

NOT BORN AGAIN

Elly, making up for the breakfast she'd been too nervous to consume before our departure, sat next to me on the Greyhound bus eating the last of the sandwiches Mama packed for our trip. We were somewhere in farm country heading upstate in New York toward the summer camp on Lake Canandaigua where we were being sent. More than three hours had passed since Mama put us on the bus and we were both tired of the long ride, impatient to get there. I was bored with the sci-fi book I began to read about an earth-colony boarding school on Mars. Elly, nearly done with her pile of Archie and Donald Duck comics, was fidgety and grumpy.

Staring out the window at the passing cars and landscape, I noticed little white on red signs, each containing a short phrase, grouped along the roadside. Read together in sequence, the signs delivered a brief message.

Look, El, I said, and read out loud:

The whale
Put Jonah
Down the hatch
But coughed him up
Because he scratched
Burma-Shave

What's Burma-Shave? Elly asked me.

I told her that I guessed it was some kind of shaving stuff, maybe foreign.

Over the next couple of hours, we passed many more of these back-road signs – catchy ads that I quickly learned by heart:

Don't put your arm out
Quite so far
It might go home
In another car
Burma-Shave

He played the sax
Had no B.O.
But his whiskers scratched
So she let him go
Burma-Shave

Burma-Shave
Was such a boom
They passed the bride
And kissed the groom

The Burma-Shave signs eased our boredom and made Elly smile. She was eight years old, four years younger than me, and this two-week camp stay was her first time away from home for longer than an overnight at a relative's. The two of us had been born in Bolivia, where our parents had fled the Nazis from their native Austria. During our two years in the U.S. she'd learned to speak English very quickly. Her foreign accent was almost unnoticeable, unlike mine, though she was still sometimes thrown off by puns and language jokes. But she also really enjoyed figuring them out and

laughed "Oh, I get it!" when she did. She would remember these Burma-Shave poems so she could repeat them to Papa, she declared.

My sister's improved mood, however, did not stop her from repeatedly asking me "when are we going to get there?" I knew she was anxious and a bit scared. But, even though as her older brother I didn't want to admit it to her, so was I. I had never been to a sleep-away camp either. I had had rheumatic fever when I was small in Bolivia, which led to a heart murmur, and my parents didn't allow me to participate in potentially strenuous activities. And I liked reading books. I was better at losing myself in adventure stories and fantasy worlds than playing sports with children my age. I didn't really know if I would fit in and like the camp routine.

In truth, I had never expected that what Elly and I called "the camp thing" would happen. Near the end of school that year the temperature and humidity in New York City had climbed fast - into the upper 90s. By mid June it reached nearly 100°. Our parents wanted to take us out into the cooler countryside, but they hardly had any money. Mama was unemployed and Papa, earned around \$70 a week working for a plumber on St. Nicholas Avenue - not enough to pay for a family vacation. And definitely not enough for my sister and me to be at a camp!

When we all came to New York in 1950, we'd moved into a four-room, top floor, railroad apartment in a five-story walkup on Second Avenue in Yorkville. The rent was cheap, but we had to share an outside hallway toilet with an old lady who lived next door, and we had to be satisfied with a sink, for our personal wash-ups and for dishes, and a bathtub in the kitchen. Our parents slept on a pullout couch in the living room on the street side, while

Elly and I each had a windowless room, with linoleum-covered floors that sagged in the middle. Unwillingly, we also shared our space with roaches of all sizes, tough bugs that flaunted their ability to survive despite our all-out war against them. All too frequently, mice, creatures that Elly and I especially dreaded, also invaded our apartment.

As the temperature rose, our living quarters became more and more unbearable. Hoping for a breath of relief, we climbed out the kitchen window in sleeveless undershirts and shorts and sat on the fire escape overlooking a trash-laden back yard. Sometimes Mama, Elly, and I walked to Central Park a few blocks away and tried to find a breeze, or at least some cooling shade. Her treat was to hand us a coin and allow both of us to rush to the nearest Good Humor cart to buy a chocolate-coated ice cream bar or a fruit ice bar on a stick. But even these small, affordable, frozen delights bought us only momentary reprieve from the sweltering temperature and humidity. We remained hot, we were sweaty, and we were cranky and miserable. Mama and Papa, trying to make do but unable to afford even a fan, seemed increasingly desperate.

