JDC International Centre for Community Development
Oxford, UK

The Camping Experience:
The Impact of JDC Jewish Summer Camps on Eastern European Jews

Erik H. Cohen

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Executive Summary

- A comprehensive survey conducted (2008-2009) by the JDC International Centre for Community Development (ICCD) among Jews in five Eastern European countries provided data on Jewish background and current attitudes of young adults.
- Based on this data, a comparison is made of young adults who are alumni of Jewish summer camps and those who did not attend summer camp as youth.
- Jewish camping is often part of a larger context: youth from strong Jewish backgrounds and those with additional Jewish educational experiences are more likely to have attended Jewish camp.
- There are also a significant number of youth from the periphery, with little other Jewish educational background, who attended Jewish summer camps in Eastern Europe.
- Campers express stronger Jewish identity as young adults, as documented through a number of indicators related to religious practice, Jewish Peoplehood and attachment to Israel.
- The impact of Jewish summer camps is particularly clear among campers from weak Jewish backgrounds.

Introduction

Jewish communities in Eastern Europe are undergoing a process of rapid change, reorganization and revitalization. More than two decades into the post-Communist era connections have been established with national and international Jewish communities and institutions based in other parts of Europe, North America, and Israel. Following decades of religious and cultural suppression, Jewish educational and cultural programs and settings are being established throughout Central and Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. The American Joint Distribution Committee has been instrumental in supporting Jewish summer camps in Eastern Europe.

As a result of this work, Jewish children growing up in this region today have opportunities which were unavailable to their grandparents—such as attending a Jewish summer camp. Each summer, thousands of youth from across Central and Eastern Europe join Jewish sleep-away camps, where they learn Jewish culture and traditions, gain a sense of Jewish identity and pride, and take part in general outdoor, sports and social activities.[1] This phenomenon, while expanding, is not new. Some of the camps were founded soon after the dismantling of the Communist regimes and have alumni who are now adults.[2] This makes it possible to begin to track the long-term impact of the camps on alumni.

This report looks at the impact of summer camping on Jewish young adults in five Eastern European countries, by comparing sub-groups of those who went to Jewish camp as youth with those who did not.

[1] Today, the camping activities include also winter, fall, and spring editions and altogether contribute to mobilize each year more than 5,000 kids in 46 camps taking place in the region.
See http://jdceurope.org/programs/13/jdc_jewish_camps_in_europe.

[2] One of the best examples is the JDC-Lauder International Jewish Youth Camp Szarvas in Hungary, which started in 1990. Szarvas became the largest and most important camp in the region, attracting children from all over Europe and overseas and offering three editions during summer.
See http://www.szarvascamp.eu/index.php

The survey

From 2008 to 2009, the JDC International Centre for Community Development conducted a survey of Jewish identities and affiliations in five Eastern European countries.[3] Directed by András Kovács and Ildiko Barna, the sample included interviews with 1,280 respondents between the ages of 18 and 60 in: Bulgaria (200), Hungary (405), Latvia (276), Poland (200) and Romania (199). Since people who are completely alienated from the Jewish community—undoubtedly a significant number—are difficult if not impossible to reach in the framework of such a study, the survey population consisted mainly of those with at least some connection to the Jewish community. Thus, the survey yielded a rich and detailed picture of affiliated Eastern European Jewry.

The survey included questions about Jewish family background and education. One of these was whether or not they had attended a Jewish summer camp during their youth. Of the 436 of the respondents of the targeted age range (26-35), two thirds had attended a Jewish summer camp as youth while one third had not.

This report compares sub-populations of those who attended summer camp and those who did not, exploring background factors which may impact likelihood of attending camp and possible impacts of the camp experience on current attitudes and behaviours.

[3] See http://www.jdc-iccd.org/new-detail.aspx?id=492.

Jewish Identity among Campers and Non-campers

Jewish Family Background

The respondents who went to Jewish summer camp were more likely to have come from relatively stronger Jewish backgrounds. Those who have more Jewish ancestors (parents and grandparents) were more likely to have gone to a camp. However, given the prevalence of intermarriage among Eastern European Jews, few of the campers had homogenous Jewish ancestry.

Campers describe their childhood as more Jewish in character: 18% said their upbringing was 'intensively' Jewish, while only 5% of those who didn't attend Jewish camp said so. Campers were more likely to say their families attended synagogue, lit Shabbat candles, fasted on Yom Kippur, held a Passover seder, put a mezuzah on their home and so forth.

