Rishe Deitsch

"FOR ME, CAMP IS GAN EDEN"

"You say you love us, but then every year you leave us," says a little Ukrainian boy camper to his Lubavitcher counselor on the last day of camp.

"I'll be back for Pesach camp," promises the bochur.



Camper Motty Chupin in a display of camp spirit.

Just three months ago, there was a "Pesach camp" in Dnepropetrovsk (formerly Yekatrinislav), in East-Central Ukraine. In many ways it is the same as summer camp, since it is also geared to boy campers ages five to 16, and also run by bochurim ages 18 and up, except instead of happening during the summer months, it extends from bedikas chometz through Isru Chag. Seventy-five Jewish boys who live in Ukraine got to keep Pesach correctly.

Every summer, bochurim come to the Ukraine and do a three-week overnight camp in one location, then move to another location and start all over again with a new group of campers. The campers get attached to the counselors,

and since it's summer and they're free anyway, very often the campers want to come along with the counselors to the new location for more camp.

"At first I could not believe the boys wanted to travel for 25 hours on a train from Minsk [Belarus] to Crimea [a region near the Black Sea] to have another three weeks of camp," said Ephraim Yarmak, 21, who spent several summers and Pesachs as a counselor in the Ukraine. "But then I understood. Camp is all they wait for the whole year. It is when the boys, many of whom live in very uncomfortable or even hostile environments, come alive. It is when they are given unlimited love and attention, given the time of their lives and given a full dose of the 'oxygen' of Torah. Not to mention American treats like chocolate bars and licorice."

Just to try to give American readers some understanding of the difficult lives of these Ukrainian children, let me share with you what one counselor told me: "Many Yidden come to Berditchev to visit the grave of Reb Levi Yitzchok, and nobody turns down a child beggar. So, many Jewish children living in Berditchev survive by begging."



Camper Shmerel Wolf.

Levi Katzman, 24, spent six summers in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia as counselor and head counselor. He will never forget the day he found a pile of challah rolls in a camper's drawer. He asked the child why he was keeping them.

"To take home," said the boy.

"But they'll be dry and hard by the time you go home," Levi explained.

"It doesn't matter," insisted the boy. "My mother will still be happy to have them."

Ephraim Yarmak was teaching his campers that Hashem created the world in six days; Adam and Chava lived in Gan Eden for a short while, etc. At the end of the learning session, Ephraim noticed tears rolling down the cheeks of one small camper.

"What's wrong?" asked Ephraim.

"For me," replied the boy, "camp is Gan Eden. And I know we only have a short time here and then it is going to end, just like it did for Adam and Chava."

Ephraim was once in a suburb of Dnepropetrovsk for Shabbos. They had nine for the minyan. "We went out searching for a tenth man. We saw a group of young men. I walked up to them and asked, 'Anyone here Jewish?' They all pointed to one guy, who said, 'My name is Yosef Yitzchok. I went to camp with you guys twelve years ago; I had a bris then and took Yosef Yitzchok as my Jewish name.' After completing the minyan, Yosef Yitzchok stayed for seudas Shabbos. We sang all the camp songs he still remembered."

> Camp is the only place where Yiddishkeit is something positive.

The Shluchim who have created, directed and fully sponsored the summer camps and the Pesach camps deserve the gratitude of Jews everywhere. We could not list all their names here, but below are the Shluchim who dealt directly with the bochurim I interviewed, Ephraim Yarmak and Levi Katzman.

Rabbi Shmuel Kamenetzky is head Shliach of Dnepropetrovsk, a city in Ukraine. He is responsible for the Dnepropetrovsk Pesach camps and summer camps, among many other life-saving projects.

Rabbi Reuven Chupin is principal of the yeshivah ketanah in Dnepropetrovsk and director of summer camp.

Rabbi Yossy Glick is Tzivos Hashem director and Pesach camp director.

Rabbi Shlomo Wilhelm is head Shliach of Western Ukraine, and has a camp every summer for kids from all over Western Ukraine, including many small villages.

Rabbi Shneur Deutsch is head Shliach in Belarus and has a camp there every summer.

And the rest of the story is told in captions…



Train from Dnepropetrovsk, carrying about 125 Jewish boys, arrives in Crimea for three-week overnight camp.



