

The Twelfth Jewish Children's Work Commune: A Reflection

By Shifra Cooper (aged 17)

*“A young seed
Waits
Embedded into the warmth
The nourishment supports
Sustains
Centers
Celebrates
The fresh dew drenches the soil
The parched seeds absorb willingly
The sun breaks over the horizon
Hope for the future.”*
-Devorah Bialy (Abby Cope, 16)

“As individuals, we may not change the world, but by creating the world we want to live in at the commune together, we encourage others to do so as well.”
-Joel Freedman (CJ Sharpe, 15)

Many of us learn through experience: through our day to day lives, we understand ourselves, our dreams and the world around us. In a history full of so many centuries of experience, there are many things which we have never even come close to encountering emotionally. This past collection of stories and people are accessible through the writings we discover and the accounts we overhear. Now and then, we are fortunate enough to come upon a story that inspires and challenges us, that pulls us into a new place and invites us towards new emotions. A few months ago, my friends and I were lucky enough to be introduced to the writings of Manya Lipshitz in her book, Time Remembered. Manya's stories of her life growing up on a children's commune in early Soviet Russia, the poems and stories written by her and her friends from the commune in Vitebsk, moved all of us and inspired a project that became more magical and real than we could imagine.

At the beginning of last week, twenty-seven children (ages seven to eighteen) entered the Lasowsky Centre, which had been laboriously transformed into a Russian Mansion in great disrepair. Under the guidance of four full-time teachers and many guests from the 'Village', we not only cleaned our new home, but made it into a replica of the world that Manya describes: a place where people came together to learn and work under a shared philosophy of hope for the immediate future.

This re-enactment, which lasted a week unbroken in full costume and character, was prepared by a team of Jumbles Theatre artists and Naivelt community members who not only helped to build the commune in advance, but supported the entire project through the week: providing us with rations, lessons, advice and even a cow. Over the week, as our group of children grew more stable and close – both in and out of role – we began to take the initiative and work into our own hands. The community between guests,

kommunars and teachers came out of a group of people who knew each other to varying degrees in real life, but who worked through entirely new and riveting experiences that are so outside our normal sphere of existence that they could only bring us closer together.

Through the week, we had many accomplishments; we learned to bake bread, to mend benches, read about Yiddish writers, sing folk songs and debate period political ideas. We created a library (catalogued precariously in three languages – two of which none of us spoke), filled up a kitchen and performed a play. One of our huge accomplishments was the publishing of our journal, titled Kommunar like the journals of the real Twelfth Commune. The journal was organized by the Editorial Board and was comprised of the daily writings of all the children from the commune. Topics ranged from “Dancing and Singing” to “The River” to “How Children Can Change the Future” to poetry and drawings from kommunars of all ages. Through these entires, as in the case of the real journals that we had access to, we get a glimpse of commune life through the eyes of the children living it: a glimpse into their dreams, experiences, struggles and laughter. Reading our journal (now completed and on display in the Art Cottage, Hill 3), will introduce you to the members of the commune, to their guests and to their adventures. At the end of our final presentation, we, the Editorial Board, presented our journals to visiting writer A. Litvin and therefore passed our writings into the hands of Camp Naivelt, carrying them into reality and the weeks of preparation before us.

Having just recently stepped out of the commune and come permanently “Up the Hill” and into my real life, there is still a great deal of adjusting to do. It is difficult to be a part of a different world so quickly. It’s been slightly disorienting and very interesting as well as challenging. I find myself homesick for a place I never ‘really’ went, that hasn’t existed for almost one hundred years and that we created: a place I’ll never, ever go back to. As we changed out of our costumes and into our own clothes again, a friend of mine remarked thoughtfully how she had made new friends that she would never see again.

It is difficult to explain this emotion to someone who did not live it. Although our characters were just that, fictional creations that came out of names alluded to in the writings of a woman that none of us ever met, they were once real people and, more than that, last week they were very real children who we met and came to know. There is a deep camaraderie between us, grounded in fiction, but carried into our own lives along with the lessons and thoughts of a very extraordinary week.

Throughout the Commune Week, I watched my friends, old and new, learn many things. From the small girls who helped my sister make bread, to the boys who learned to make their beds so neatly, to the children up all night with their embroidery – you could see the very real pride in the faces of us all, as we opened the doors to our temporary home on Saturday and led people through our temporary lives to share the permanent products of our learning. When we left the Lasowsky Centre for a world of technology and separate cabins, there are things we left behind. However, there are thoughts and experiences that follow us and that have become part of us. Yes, we said goodbye to the ‘each other’ that

had to be left behind, but we bring them with us in our new-found friends and our writing.

At the end of the week, we children wrote our hopes and dreams for the future in our journal. The things I learned from my life in the Twelfth Jewish Children's Work Commune are too numerous even to understand myself yet, but one great teaching of the week is the importance of dreams. From a building with hay all over the floor to a finished flower embroidered on a pocket, it was a week full of bringing our hopes – both in character and out – into realization through our work together. That is a lesson that is relevant even eighty-eight years later as it teaches us to believe in our own strength and in the power of deep friendships, however unusually formed.

“I dream of children who will never be jealous when they see other peoples’ mothers hug their children. I dream of there being no real need for children’s communes, because everyone has a father and mother to come home to and no one is beyond fixing.”

-Zyame Gutkorovich (Zoe Jenkins, 15)

“I look out at the fields and see into the distance. The commune goes on forever.”

-Margolia Kantorovich (Shifra Cooper, 17)

“I hope the entire world comes together to be just like this commune.”

-Sarah Blazer (Maddie Wintermute, 9)