And then, through an acquaintance of Mama's sister, Aunt Regi, my mother met a nicely dressed middle-aged lady, Mrs. Rein – a native German-speaker. She had some sort of connection with charities offering free two- or three-week vacations in a summer camp in upstate New York for, as she put it, "less privileged" city children. We certainly fit that category! In addition, Mrs. Rein noted, her charity was especially interested in funding Jewish children – recent immigrants to this country. I remember that she

smiled at us when she said that, and that she patted both Elly and me on the head.

There was something about Mrs. Rein I didn't like. But I tend to judge people quickly, on the basis of feeling not fact, and Mama anticipated my negative reaction. This seems like a nice offer, she said to us, indicating that an old friend of Regi had set up the meeting. Her sister wouldn't connect us with an untrustworthy person. And yet when I overheard my mother tell my father about this opportunity later that day, both she and he seemed somewhat hesitant about the offer, agreeing that they really did not know much about Mrs. Rein or the camp. The persistence of the heat wave and humidity, however, and the crankiness and family stress that they provoked, could not be denied. Both Mama and Papa's doubts mellowed and then melted away very quickly.

Pulling out a folder lent to her by Mrs. Rein, Mama showed Papa and us pictures of Lake Canandaigua and of camp cottages and smiling children swimming and at play. The place looks beautiful, she commented reassuringly after each image. She praised the lake, the camp swimming dock and floats, and the cool water that would permit us to escape the city's unrelenting heat. The children will love it, she noted again, and again, like a mantra.



A day or two later, our parents decided to take up the camp offer and arranged for us to leave the city soon after. We received fully paid two-week accommodation and meal awards for our stay at the camp, but Mrs. Rein told Mama that it was possible we could extend these for an additional week.



We must have been under way for well over six hours when our bus pulled into a small Greyhound station and the driver announced that this was the Lake Canandaigua terminal. We got off, as did three other kids travelling with us. Straight away we were met there by a young man and woman, both smiling, tan, wearing khaki shorts, tennis shoes, and white tee shirts emblazoned with the initials "LCC."

I nudged my sister knowingly: Look El, I told her, LCC, Lake Canandaigua Camp!

Our arrival hosts introduced themselves as Bob and Jeanette, senior counselors and class leaders. They checked off our names on a clipboard, grabbed our duffel bags and placed them in a van, and minutes after loading us in the same vehicle, set off in the direction of a large and beautiful lake surrounded by hills.

Say hello to dear ol' Lake Canandaigua, Jeanette said enthusiastically.

We drove along a road parallel to the lakeshore, passing well-kept whitewashed cottages surrounded by green lawns decorated with colorful flowerbeds, and docks with small motorboats and rowboats attached to them. We saw children, swimming, floating on tubes, and playing in the water with water toys. There seemed to be a comforting breeze. We could make out gleeful sounds.

I had grown up in a landlocked country of awesome natural beauty. From our home in La Paz, on a daily basis I had seen the colossal snow-capped Andes Mountains. I had been to the dense Yungas rainforest and to

the Altiplano highland plain. I had sailed on the spectacular Lake Titicaca to the Island of the Sun, where, as they taught me in school, Inca civilization originated. And yet, at that moment, after a sweltering city and seemingly endless bus ride, nothing could have been more inviting than the bluish cool waters of this New York lake.

A couple of minutes later we reached a long white picket fence and drove along its length. On the inside of it we could now see a huge lawn and numerous small white buildings that I guessed were campers' bunk cottages near some large tents, and a few much larger white buildings. The biggest one looked like a cow barn. We also passed by an impressive red gazebo, with a weather vane rooster on the peak of its roof rafter, next to a flagpole flying a huge U.S. flag.

Jeanette stuck her arm out of the van's window and pointed toward the large barn-like structure. That is Seeley Tabernacle where we worship and sing to our mighty God, she told us. We all gather there on a daily basis. You'll get to know it well.

Before I could ask her to say more about this, our vehicle came to a brief stop at the entrance gate of the camp. There stood a large sign:

WELCOME TO LA VALLEY
CHRISTIAN
CAMP
WHERE HEAVEN AND EARTH MEET...