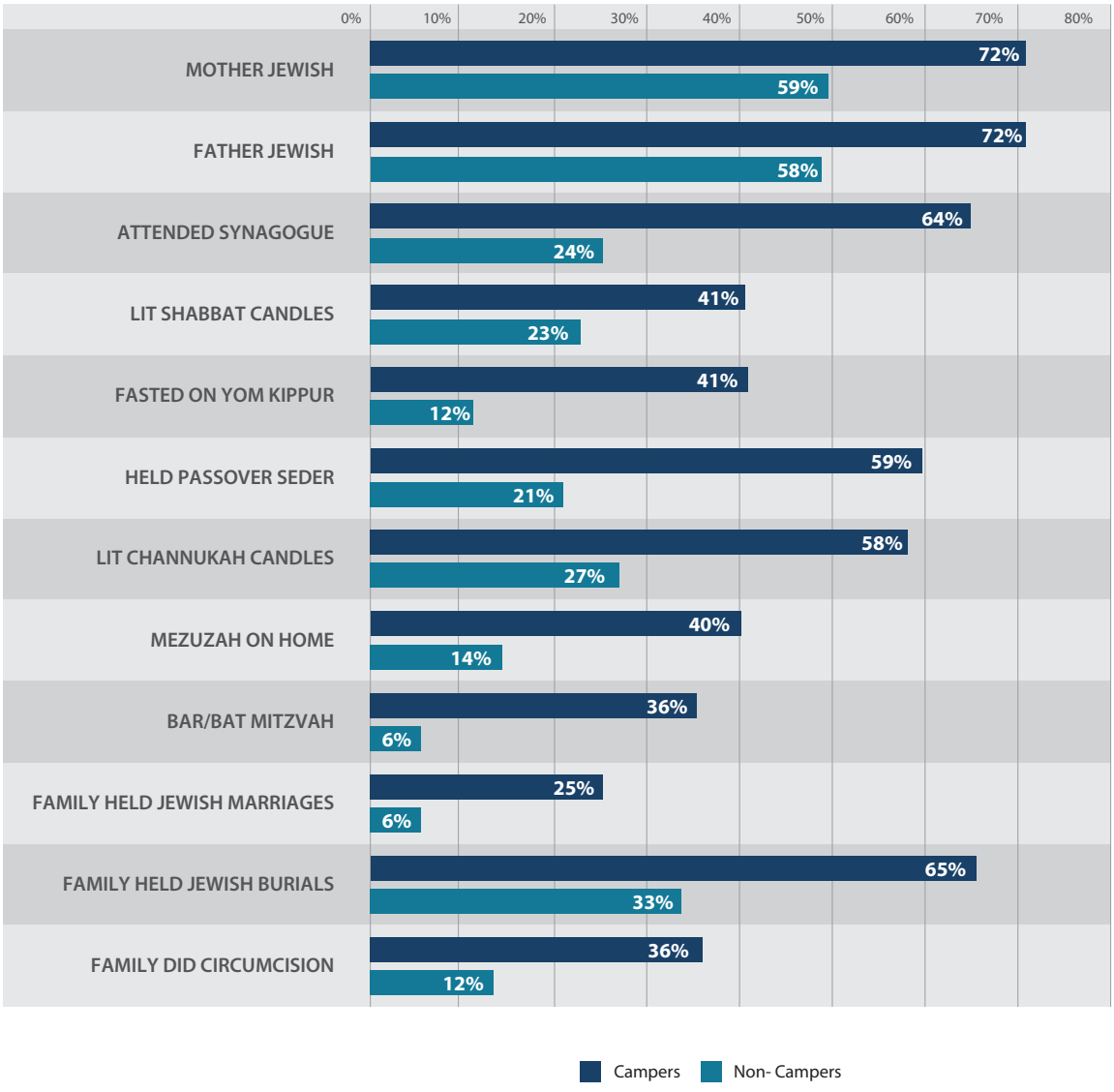

Figure 1: Childhood Jewish background of campers and non-campers

Jewish Education

Participation in a Jewish camp is often not the sole setting of Jewish education. Those who went to a camp were relatively likely to have received additional Jewish education through day schools, supplementary school and/or private lessons.

Interestingly, among both campers and non-campers, private tutors (hired or family members) were the most common type of Jewish teachers. This might result from a lack of formal educational settings. Further, it might reflect a preference for keeping Jewish educational efforts quietly private, given the region's history of anti-Semitism and negative attitudes regarding religion in general entrenched during the Communist regime.

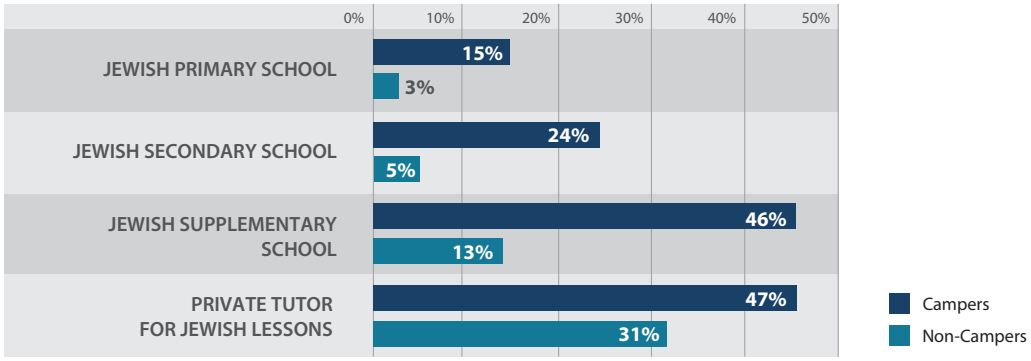

Figure 2: Jewish educational background of campers and non-campers

Jewish Identity as Adults

In many ways, those who went to summer camps as youth expressed stronger Jewish identities as adults.

