



In 1962 Phil Andron, business manager, ably assisted by Donald Newman, an active member of the Ramah Wisconsin Committee, were involved in maintenance projects at camp.

3 Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and National Ramah Commission

I was involved with Ramah from its inception as secretary of the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues in 1946. I signed the original agreement for the Chicago Council to purchase the facility which later became Camp Ramah.

The camp was purchased for \$50,000 - \$20,000 down and 20 years to pay the balance at 5% interest. An agreement was made with the Teachers Institute of Jewish Theological Seminary in which they would furnish the educational and religious program for the camp and the Council, through a committee, would look after the financial aspects as well as develop community support from rabbis and synagogues to insure initial enrollment in Ramah.

The camp opened in 1947 with educator Henry Goldberg as first director. He created a wonderful edu-

gational and religious program with excellent staff despite the poor facilities. The cook quit in mid-season forcing educational staff to



Campers in the 1960 season dive into Lake Buckaton.

become directly involved in preparing and serving food which they had not been hired to do. It became apparent that running a successful camp with proper facilities for housing campers, as well as kitchen and dining facilities, tennis courts, ball fields, etc. was important if the camp was to accomplish its purpose.

My fraternity brother Reuben Kaufman appointed me in the second year of Ramah to raise funds for counselors' salaries. The president of camp was also president of United Synagogue Region, and that is how I became Chairman and President of the Ramah Committee. I spent 10 years in this position. When I became Chairman of Ramah I had to learn to love children from other communities, like Detroit, Kansas City, Minneapolis, St. Louis, as well as those who came to Ramah from my congregation Rodfei Zedek.

Originally Ramah was supervised through a committee of the Chicago Council of Conservative Synagogues. This was changed and a Ramah Committee was given the authority to operate the camp and take over the financial problems. At the suggestion of Moshe Davis and Sylvia Ettenberg of the Teachers Institute of the Seminary, an agreement was reached that every camper should pay full tuition. Where parents were unable to cover the total cost, the congregation where the camper was affiliated would pay the difference in scholarship.

A small group consisting of myself, Sam Specter, and Joe Kanter formed a group to raise scholarship funds to be distributed at the discretion of the camp director in those cases where synagogues were unable to raise sufficient funds or an individual camper had special financial needs. We became known as the "Syndicate". This system enabled Ramah over the years to become viable financially.

I visited the camp for the first time in the summer of 1948. I learned first hand of the physical problems of the camp, which was located on swampy, uneven land with no ball fields and no electricity except a tempermental generator. Ramah was infested with mosquitoes and other bugs. It was wild country.

The camp in 1947-48 could only accommodate 100 campers. Our committee felt that expansion to 180 campers was necessary for the camp to be viable financially.

It was also necessary to improve the food service. The committee

authorized the building of a new dining room and kitchen. This was done at a low cost and with funds borrowed from the National United Synagogue organization. It was also necessary to build bunks to accommodate additional campers.

Arrangements were made to have electricity brought in from the outside to eliminate reliance on our generator. The local electric company required us to obtain rights to pass electric lines over other people's property. I contacted all the owners about acquiring those rights so the company could run lines into camp. Wells had to be dug. I made arrangements for the equipment to dig the wells and to get the pumps. We also had to level the ball fields and build tennis courts. This required raising funds from individuals on our committee and others. We needed to engage a business manager to supervise the camp's business activities and to plan its future. My special interest was developing the business end and I recall the excellent work done by Phil Andron and Phyllis Hofman Waldmann who were greatly helped by a lay member of our committee, Donald Newman.

I visited camp with Dr. A. P. Schoolman who ran Cejwin Camp in New York and was a great educator. Plans were made to build three double bunks for girls east of the dining hall, and bunks for boys on the west side facing the lake. He also gave us plans used by Cejwin for building double bunks. Later a group of our committee financed the building of a beautiful library on the lakefront.

To accomplish this required the cooperation of a wonderful committee whose members made Ramah their major interest. We worked with great directors including Hillel Silverman, Lou Newman, Seymour Fox, Jerry Abrams, David Mogliner and Bert Cohen. David Soloff succeeded Bert Cohen as director of Ramah Wisconsin.