LCC, I abruptly realized, did not stand for 'Lake Canandaigua Camp'!

Something was really not right here but I didn't say anything to Elly, who seemed not to have noticed. I was sure Mama and Papa wouldn't like this. But how could I let them know?

The van proceeded to take us to our cottages and assigned bunks – my sister to one in the “Junior Section (JS)” for younger girls, and me to the “Intermediate Section (IS).” The two boys from the bus, Sasha and Max, were also given bunks in my cottage. We were all roughly the same age. And we all spoke English with an accent.

A very big fat guy in large sunglasses, dressed exactly like Bob and Jeanette, greeted the three of us newcomers with a broad, toothy, smile. This was Jerry, our cottage's head counselor. After shaking our hands, he handed each of us a small brown bag. It contained a white LCC tee shirt, a mimeographed sheet of paper with a daily schedule for the week, a little brochure, and a small Bible with a golden crucifix on its black cover. Looking at Sasha, Max, and me through his dark sunglasses, Jerry told us that we were lucky to be in the newest and best of the IS cottages at LaValley. He noted that his campers play hard and have a good time, and that the camp activities included softball, basketball, Ping-Pong, swimming, shuffleboard, row-boats – lots of outdoor stuff and sports. But he also emphasized that his boys study hard in class after breakfast and attend all events and special programs in the Tabernacle after supper. He indicated that the camp was a little oversubscribed and overcrowded at the moment, and that we had probably seen the tents near the cottages. Lots of guys would like to be in bunks in his cottage, he continued, stressing again how lucky we were to be with him. Bunking in this newest and best cottage depended on our right

attitude and cooperation. But, he concluded, he was sure that none of us would disappoint him.

This was the first time that I'd heard about an early morning class activity. Was he talking about some kind of arts and crafts shop like we had in our school, P.S. 190, back in the city: painting, metal embossing, stenciling? That wouldn't have been hard to like. But then what did he mean by us having to study hard?

All of this became clear to me soon enough after I unpacked, stowed away my clothing, books, and comics in my cubby, put on my new tee shirt, and had a chance to look at the daily and weekly schedule.

Every morning, after breakfast in the dining hall, Bible Study for an hour-and-a-half was listed. Next, depending on the day, we were scheduled either for outdoor sports, arts and crafts, or swimming/boating. Lunch followed, from about noon to after 1:00. An hour of bunk rest and reflection and two hours of additional sports activities and swim instruction were down for the afternoon. By 4:30 we were supposed to be back in our bunks for an hour of cleanup and additional Bible study. Supper was scheduled to follow.

TABERNACLE SPECIAL PROGRAM/ EVENSONG was down for all the evenings, starting daily at 7:00 pm.

It suddenly hit me. Were they going to try to convert us? This schedule obviously explained why we had been given a Bible and told about the class in which we were supposed to study hard. Had Mrs. Rein fooled my mother? Was she some sort of a Christian missionary?"

I was angry about the likely deception. But I didn't know what to do about it! It was not that I had been raised as a practicing Jew. Neither of my parents was very religious – in fact, quite the opposite. They had met in a Labor Zionist Hashomer Hatzair, youth group in Vienna before the war. Both were working class and called themselves Socialists. They'd hardly ever attended a religious service in a synagogue. They were what some in the U.S. called "High Holiday Jews," people who went to services only on the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, and for Kol Nidre on the eve of the Day of Atonement. Man saves man, Papa told us whenever something about God helping out came up. Don't expect pie-from-the-sky, he warned us. He praised the Russian Revolution and taught Elly and me to sing German lyrics *Wacht auf, Verdammte dieser Erde* ["Arise you wretched of the Earth"], from the Communist International. Still, Mama and Papa also knew that, no matter what, they were Jews. They knew it even before they were stripped of their citizenship in Austria and forced to emigrate. The Nazis and the Viennese street mobs that had found great amusement in beating up and publicly humiliating all Jews, no matter how secular and Austrian-identified, had underscored that fact for them. In Bolivia they'd sent Elly and me to the Colegio Boliviano Israelita, a school funded by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and largely attended by children of Jewish refugees. Some religious instruction was part of the curriculum in that school. And I did learn some Jewish history and the Hebrew alphabet. Even though none of this teaching was reinforced at home, there was never any question in my mind about what I was and where I belonged. I knew I was a Jew.