Interviewees were asked to rate the intensity of their Jewish identity on a scale of 1 to 10; as seen in Figure 3, campers were more likely to put themselves in the top bracket (8 or higher).

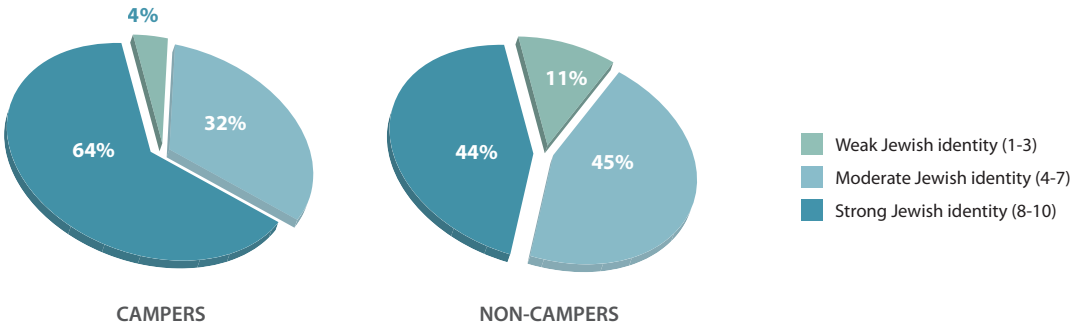

Figure 3: Self-assessed intensity of Jewish identity (scale of 1 to 10)

This self-assessment is borne out in practice: as young adults, the campers are more likely to express connections to Jewish tradition and the Jewish People.

Religious practice. More of the campers have a mezuzah on their home and say that their families have Jewish weddings, circumcise baby boys, celebrate the bar/bat mitzvah of their children, and bury relatives according to Jewish tradition. They are more likely to attend synagogue, at least on the major holidays.

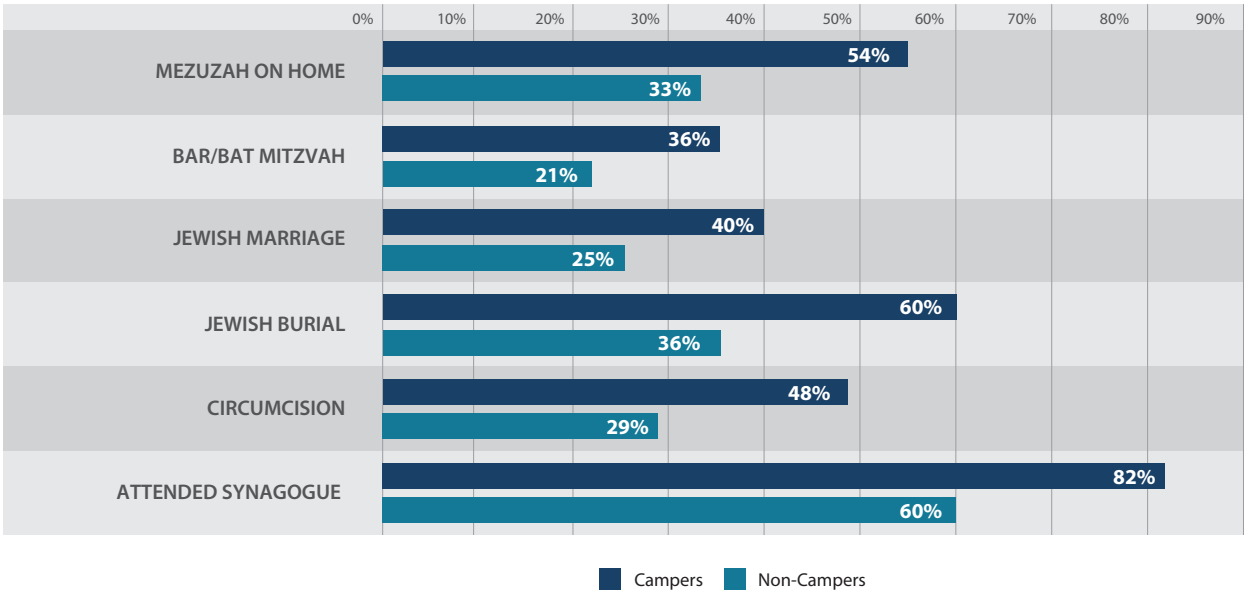

Figure 4: Observance of Jewish rituals in homes of campers and non-campers

Jewish peoplehood. Campers express a stronger connection to the Jewish People in various ways. They are more likely to say that endogamy is important and slightly more likely to be married to a Jew, though intermarriage rates are high among both groups.

