

Mrs. B: The Mother of All Camps

by Al Levine (Madrich 1968-69, 71-75, 80)

I was walking on the dock late one night and literally tripped over Richard ("Ruve") Boroditsky and some girl. I said, "what are you doing here?" He replied, "what are you doing here?"

In the spring of 1953, seven-year-old Marty Billinkoff thought he was going to attend B'Nai Brith Camp, but fate intervened. His mother Leona was at the time president of the Talmud Torah PTA. The school's principal - Eddie Yuditsky – was also director of Camp Massad – a new Zionist summer camp located at Winnipeg Beach.

As Leona recalls: "one day Eddie said to me, 'Leona, you have worked so hard for this school all year; why don't you come out to the camp and have a rest in the summer?' So I lost my \$50 deposit at BB and, with my family (Marty was 7, Batya 4 and Arlene was 10), we went out to Massad. I went laughingly as 'camp mother'. That was funny because Yuditsky knew nothing!"

Leona Billinkoff ("Mrs. B" to the hundreds of campers and staff who have known her) kept her job as camp mother for the next 25 years. Through her diligence and the hard work and financial support of her late husband Alex, the Massad dream remained alive. Summer after summer, she arrived at Massad to supervise, comfort, guide, care for homesick children and, more often than not, to cook.

The first summer, she and her family slept in one of the small cooks' cabins, along with Mrs. Yuditsky and her child, and Shoshana Leventhal, who taught arts & crafts. Each of the other cooks' cabins had 5 bunks for 10 campers, and a cot for the counsellor. Leona claims to have slept at least one time in every room on the camp site, even in the Refet (the camp's oldest building) when it was used as a cabin in 1957. Her own cabin across from the Refet was built for her in 1961. As a birthday present one year, Alex gave her a flush toilet. "Most women married for this length of time would have asked for a mink coat," she says with a smile; "I asked for an indoor toilet."

Leona was born in Winnipeg in 1920, the daughter of eastern European immigrants. She was educated at the old Talmud Torah, and later attended university – one of the few Jewish women of her generation to do so. After marrying Alex in 1939 and having three children (Arlene, Marty, and Batya), Leona became active in the Talmud Torah and single-handedly ran the PTA. She credits the establishment of the day school in the 1940s to the late Rabbi Avraham Kravetz, who passionately believed that he had a mission to revive the Jewish culture lost in the Holocaust.

The popularity of Talmud Torah eventually spun off to Massad, making the camp more mainstream and acceptable to the wider Jewish population in Winnipeg.

Leona belonged to small Zionist groups in her earlier years, and was a member of the Menorah Society while at the University of Manitoba. She says that its commitment to Israel “was largely intellectual, and more a matter of ethnic identity than of practical political action.” Massad became Leona’s great Zionist commitment. Soody Kleiman, who was the Head Counsellor in 1953 and who had come to Massad from the Habonim movement, instilled in her a passion for Israel.

Leona and Alex traveled to Israel in 1956 (the first of many trips) where they literally climbed Mt. Zion. She never believed in outright indoctrination, nor has Massad ever practiced this, but the camp has developed and promoted a consciousness and commitment among its campers and staff to Israel and to Zionist ideals.

But Massad always has been more than a Zionist camp. It was a place, Leona says, where “every little boy could learn to dance and every little girl could learn to hammer a nail; where everyone could sing and appear on stage. It was important to teach Hebrew, but you also had to teach ‘menschlichkeit’.” Beyond that, it is the spirit or “ruach” of Massad that transcends the generations and that makes it a special place. Leona believes it was the programs developed by program director Gad Horowitz in the early 1960s which accounts for this.

At most summer camps, children are confined to their own age group, and come into contact with very few other people. At Massad, the campers and counsellors are divided vertically, horizontally and diagonally into teams and groups. The emphasis is on the whole program, and the result is the creation of the Massad family. “Everywhere,” Leona says, “there are Massadniks of different ages drawn together by this common experience.”

The Horowitz years (1961-1966) stand out in Leona’s mind as the camp’s “golden years”. Horowitz, now a retired University of Toronto political science professor was, Leona says, “nuttier than a fruit cake!” Once, as a shtick, Horowitz decided to fake his suicide. An elaborate scenario was devised, right down to the note and noose. “So help me Gad,” Leona recalls telling him, “if that noose slips, I’ll kill you.” But Horowitz had an understanding of people well beyond his age, while he was director (at an annual salary of \$600). “He planned the programs so they fit, from the first night when the counsellors introduce themselves right down to Maccabia,” Leona says. The staff was brilliant and talented,

having come to camp with their plays and songs already written (“they are still singing songs Marty and Arlene wrote”).

Leona particularly remembers a major production of the complex play *Waiting for Godot*. The camp nurse commented to her that there was no way the kids understood it. Yet, two days later, a group of 11-year-olds (Ethan Poskanzer, Ira Udow, Danny Chiel, and Bernie & Brian Migie) performed a brilliant parody of the play that showed they knew exactly what it was about.

By the time Leona knew the campers’ grandparents better than their parents, she knew it was time to move on. Her decision to retire as the camp’s administrator after the summer of 1978 was made reluctantly, but she was comforted by the fact that the children she had watched grow up were now members of the camp’s board. She knew that Massad would be sustained for future generations of Jewish children, maintaining the traditions of the past. Leona has been a Life Member of Camp Massad ever since, and still enjoys visiting the camp whenever possible.

Author’s Note: Everyone has a favorite Mrs. B story. Mine is rather embarrassing. This incident happened in 1974 or 1975 when I was a counsellor. One lunch, Perry Rubinfeld thought it would be amusing to spike my bug juice with tabasco. Once I drank it, my entire body was on fire. I grabbed the nearest thing to me – a large can of dirty water that had been used to wipe down the table. When Perry saw me coming after him, he ran for cover near the administration table. Just as I pitched the water at him, he ducked behind Mrs. B, who unfortunately got the worst of it. “Nu, Al,” she said calmly, “is this how a mensh behaves?” Perry and everyone else in the dining hall were laughing so hard that I did not have a chance to answer her. But now I say to her: “slicha – please forgive me.”

(Written by Massad alumnus Al Levine in 1992 – on the occasion of the alumni reunion that year.)