How could I tell Mama and Papa that they had unknowingly sent us to LaValley Christian Camp? Not easy, I realized. Maybe I could try to

telephone them, but Elly and I hardly had enough money with us to make a long-distance call – and I did not know if there was even a pay phone near by.

Our parents had given us some blank stamped postcards to take with us. I decided to write to them as soon as I had a chance, but I wondered, how they would react? Would they make the long bus trip up here and take us home? Was it worth upsetting them and having them spend time and money to take us back to boiling New York City? I told myself not to panic and rush to leave. Maybe Elly and I could take advantage of camp features that had drawn us to this place in the first place – the great lake, the cooler temperature, the arts and crafts workshop, the games and fun? Maybe the smartest move would be to give it all a chance.

Around 5:00 the rest of our cottage mates came back from their afternoon activities and greeted us. Hey, one of them shouted, some greenies arrived. Welcome to LaValley's Greatest Cottage! Greenies were new campers. They barraged us with questions: Can you hit a ball? Catch a baseball? Have you checked if anyone short-sheeted your bed yet? Do you fart in our sleep? Do you snore? They joked and seemed friendly enough. But they were clearly checking us out.

A half hour later we all sat down on benches by a long table set for dinner in the camp canteen and dining hall. I tried to make eye contact with Elly at another table, but she was looking elsewhere and was talking to one of her companions. Chuck, could you say grace? Jerry, our counselor asked one of our cottage mates who had been among our loudest questioners. I could hear similar assignments at other tables in the dining hall. Chuck

smiled and nodded, seemingly pleased to have been chosen. He lowered his head, closed his eyes, and said to our group, Okay, let us pray. And, when others at our table also lowered their heads, he began:

Dear Lord, bless this food to the nourishment of our bodies and us to thy service. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

No sooner had the group repeated Amen, when another boy said: Okay, pass the bug juice. He was referring to one of the pitchers of reddish Kool-Aid containing little black seeds and ice – the drink that was served to us instead of water at every meal. The food then arrived on large platters and we passed it around and helped ourselves. We ate quickly, finished our dessert, and, in relatively short order after another prayer led by our counselor, we were ready for our next activity. We repeated the same mealtime routine every day during our stay at LaValley's.

That evening of the day of our arrival, we had our first exposure to a Seeley Tabernacle Special Program. I didn't know exactly what to expect as I approached the entrance of the camp's largest building, but we were told to bring our Bibles along, so I knew we were in for some sort of religious gathering.

I had been to Catholic mass with friends in Bolivia a couple of times and had been captivated by the interior space and splendor of the church building, with its large stained glass windows, sacred art, and ornate silver and gold décor. I was captivated by the music and ritual of the Latin mass – by prayer that involved the worshippers but that was also otherworldly in sound, kind of magical. Seeley Tabernacle had none of these church-like

spiritual qualities. Its interior, an impressive wood post-and-beam barn-like space, was constructed like a movie house. The floor was slightly elevated at an angle from bottom to top: its lower front-end contained a small raised stage with a pulpit, and its back-wall displayed a large American flag and a clock. About twelve triple rows of long wooden benches for the congregation were laid out and fastened to the ground. Like in our school back in the city, a score of long fluorescent lights hung in metal reflectors from the roof beams, and small loudspeakers were fastened to the front and sidewalls of the building. Had it not been for the large, freestanding, illuminated cross on the stage and the portable reed organ, no physical indications of the Tabernacle's religious function would have been evident.

When our group arrived with Jerry, many other campers were already in the Tabernacle. A woman was playing a rousing tune on the organ. After everyone seemed to have entered and found a seat, a red-haired man, whom Jerry identified as the camp director, Rusty, stepped on to the stage. Unlike the counselors in their white LCC tee shirts, he wore a light zip-jacket with his name written on the front and LaValley Christian Camp, Director, fully spelled out on the back.

Please stand, and let us pray, Rusty began after the tune ended and the counselors shhh-ished us campers. He raised his head, closed his eyes, and we, on the benches, stood up and lowered ours as he spoke:

O Lord, open thou our lips.

And our mouth shall show forth Thy praise.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy
Ghost;

As it was in the beginning, it is now, and ever shall be,
world without end.