Campers placed more value on feeling part of the Jewish people, and hold a stronger sense of responsibility to other Jews. Further, campers had a greater level of participation in the local Jewish community, though it was not a primary leisure activity for either group.

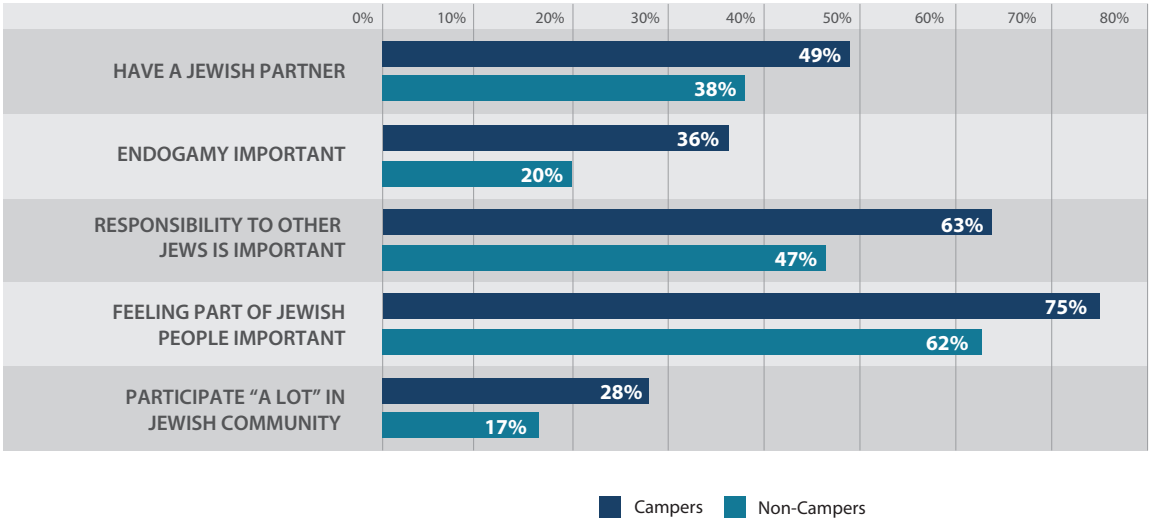

Figure 5: Jewish peoplehood among campers and non-campers

Visiting Israel. It is interesting to note that among the Eastern European Jews, visiting Israel is a far more prevalent expression of Jewish identity than either participation in the local community or observance of traditional religious rituals. Almost all campers had visited Israel at least once, as had two thirds of non-campers. Campers and non-campers alike were far more likely to have joined a group tour (ex: "Israel Experience") than to have attended any type of local Jewish educational setting. Though only a minority of either group reported plans of moving to Israel, those who attended summer camp were somewhat more likely to be considering such a move.

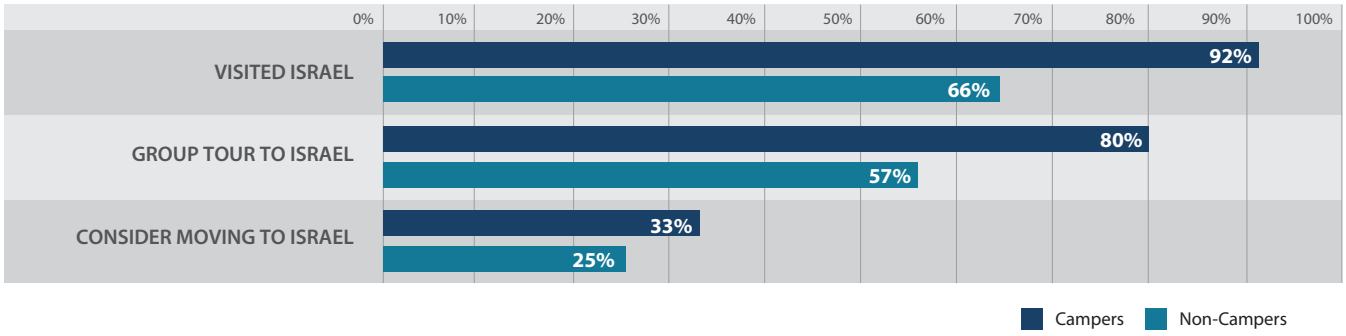

Figure 6: Visits to Israel

Index of Jewish Identity

The stronger identity seen among campers may be attributed to multiple, interconnected factors. Due to the intricacies of the inter-connections between Jewish educational experiences, prior background, and subsequent behaviors and attitudes, it is not easy to determine the specific impact of the summer camp experience. A hypothetical model was designed predicting the links between Jewish summer camping and various aspects of Jewish background and subsequent behaviors (shown in the appendix). Using two statistical methodologies (logistic regression and the AMOS software package) it was found that some forms of Jewish education were more strongly linked to participation in a Jewish summer camp than others.