Levi Yitzchok Kabakov, age five, was brought to the orphanage at the age of two due to neglect. His behavior at the time was more dog-like than human because he was being left with the dogs from 6 a.m. to 9 p.m., while his mother was out. He came to summer camp and to Pesach camp. Counselor on the left is Meir Gramma, a baal teshuvah who credits camp with his becoming a tomim Counselor on the right is Yosef Carlebach.



This young man, Peretz of Zhytomyr, accepted upon himself Torah and mitzvos thanks to his involvement with the Shluchim in Zhytomyr. According to Levi Katzman, "Peretz, formerly Vitalik, is the best influence of all on the campers, because he was once one of them. He understands them perfectly, and he is also talented, good-natured, and devoted. *Shliach oseh Shliach."*



Line-up takes place every morning in camp. The campers and counselors sing the twelve pesukim, and the theme of the day is announced.



Nochum Simcha from Kiev (above) became a full baal teshuvah at a young age completely on his own, thanks to his close relationship with Shliach Rabbi Boruch Mendelson in Kiev and his weeks in camp. Nochum Simcha, a double orphan, lives with his grandmother. For many years, each year when camp ended, Nochum Simcha wanted to undergo bris milah, but his grandmother was afraid of the procedure. It took five years but finally, when he was 14, she gave permission, much to Nochum Simcha's great joy.



Camper Chaim Tchyka putting on tefillin in camp. Color war often brings about real changes in lifestyle. The campers want to win and so they work hard to promote their theme. In the process, they convince themselves too! Examples of color-war themes: Yeshivah (and many children do go away to yeshivos following camp); Tefillin, Shabbos, Davening, Tzitzis, and Bris Milah.



Avraham (Anton), age six. Avraham came from the orphanage to spend three weeks in camp. He was sad when the three weeks were over.



Levi Yitzchok Kabakov, age five, and Yossy Lizhetsky, six. Both live in an orphanage but spend a few exciting weeks every summer at camp.



Ephraim Yarmak saying goodbye to Misha. Misha's mother works nights in a place where children should not go. She often takes Misha along. He loved camp very much and found it very difficult to see it come to an end. "Misha is one of many who live from camp to camp," says Levi Katzman.



Eli can't hold back his tears on the last day of camp.



L-R: Gavriel from Cherson, Yekusiel ("Kusi") Lipskier, Vlad from Kiev, Yosef Yitzchok from Kiev and Anton from Kiev. The campers are all about 13 years old.



The "abrizanya boys." These boys elected to have bris milah after camp was over. The signs proudly proclaim their new Jewish names.



Counselor Sholom Ber Wircberg: He's got the goods!



Shmuly Lipskier (R) with Peretz of Zhmerinka. Peretz decided to have a bris after camp was over. Like many campers, he chose to have his counselor's name. His counselor was Peretz of Zhytomyr. The bond between counselors and campers, many of whom live in broken homes or hostile environments, is very strong.



Counselor Yisroel Levertov (R) with Ariel, the camp's Tanya b'al peh champion. Ariel's mother passed away when he was five. He is very attached to the bochurim counselors. "We got together and bought him a pair of Tefillin for his bar mitzvah, the regular Chabad tefillin, just like we use," says Levi Katzman. "Nothing less would have satisfied him."



Counselor Yosef Paysin serves as sandak during his camper's bris. One of the most important accomplishments of camp is that the young Ukrainian boys see lots of adult male Jews who are good role models for them.



Counselor Nissy Deitsch learns with Motty Chupin, the son of Shliach and camp director Rabbi Reuven Chupin.



L-R: Zalmy Wolf (head counselor for many summers in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and others places); Yosef Paysin (head counselor in Pesach camp 2012); Levi Katzman. Levi explains the success of Ukrainian camps this way: "Ukrainian children, whether the 30 to 40 percent who are orphans or even the children from stable, well-to-do homes, know Yiddishkeit as a negative, as a minus. It makes them different, and, in the eyes of anti-Semites, not as good. They always 'hear about it' from the goyim. Camp is the only place where Yiddishkeit is something positive and they can enjoy being who they are. They can grow in Yiddishkeit instead of trying to hide and suppress it."



Alon (R) and Sasha: frum and not-yet-frum. Alon is from a frum family. Children who are Shluchim or from frum families are good camp friends with the non-frum children and have a good influence on them.



Yekusiel ("Kusi") Lipskier (leading line-up) spent a full year as a dorm counselor in the Chabad orphanage in Dnepropetrovsk, and also many summers and Pesachs with the boys. He has watched many of the boys grow up, while helping and guiding them along the right path. ■