Praise ye the Lord.

The Lord's Name be praised. Amen.

He then indicated that we take a seat and the sound of the organ resumed. This time the organist played a tune that most everyone in the room seemed to know and the counselors and campers began to sing:

Je-sus loves me! This I know,
For the Bi-ble tells me so...

Je-sus loves me! He who died,
Heaven's gate to o-pen wide;
He will wash away my sin,
Let His lit-tle child come in...

The song went on for a number of stanzas. I had never heard it before and had remained silent while it was being sung. The lively organ tune and the enthusiasm of the voices in the congregation were catchy. By the end of the piece, I had learned the refrain by heart. Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

After that hymn was finished, a small group of singers – campers as well as counselors – stood up, moved to the front of the room, and performed a short concert of equally rousing religious music:

What a friend we have in Jesus,
All our sins and grief to bear...

Rusty, the camp director, then stood up on the stage again and, this time, began to preach. When he did so, he did indeed “open his lips and show forth praise for the Lord,” as he had invoked in the opening prayer. And perhaps for us, the greenies, who had arrived only hours earlier on the bus and who had never heard him give a sermon before, he started with the LaValley camp statement of faith.* At first his voice was quiet, calm:

The Bible, he said, is inspired. It is infallible – the authoritative Word of God. Read it, study it, memorize it. It is your guide to salvation.

We believe that the one God is eternally existent in a Trinity: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, he continued.

He had flaming red hair and large green eyes that looked just like my father’s, and he narrowed them when he spoke, creasing his brow, to focus on us in the audience. At one point, he looked my way and I felt as if he was looking just at me, casting some a kind of hypnotizing spell like Dr. Poli, the evil enemy of my TV hero Captain Video whom I watched devotedly at my aunt and uncle’s apartment.

With each phrase the volume of his voice grew louder:

We accept the truth of our Gospels: Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God. We believe in his virgin birth, his miracles, his life without sin and that

* In what follows, I have adapted text from the “Statement of Faith” of the actual camp Elly and I attended in 1952 – a camp whose identity and name I have modified here, but one that continues to exist, now with a website that displays camp photos and historical and religious materials relevant to my account.

he shed his blood to atone for ours. We believe in his resurrection and ascension to Heaven.

And then he slowed his speech, and emphatically raised his voice even more:

We believe in the salvation of lost and sinful men. But, for salvation, regeneration through the Holy Spirit must take place. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost – the saved resurrected unto eternal life, the sinful and lost unto eternal damnation.

He raised his arms, clenched his fists, and extended a finger towards the Tabernacle's ceiling:

You must be born again to be saved, he shouted, born again into the bosom of the Lord! You must be born again in Jesus or you will face the fires of eternal Hell!

Come! Come up here, he beckoned us. Give your heart to Jesus. Shed your sins. Let yourself be saved into life eternal. Come up here...

Organ music resumed and boomed through the hall. It was riveting. The emotional intensity of the message – eternal fiery damnation or salvation through Christ – scared me and made me wish I could just ignore Papa's pie-from-the-sky warning about religion. Did the Bible really contain the Word of God, as Rusty told us – factual truth and a guide to salvation and rebirth to eternal life – or was it mainly a book of great stories, like Adam and Eve or Noah's Ark, two of my favorites?

I glanced at others sitting near me, and looked for Elly with her group two rows behind me on the left. Suddenly children began to stand up and to

make their way to the front of the Tabernacle. Rusty's summoning call continued. Come up to be embraced and taken into the fellowship of the blessed! Come up and be born again!

Heightened by the organ's rhythmic sound and encouraging beat, the mood in the room turned joyful, electric.

Some twenty minutes later, it was over. After a final blessing from the camp director, we were dismissed to return to our cottages and I quickly made my way over to Elly in the crowd and said to her in German:

Are you OK? I'm going to write Mama and Papa about this tomorrow. What do you think?

Elly didn't seem very upset. I told my counselor Nancy I am Jewish, she responded to me. Nancy told me not to worry. Christ will forgive me and take me into his kingdom.