Using logistic regression to ascertain the extent to which participation in a summer camp can 'predict' subsequent Jewish behaviors, it was found that those who went to a camp were more likely to join group tours to Israel as teens, and to attend synagogue and participate in public meetings related to Jewish issues as adults.

Among the selected variables, membership in Jewish youth organizations was found to be the strongest predictor of summer camp participation. Those who went to a camp were at least five times as likely to also have been members of youth movements. These two activities both take place during pre-teen and teenage years; participation in one encourages participation in the other. Supplementary Jewish education (Talmud Torah or Sunday school) was the next strongest predictor; students of such extra-curricular Jewish lessons were up to three times as likely to go to a camp. In turn, camp participation is a fairly strong predictor of synagogue attendance as an adult. Links between camp attendance and other behaviors and attitudes are less clear; again, it is difficult to separate the impact of the camp from other influences.

To summarize and synthesize these findings, an index of Jewish background was designed based on 14 items pertaining to religion of family members (parents & grandparents); religious observance in childhood home, and Jewish education received.[4] In this way, respondents were divided into three groups: those with weak, medium or strong Jewish background. Of the whole population of 26-35-year-olds, 34% had **weak** Jewish background (positive on 5 or fewer of the 14 items), 42% had **medium** Jewish background (between 6-9 items) and 23% had **strong** Jewish background (between 10 and 14 items). This index indicated differences between countries. The young adults in Hungary and Romania had relatively stronger Jewish backgrounds; in these two countries about a third of the population was in the highest category. In Poland, in contrast, only 4% were in this category and 70% were in the weakest category.

There was a distinct difference in the percentage of individuals in each category that had gone to summer camp. Among those from the strongest Jewish background, the vast majority were summer camp alumni, as were almost three quarters of those from a moderate background. Less than half of those from a weak Jewish background had gone to a Jewish summer camp.

Table 1: Typology of Jewish background and summer camp participation

	Strong level of Jewish background	Medium level of Jewish background	Weak level of Jewish background
Campers	94%	74%	42%
Non-campers	6%	26%	58%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Given that participants in Jewish educational settings tend to have at least moderately strong Jewish identities from the outset, Jewish youth from the 'outer periphery' of the Jewish community are difficult to recruit, despite concerted and repeated efforts to reach them into the community through such educational programs.

Reaching the Periphery

Jewish Summer Camping among Eastern European Jews of Weak Jewish Background

While those from stronger backgrounds were relatively more likely to attend a camp, there were also many participants who declared having moderate or even weak Jewish backgrounds. Particularly for those with only a few other Jewish inputs, the summer camp played a proportionally greater role. What impact did the camp have on them?

To explore this, a comparison was made considering only those with the weakest Jewish

[4] The 14 items were: (1-6) religion of the two parents and four grandparents; (7) self-assessed intensity of Jewish character of childhood home; (8) fasting on Yom Kippur in their childhood home; (9) bar/bat mitzvah observed in childhood home; (10) brit milah (ritual circumcision) observed in childhood home; (11) Jewish primary school; (12) Jewish secondary school; (13) Jewish supplementary school; (14) Jewish tutor.

background. Of the 139 individuals who fit this category, 58 had attended a Jewish camp and 80 had not.

This finding is interesting in itself. It may have been expected that within this group there would be fewer who had been to camp. But even families with very little connection to Judaism sometimes decide for various reasons to send their children to a Jewish summer camp. The camp's impact on these youth, who grew up on the periphery of the Jewish community, is of great interest.

Campers had more positive attitudes on a range of issues compared to the non-campers. It may be posited for this group that the camp had a large impact. They gave a higher assessment of the intensity of their current Jewish identity, despite the fact that they came from the same type of family background

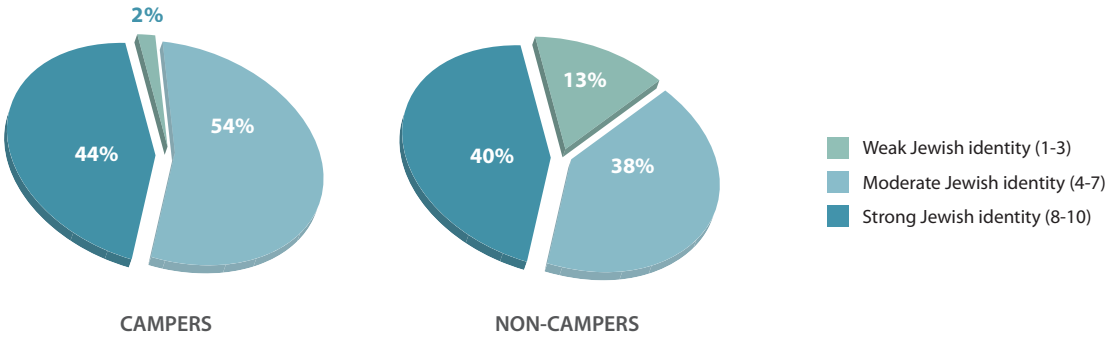

Figure 7: Self-assessed intensity of current Jewish identity among campers and non-campers of weak Jewish background (scale of 1 to 10)

