-strong community.

For the 230 children who attended camp this summer (20 more than in 2017), camp was an opportunity to fully immerse in Jewish life. Staff estimate that for about 50% of campers, camp is their main Jewish experience of the year. Based on experience, many are expected to continue to be involved in Jewish life in the future.

*"I first learned the Grace After Meals and Israeli dancing at Bulgaria's Jewish camp," says **Daria, now head of the JCC in Sofia**, Bulgaria's capital, "Camp is not just a 12-day experience, it's one you take with you for life."*



Like Daria, many camp alumni have moved from campers to counselors to community leaders. It is for this reason that the local Jewish camp is known as Bulgaria's "Jewish Leadership Factory." While Daria attended camp a few years back, Jewgathon's impact is just as strong today. A recent community survey found that **70% of campers remain involved in Jewish activity** throughout the year and **80% come back** summer after summer.

*"Camp is where the next generation of the Jewish community grows up," said **Maxim, the Bulgarian community's top Jewish educator**. "Everything that we learned, not only about Judaism but also about ourselves, we learned through camp."*



Jewgathon: Summer of 2018

As a major engine of Jewish life in Bulgaria, Jewgathon camp is open to all Jewish community members. Being part of camp is being part of the community. For a disadvantaged young girl like Toni the efforts by the community to bring into the heart of Jewish life are invaluable.



Toni, 8, lives an isolated life. She contends with educational and cognitive challenges and requires speech therapy and an aide. She lives with her mother and sister in a small apartment for which her mother's income barely covers the rent.

Due to multiple health issues, her mother has had two brain surgeries leaving Toni's aunt to help care for her and her older sister. Toni has few regular childhood experiences.

But for 12 days a year this all changes...

During Jewgathon camp, Toni can relax, feel secure, and enjoy being happy. Her involvement is made possible both by your support and by the fact that the community ensures that the camp has a psychologist to help her develop her speaking and behavioral skills.

Camp Open to All

Jewgathon camp leaders strive to be inclusive to all Bulgarian Jewish children. They know the long-lasting benefits that camp has on participants and that many will take what they have learned at camp and apply it to their lives when they return home. They also understand that Jewish community means caring for all its members and bringing them in to Jewish life.

These goals were at the forefront of camp leaders' minds when they developed this year's camp. To make camp both fun and educational, this year's theme involved Jewish *agadot* / legends from different time periods and countries from Morocco to Hassidic Poland to Second Temple Jerusalem. Interactive activities, games, and workshops revolved around the theme, living up to the camp's new name, Jewgathon, an amalgam of "Jew," *Jugar* (the Ladino word for "play"), and "marathon."

JEWGATHON AT A GLANCE

- **Length:** 12 days
- **Dates:** July 15-27
- **Ages:** 6-17
- **Campers:** 230 (including madrichim)
- **Staff:** 5
- **Location:** Pamporovo Southern Bulgaria



Connecting Back to Community

The marathon of camp activity culminated in the first ever event for parents. On the last day of camp, parents joined their children for a special Shabbat dinner in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital. **370 people** attended this Shabbat celebration, dancing and singing late into the night.

It was a huge success and many came away from their time together inspired and motivated to continue the camp experience in their own homes and families.

It is these types of immersive experiences that Jewgathon hopes to foster, and the reason that Bulgaria's spring camp – also made possible with your support – is held over Passover rather than in the winter. By offering the spring camp at Passover time, **the camp gives families who might otherwise not experience the holiday a chance to do so.**

Camp Counselors: Challenge and Opportunity

Jewgathon plays a critical role in building local leadership – each year, a changing cast of counselors) is responsible for creating and implementing the camp program. The madrichim take these skills with them for the rest of their lives, which often involve continuing Jewish activity.



Yet, as the camp grows, finding a sufficient number of madrichim is becoming increasingly difficult. Many young people leave Bulgaria to study abroad, during the very years they would be most active in camp. This challenge is common to camps across Europe including the Baltic Jewish communities. There they decided to launch a new cycle of Madrichim School (youth leadership training) in the year ahead to keep up with demand. Similar discussions will take place in Bulgaria to devise a solution.



Szarvas JDC International Jewish Camp

Finding my way to Szarvas summer camp at 14 inspired my decision to dedicate my career to renewing Jewish life in Poland. – Agata Rakowiecka, Director, Warsaw JCC, Poland

Szarvas was one of my first Jewish experiences. Three years later, I now lead a movement of more than 3,000 teens across the former Soviet Union. – Eva Stupka, 16, Moldova

Testimonies like Agata’s and Eva’s point to the fundamental role of JDC-Lauder International Jewish Camp at Szarvas, Hungary (Szarvas) in boosting Jewish communal life. Jewish camping is known for its inimitable capacity to infuse lifelong Jewish commitment. And Szarvas, excels in this mission.

Each year, Szarvas gives campers age 6-18 a chance to engage in traditional camp activities (sports, theatre, arts, etc.) while also exploring their Jewish heritage, meeting peers from around the world and connecting to Jewish life. These experiences aim to promote Jewish literacy and Jewish involvement, and, based on a recent internal evaluation, succeed.