Joe Levine, who succeeded me as President of the Ramah Wisconsin Committee was a most generous person who was responsible for many important improvements in camp. He built much needed facilities for housing staff, and for kitchen and maintenance help. No task at camp was too difficult for him to accomplish. His family, through an endowment fund he established, built a beautiful building which enabled us to develop a meeting room for adult-education programs. I succeeded Abe Birenbaum as President of the National Ramah Commission but

maintained my interest in the Wisconsin Ramah Camp.

Irving Robbin, who succeeded Joe Levine as President of Ramah Wisconsin, was most devoted to the camp and to solving problems as they arose. During his administration a beautiful synagogue was built in memory of Rabbi Isaac Bonder, a former member of the camp staff. Additional camper bunks were built along with new tennis courts. Irving Robbin's wife Jan became interested in supporting a program within Ramah for youngsters who had learning disabilities called the Tikvah program. Irving served the camp for many years. He was succeeded by Al Silberman, a former camper.

The growth of Ramah was a result of the foresight of lay leaders who devoted their efforts to its economic viability.

A National Ramah Commission was established to supervise the programs for all camps and coordinate the local Ramah committees under the direction of Bernard Resnikoff, who was executive director.

Maxwell Abbell of Chicago, who became president of the United Synagogue of America, was the first president of the National Ramah Commission. Bert Weinstein and I represented our local Ramah Committee. Bert succeeded me as National President.

The Poconos Camp Ramah was organized and purchased by Abe Birenbaum as the second Ramah Camp. He became the second President of the National Ramah Commission. A camp in Connecticut was a third camp; Camp Ramah in California, a fourth camp. The camps grew in popularity in the Conservative Movement and the demand for space for campers was beyond our ability to provide room, so several camps were purchased in a short time, including one in the Berkshires. The Connecticut camp was sold and a camp in New England was purchased.

My relationship with the other Ramah camps was of extreme importance to our Ramah Movement. After several years of rapid expansion it became apparent that Ramah had reached a financial crisis in its operation. The Jewish Theological Seminary was most helpful in helping finance purchase of camps and for physical improvements. But the Movement owed the Seminary \$1.5 million. The Seminary would no longer permit camps to borrow from its funds and also barred individual camps from raising funds from their constituents. But the camps

desperately needed money for repairs. Most of the facilities purchased were old and depreciation set in.

It was necessary to constantly repair and replace facilities if the camps were to continue to operate and meet health standards, etc.

At one meeting of the Ramah Commission in the Poconos Camp, all the camp presidents were in great despair over this situation. I made a motion that the National Ramah Commission should appoint a committee to meet with the chancellor of the Seminary and request that our Ramah Camps be given authority to meet their urgent cash needs by fundraising. At that time the vice-chancellor of the Seminary was Rabbi Stanley Schachter, formerly of Chicago and a good friend of Bert Weinstein and myself. Arrangements were made for a committee to approach Rabbi Gerson Cohen, then chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, to discuss the problems and to ask for permission to raise funds for our camps. This permission was granted provided we did not in any way interfere with the Seminary fundraising campaign.

We immediately hired a fundraiser. The Wisconsin camp needed additional kitchen and dining room facilities. Fundraising took place and a beautiful kitchen and dining room were added to the Wisconsin facility.

I was also involved in a fundraiser held for the Berkshire camp at the Jewish Museum in New York, which was successful. The Poconos camp raised substantial funds to put the camp in fine shape. The New England camp (Palmer) was also having financial problems and reorganizing their committee. Bert Weinstein and I were very helpful to them.

The camps now no longer depend on the Seminary solely to meet their capital needs.

The success of the Ramah camps was also substantially the result of the selection of directors of the camps. Rabbi Hillel Silverman was the second director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin and the first that I had contact with. He was a graduate of the Jewish Theological Seminary. A young, handsome athletic type, Silverman presented a glamorous image to the campers. He stressed color wars, and leagues which he maintained represented healthy competition. I became the liaison between him and the Chicago community. He was struggling to run a camp which lacked facilities for housing athletics and I offered my help and advice to him.