Further, campers were more likely to spend time in the local Jewish community, and more than three times as likely to spend 'a lot' of their leisure time in Jewish community activities. After the intensive (and generally fun) experience of living in an all-inclusive Jewish community for the few weeks of a summer camp, participants may be inspired to seek out Jewish community on a longer-term basis (Cohen et al. 2011; Sales & Saxe 2004). Campers put more value on feeling part of the Jewish People and a sense of responsibility for fellow Jews. They were more likely to be married to or living with a Jewish partner and to value endogamy, though intermarriage is widespread and largely accepted among both groups (and indeed the Eastern European Jewish population as a whole). Interestingly, a survey of summer camps in the US also found camp alumni to be 10% more likely to have married a Jew (Cohen et al. 2011).

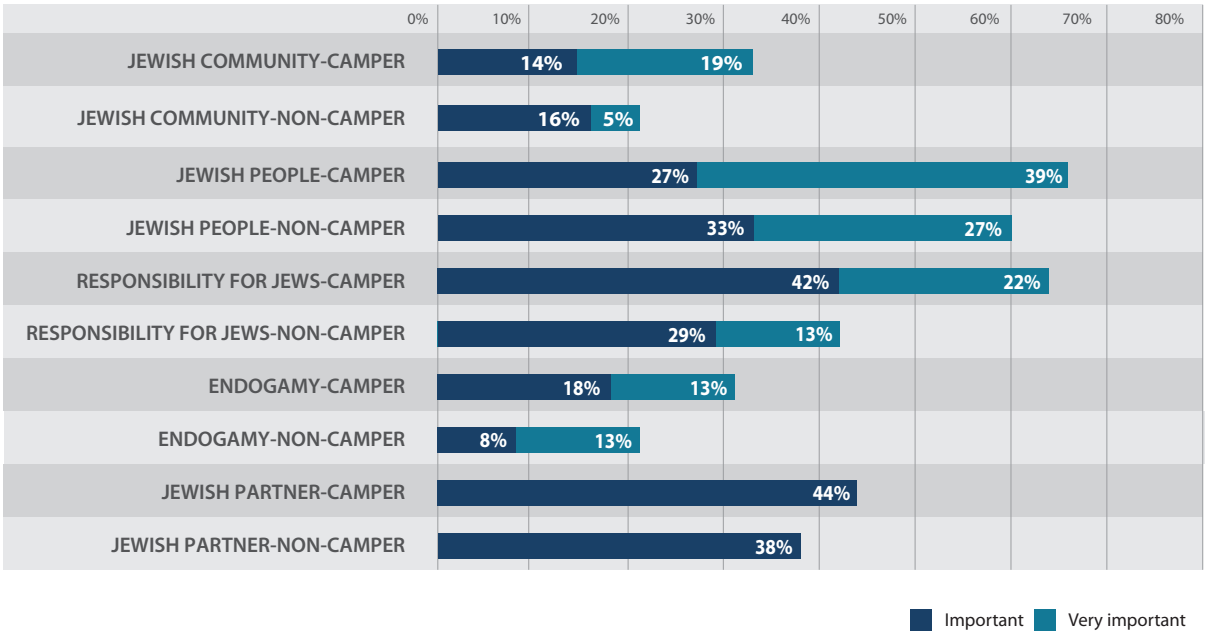

Figure 8: Jewish identity among campers and non-campers of weak Jewish background

Those who had gone to a summer camp were more likely to have a mezuzah on their home and to observe Jewish burial customs. Concerning other religious rituals (keeping kosher, bar/bat mitzvah, circumcision) there was little or no difference. Similarly, the summer camp experience had no impact on core religious beliefs, such as faith in God.

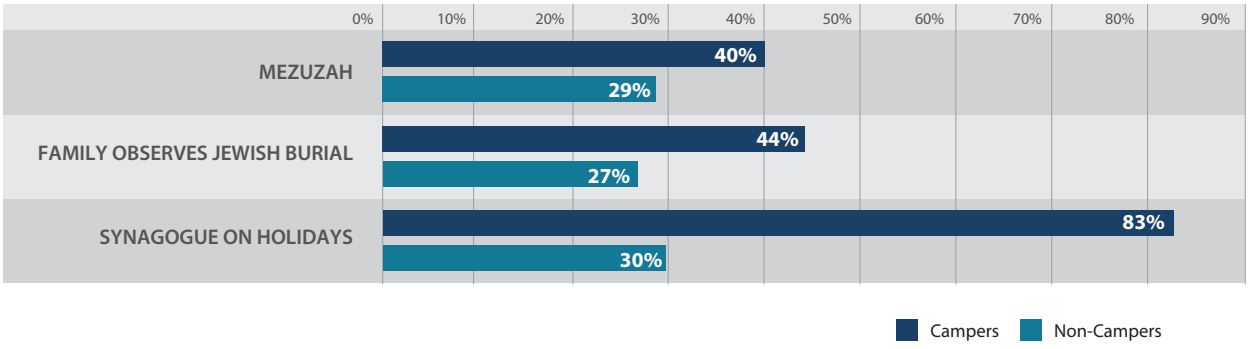

Figure 9: Jewish ritual observance as adults among campers and non-campers of weak Jewish background