In an evaluation conducted between 2014-2017, campers ages 13-16 were asked to complete a questionnaire towards the end of each session. Over four years, **up to 78% reported that Szarvas helped them feel part of the Jewish people.**



Szarvas: Summer of 2018

Each year, when she returns home from Camp Szarvas to her home in Hungary, **Dorka, 19**, unpacks her latest art creations made at camp, and the Shabbat siddur in Hungarian and Hebrew used for camp services. She puts everything on display in her bedroom so that she can look at them throughout the year and be reminded of her camp experiences.

“I’ve become more Jewish during these years in Szarvas. I feel like a Jew, and now I’m proud of being Jewish,” said Dorka. *“Oftentimes I think back to Szarvas, because I have really good memories. When I see pictures of Szarvas, I get emotional. I get very excited to return.”*

Dorka has attended Szarvas for the past five years and plans to return next year in the madrichim (counselor) training program. She wants to give back by providing the same positive experience she has had at Szarvas to future campers.

“If I didn’t have Szarvas, I wouldn’t have been Jewish at all,” remarks Dorka, *whose grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, but whose family does not identify with Judaism. “I feel I have this root and I do not want to forget it.”*

Dorka’s sentiment is exactly the reaction camp organizers strive to invoke in all campers: their memories should bring them back to the next camp and feel more Jewish through the year.

This is what the 2018 theme of **“Gifts: Jews Gaining From and Giving to the Outside World”** aimed to do. The Szarvas curriculum aimed to help campers delve into Jewish values and themes from Judaism that have become universal—such as monotheism and the seven-day week—while also explore how Judaism in turn was influenced by the Western world.

On the one hand, the theme helps campers take pride in being Jewish by seeing the Jewish influence on their society. At the same time by putting the concept into action each day of camp through fun, interactive, and creative activities, the theme creates unforgettable experiences for campers.





Program Highlight: Jewish Thinking out the Box

In the context of discussions about monotheism, campers learned about the Patriarch, Abraham, who originated and championed this concept, at a time when it was virtually unheard of. Campers then explored the lives of three modern-day Jews who similarly "thought out of the box": Albert Einstein, Sigmund Freud and Marc Chagall.

Then in an evening activity, Unit Heads (head counselors) dressed up as these notable Jews introduced themselves to campers and shared how their Jewish background affected their life's work. Then, remaining in character, each leading an activity associated with their figure:

- For Einstein, campers were given a brainteaser.
- For Freud, campers were assigned colors based on a personality assessment and then met up with other campers with the same color.
- For Chagall, campers heard a description of a Chagall painting and then painted what they heard. Later they compared their efforts to the original.

All of the camps activities and lessons revealed how from ancient times to today, Jewish culture influences our society. This is a powerful teaching in a place where young Jews are inspired, encouraged and motivated to be connected to and continue Jewish life.

This is Szarvas Camp.



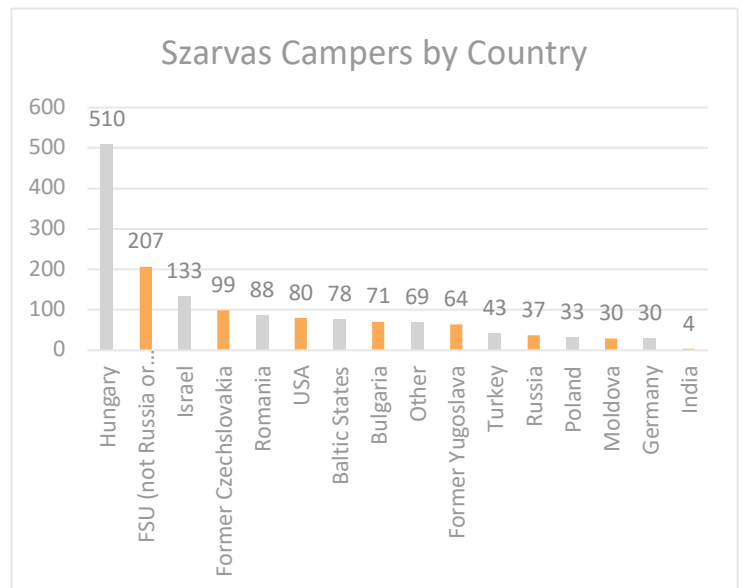
SZARVAS AT A GLANCE

Length: Four 12-day sessions between July 1-Aug 24

Campers: 1576

Ages: 6-18

Countries: Over twenty, including Hungary, Poland, India, Russia, Moldova, Romania, Germany, Czech Republic, Israel, and the United States





Thank You

The idea of Jewish camping as a power or force for Jewish community is a motif that repeats itself when talking about the Jewish camps you support in Europe. With Jewish adults raising young Jewish families in countries once thought struck off the Jewish map, attributing their decision to be communally active to their Jewish camp experiences, this power is palpable.

Thank you Lisa and Victor Kohn for being a vital power behind Jewish camping and community development in Europe today.



About JDC

JDC is the world's leading Jewish humanitarian assistance organization, impacting millions of lives in more than 70 countries today. JDC leverages a century's experience confronting poverty and crisis around the world to save the world's poorest Jews, build Jewish life and leaders, empower Israel's future, and rescue victims of global emergencies.

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The American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, Inc.

220 East 42nd St., Suite 400, New York, NY 10017

Tel: (212) 687-6200

Fax: (212) 370-5467