He was succeeded by Lou Newman. Lou Newman needed a lay committee to help him change the philosophy of the camp and its program. As Chairman, I became aware of his plans to eliminate the competitive sports program. In the summer of 1951, Lou Newman announced that campers would no longer go by bunk to a prescribed number of activities. It was now up to the individual camper. Campers were given a choice of activities. This policy enabled the individual camper to select the activities which interested him/her.

Lou Newman and I were involved in making plans for expansion of Ramah to accommodate more campers. We visited other Eagle River children's camps for ideas. We engaged an architect from Chicago to develop the building of a Beth Am which had space for an office, indoor basketball court, stage and place for activities for the entire camp in inclement weather. It also included building three double girls bunks. Lou Newman developed a program for Ramah that was most successful. I enjoyed my relationship with Lou and we became good friends.

He was succeeded by Rabbi Seymour Fox who had been Lou Newman's Head Counselor. He was a Chicagoan and was well known in the community. He had the ability to inspire young people along educational and religious lines. He was deeply interested in developing Ramah in Wisconsin. During his administration the camp grew from a population of 150 to 250. It was during his years of serving as director that the buildings planned earlier were completed. He and I were involved along with our Ramah Committee in raising the funds needed to pay for these projects. He was a great educator and had the ability to work well with lay people as well as campers and staff. We became very close friends and maintained this relationship over the years.

When he left Wisconsin, Rabbi Fox went to New York as head of the Jewish Theological Seminary Teacher's Institute. He was most active along with the National Ramah Commission in acquiring additional camps for our Movement. As president of the National Ramah Commission, I was also involved in the purchase of the New England Camp in Palmer, Massachusetts, the Berkshire Camp in New York, the Nyack Camp in New York, and the Ramah Camp in Utterson, Canada. He also inspired the establishment of the Ramah Israel Seminar for entering high school seniors. We also built an eight-room guest house

during the period in which he was director.

Rabbi Seymour Fox was succeeded by Rabbi Jerry Abrams. Rabbi Abrams lacked business knowledge for operating a camp and needed someone to help him adjust to camp operations. He needed me for advice and counsel. He became most successful in fulfilling his position as director in the educational and religious area. With help from myself and others he became a successful director. After two years as director of Ramah Wisconsin he left to become director of Schoolman's Cejwin Camp.

Jerry Abrams was succeeded by Rabbi David Mogilner, another one of Seymour Fox's understudies. David was a most effective director and the Wisconsin Ramah Committee wanted him to reside in Chicago for a full-time position. He declined and decided to go back East. He became director of the Ramah camp in the Poconos. Later he became National Director of Ramah.

David Mogilner was succeeded by Rabbi Burton Cohen who was a Chicagoan and assumed a full-time position with the establishment of a Chicago office for the camp. He served Ramah Wisconsin as director for 14 years and was appointed National Director of Ramah after the death of David Mogilner.

Rabbi David Soloff succeeded Rabbi Burton Cohen as director of Camp Ramah in Wisconsin in 1975. He has now served Ramah Wisconsin for over 18 years. As a director, he has instituted many innovations that have made the camp one of the finest in the country and in our Ramah Movement. I became deeply involved with him in many ways. I supported the raising of funds for a much needed dining room and kitchen expansion. This project required a large sum of money to be raised. Before the campaign took place, people familiar with Ramah warned me it could not be accomplished. The campaign was a success and was supported by our committee members and friends of Ramah, and especially Rabbi Soloff. He has maintained a close relationship with the far-flung communities like Minneapolis, St. Paul, St. Louis and Kansas City, who send us campers. His relationship with the Chicago area committee is super and large numbers of campers come from our leading synagogues and day schools.

I was most helpful in raising funds for a second guest house and in

getting the local Ramah committee to support it. Over the years I have been supportive of scholarships for Ramah campers who could not get sufficient help from their synagogues. I was especially helpful in 1991 to Rabbi Soloff who needed substantial funds due to the recession. In 1992 the Wisconsin Ramah Camp had its largest enrollment of more than 430 campers. Almost 80% of the staff had been Ramah Wisconsin campers.