The connection to Israel was also stronger among campers; more of them had gone to Israel and considered moving there. There were no significant differences in political positions related to Israel between campers and non-campers.

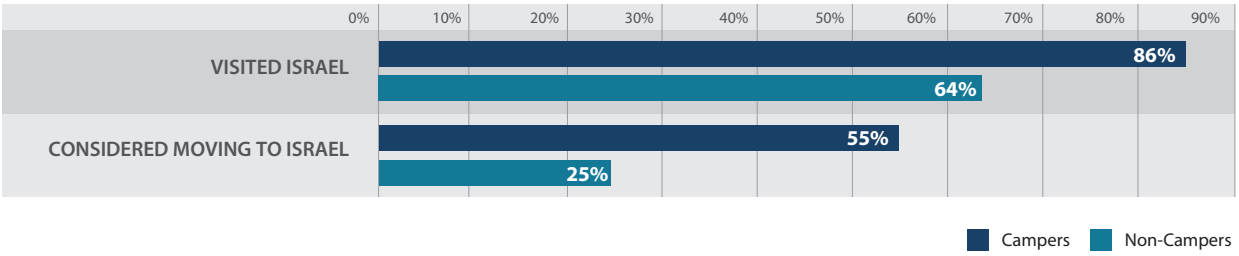

Figure 10: Connection to Israel among campers and non-campers of weak Jewish background

Conclusion

One of the goals of this analysis was to assess the specific impact of the summer camp on the alumni as young adults. While caution must be taken in ascribing cause and effect, there seems to be clear correlation between summer camp attendance and current Jewish identity, particularly notable among those of weak Jewish backgrounds.

As it has been well documented among other populations, participation in Jewish summer camp is influenced by other aspects of family, community and schooling: "the more, the more" as phrased by Paul Ritterband (1986). The more intensely parents and grandparents are connected to Judaism, the more likely they are to enroll their children in Jewish educational settings; the more early Jewish education children receive, the more likely they are to continue in advanced Jewish education; greater cumulative Jewish education in turn tends to be related to involvement in the Jewish community and connection to Israel as adults. The development of Jewish identity begins at birth and continues throughout life. Jewish summer camp is one such experience among others preceding and following it, each adding to the cumulative result.

For those who had a relatively rich Jewish background, the experience of a Jewish camp reinforces and possibly strengthens already existing dispositions. The specific impact of Jewish camping in this kind of context is not easy to measure in isolation, as it is part of a larger whole.

The unique impact of the summer camp is clearer among participants who had relatively weak Jewish backgrounds. The data analysis shows a clear and quite strong impact. As it is quite well known, this type of participant is difficult to find and recruit. However, the results indicate that efforts to reach the periphery of the community are justified.

Research in other regions has repeatedly shown that the sleep-away Jewish camp offers a specific and unique contribution to Jewish education and socialization. Unlike many other settings, participants in an overnight camp are immersed in an all-Jewish environment (Karesh & Hurvitz 2006). This type of fun, informal educational experience takes place at a critical time of personal and social development, helping youth create "memories of a Jewishly (sic) positive adolescence" (Cohen, S. 1998: 28). Further, campers often become counselors, extending the experience into late adolescence. As they gain leadership skills, they may take on other roles in Jewish community organizations (Arian 2004; Cohen, B. 2005; Keysar & Kosmin 2004). The impact of the summer camp (among other inputs) has been found to extend into young adulthood (Aron, Zeldin & Lee 2005; Cohen & Kotler-Berkowitz 2004; Keysar & Kosmin 2004; Kosmin & Keysar 2000; Lorge & Zola 2006; Sales & Saxe 2004).

While there has been much research on Jewish summer camps in other parts of the Jewish world, until now little has been known about the camp experiences of Eastern European Jews. This pioneering survey affirms the role of the summer camp as part of a Jewish education, and its unique contribution, particularly on youth from the periphery of the community.