The Jewish Theological Seminary and Ramah have an excellent relationship. The initial success of Wisconsin spurred interest in developing additional Ramah sites.

In 1980 the Jewish Theological Seminary launched a building project for a new library, which included an addition to the Teachers Institute which had allotted space for a National Ramah office. Shoshanah and I gave a substantial contribution to the Seminary for dedicating the office in the name of "Lou and Shoshanah Winer" for which we are very proud.

In the Spring of 1982, the National Ramah Commission authorized the establishment of the Bert B. Weinstein National Ramah Staff Training Institute. Each year during the December vacation period, the Institute meets in various resorts in the Catskills in New York State or at the Ramah Camp in Ojai, California. The purpose of these retreats is to bring experts in various fields to provide special training for our counselors to improve their ability to deal with campers. I became chairman of the fundraising effort to make it possible for us to endow this activity. Our good friend Irving Robbin was my co-chairman. We engaged a professional fundraiser and put out a brochure which we sent to our committee and friends of our dear Bert Weinstein, of blessed memory. Over \$80,000 was raised. In addition the Seminary had an additional \$75,000 for Ramah which was added to make this Weinstein endowment sufficient to operate without help of the National Ramah treasury.

Rabbi Sheldon Dorph, Executive Director of the Ramah Camps, advised us that counselors in attendance felt they would like to attend a second training session in the Spring during the college break. Rabbi Dorph suggested that an endowment fund of \$100,000 was needed for another institute. My wife Shoshanah and I volunteered to give

\$50,000 to National Ramah to create a "Louis and Shoshanah Winer National Training Institute for Senior Staff and Division Heads." An additional \$35,000 was raised from our friends and supporters of Ramah from various communities.

The first seminar was held in May 1992 for 25 staff and division heads at Ramah in the Berkshires. It allowed the Movement to bring together staff from all the camps to share program ideas and build a national sense of pride and purpose which would enhance all camps during their summer program. This contribution represents my commitment not just to a single Ramah camp but to furthering the educational opportunities of senior staff in all camps. I get particular pleasure knowing Ramah's program will be greatly improved by the establishment of this training seminar, a program which is a living program.

The Ramah Movement is now in its 47th year. In my opinion the bringing together of young people in a totally Jewish environment for a summer program has proved to be the most successful education program ever devised. One of the results has been the creation of friendships among the campers that have lasted over the years. A large percentage of campers become staff at our camps and end up as rabbis and teachers at our Jewish Theological Seminary, as well as lay leaders in our synagogues and communities. We are now getting second generation family as campers and staff.

In reviewing the development of Ramah nationally and locally I feel that the lay persons in our local committee and those who served the National Ramah Commission as presidents and lay leaders, namely Abe Birnbaum, Bert Weinstein, Edward Joseph, Saul Shapiro, Al Soffa, Sander and Adina Mendelson, Barney Goldhar, James Schlesinger, Mort Wachs, Irving Robbin, Al Kopin and myself built, with the help of the Jewish Theological Seminary, an organization that is a great influence on Jewish life in our country. Without lay effort I doubt whether Ramah would have reached the heights of success it has had. I have the highest praise for Maxwell Abbell, Abe Birnbaum, Joseph Levine, Bert Weinstein and Irving Robbin, all of blessed memory, for making it possible to develop Jewish youth for leadership roles in our communities.

In my relationship with the directors of Ramah and other professionals and educators I realized that they needed to know how to get along

with lay persons, and to utilize their abilities to help operate the camps. This involved explanations of the use of budgets and how budgets could be helpful in enabling the camp to operate on a viable basis. Lay committee members could be helpful in solving problems of maintenance and construction. The lay persons had to learn about the educational processes of the camp and the need for facilities so the camp could operate smoothly on a business basis.

Without cooperation on both sides, the camps could not carry out the programs for which they were organized.



Dancing in the Kikar in 1960 attracted campers as it does today. Buildings in the background have since been moved to other locations.



1960 season campers were as sports minded as today's campers who have more tennis courts and ball fields to play on.