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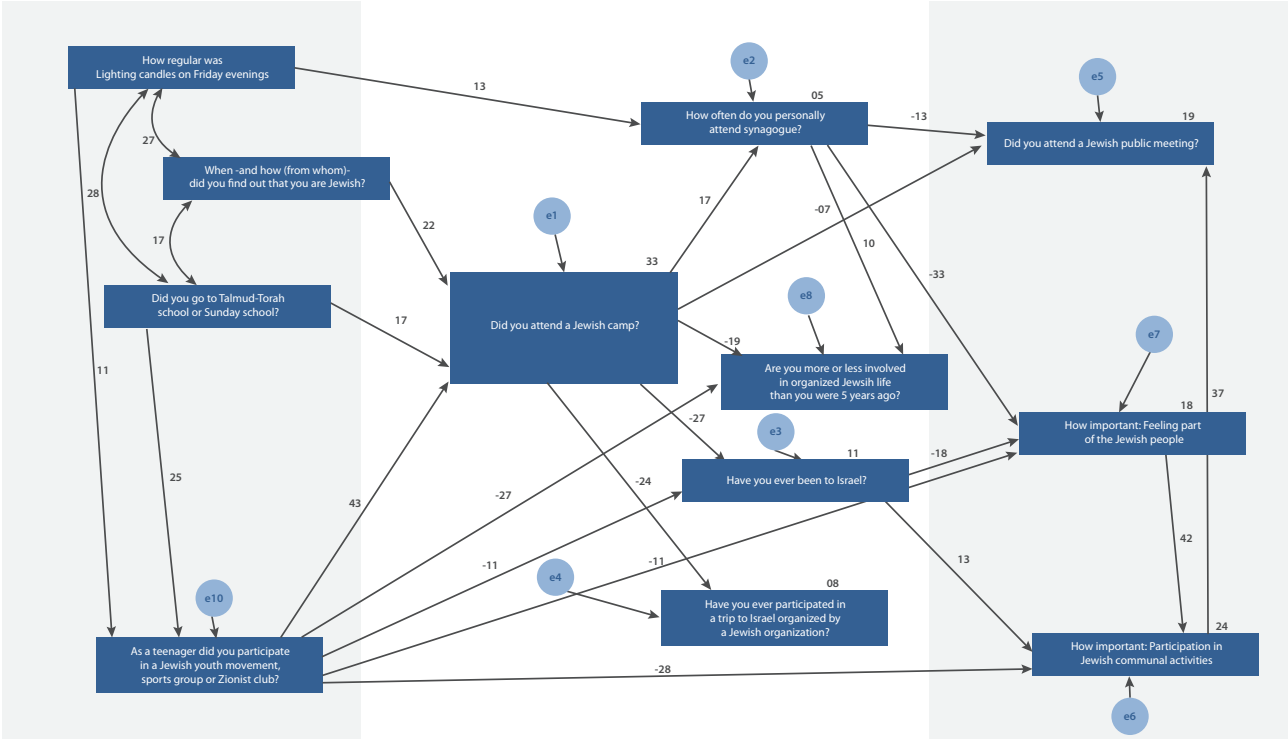
Appendix

AMOS Model of Jewish camping, background and Jewish identity as an adult



The AMOS graphic software package enables the researcher to create a hypothetical model of impacts and outcomes, and to calculate the degree of connection between items. This model is a partial one; out of 90 possible links, 41 are predicted. It confirms that participation in a Jewish youth movement is the strongest predictor of summer camp participation (though in terms of an individual's life history it is likely that youth movement membership follows participation in a summer camp). In turn, going to a Talmud Torah or Sunday school is a strong predictor of youth movement involvement. Links with other behaviors and attitudes are weak.

Distribution tables of selected variables

By Jewish background *(In absolute figures)*

	Strong	Medium	Weak	Total
Total	94	172	139	405
Country				
Bulgaria	12	36	20	68
Hungary	45	49	49	143
Latvia	13	45	18	76
Poland	2	14	37	53
Romania	22	28	15	65
Total	94	172	139	405
Jewish Camp				
Yes	87	127	58	272
No	6	44	80	130
Total	93	171	138	402

Respondents of weak Jewish background *(In absolute figures)*

	Campers	Non campers	Total
Total	58	80	138
Country			
Bulgaria	12	8	20
Hungary	19	30	49
Latvia	4	14	18
Poland	16	20	36
Romania	7	8	15
Total	58	80	138

Jewish background *(In row percentages)*

	Strong	Medium	Weak	Total	N
Total	23	42	34	100	405
Country					
Bulgaria	18	53	29	100	68
Hungary	31	34	34	100	143
Latvia	17	59	24	100	76
Poland	4	26	70	100	53
Romania	34	43	23	100	65
Jewish Camp					
Yes	87	127	58	272	
No	6	44	80	130	

Weak Jewish background *(In row percentages)*

	Campers	Non campers	Total	N
Total	42	58	100	138
Country				
Bulgaria	60	40	100	20
Hungary	39	61	100	49
Latvia	22	78	100	18
Poland	44	56	100	36
Romania	47	53	100	15

The JDC International Center for Community Development (JDC-ICCD) was founded in 2005. It aims to identify, understand and analyze ongoing changes and transformations taking place in Europe and Latin America that impact particularly Jewish Communities.

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