But I didn't write home the next day. Nor the day after that. I like to think it wasn't laziness – that I really wanted to experience the daily routine. I thought I could bear the religious stuff, kind of ignore it, and still enjoy the swimming in the cool lake waters, taking part in the activities that did not involve Jesus or sin and salvation. But I was wrong. The push was not only unremitting, it also had its subtle side. The routine featured a stick. But there were also enticing carrots.

The morning Bible class that I had dreaded actually turned out to be bearable. We concentrated entirely on reading and talking about passages of the Gospel – the New Testament – stories I'd actually never read before. I

quickly decided that I could think of these like some of the Grimm fairy tales that Omama Lina had read out loud to me in Bolivia. For doing well in class, and for saying grace at meals and agreeing to lead evening prayers in our bunks, we received check marks and extra reward points that could be traded for little privileges: an extended or extra swim period, a boating lesson, an additional dessert. Tommy and Sasha, the kids who had been on the Greyhound bus with us, and Chuck and Hank, from the bunk cottage, racked up dozens.

Even though I was always very competitive in school and in non-athletic games, here I didn't engage - at first. I acted like the reward-checks and the extra privileges they bought didn't entice me. I attended the Bible class but hardly ever said anything unless the class leader asked me a direct question. I did lower my head but did not pray at meals or in the evening. I sometimes looked up and around me before we were finished.

Then, however, came the Big Carrot.

We were outside - first, playing softball, and then down by the lake for a swim period. Both times I heard and saw a small private airplane fly low in circles over the camp property and then over the lake. I asked a counselor what was happening.

He told me about J.J., the grandson of Mr. R.G. LaValley - God's Businessman, as Rusty had referred to R.G. in the Tabernacle - the industrialist inventor who was a founder and main financial backer of the camp. J.J., a pilot, owned an airplane, a small two-passenger Cessna, and every few days during the camp season he took some of the kids who excelled at camp up for a circle ride above Lake Canandaigua.

Nothing at this time could have gotten to me more than the possibility of an airplane ride. I had often imagined myself as a pilot, a flier soaring in a plane over scenery below. I built model planes, read all about planes in aviation magazines, and drew sketch after sketch of futuristic flying machines just for the fun of it. How could I get one of the rides with J.J in that beautiful Cessna? When I found out that Sasha, an eager-beaver volunteer grace-sayer who gave his heart to Jesus in the Tabernacle the day we arrived, had been taken up in the plane, I thought, why shouldn't I try some of his tactics?

In the last days of our first week at the camp I volunteered to say grace both at a lunch and a dinner. I raised my hand and said I would lead an evening prayer. But I must have sounded either very unconvincing or a little too eager. They did not call on me. I so wanted that airplane experience that I even spoke up in Bible class. I raised my hand and then wondered out loud what Jesus must have been like at our age. He was born Jewish, right? He must have been circumcised. Did he also have a Bar Mitzvah? Tommy and Sasha laughed; Hank and Chuck had no idea what I was talking about. The instructor glared at me, frowned, and then ignored the question.

In fact, nothing happened! Not only was I off the radar screen as far as J.J. was concerned, but Jerry, our counselor, started to show his dislike for me (maybe because I didn't kid around with him, like many of my cottage mates, and generally kept to myself.) At the end of the first week, he told me that I was going to be moved from LaValley's "Greatest Cottage" to one of the tents.

I realized that I was not going to win an airplane ride.

In the meantime, on a daily basis, the Tabernacle events continued. Every evening camp director Rusty, the preacher, launched into a sermon and stirred his congregants. How to become a Christian? he asked, as if he were addressing us, the non-Christians in the hall, directly. And he gave us the answer. He told us that if we received Jesus Christ in our hearts as the Lord and Savior, we'd have eternal life and the love of God. It was just a matter of prayer and confession. Personally, each one of us needed to stand, come on down, and say: Lord Jesus, I have sinned. You died on the cross for me. You took the penalty for my transgressions. I now receive you, my savior from sin. You will give me eternal life. And for that, I thank you.

On the Thursday of our second week, when we entered the Tabernacle after dinner for Evensong, the hymns and organ accompaniment seemed especially rousing and Rusty, when he mounted the stage, was in top form. He preached about the lost, about sin and resurrection and eternal damnation. He opened his Bible and read from the Book of John:

"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him." [John 3:36]

As he escalated his rhetoric he seemed to fixate his green eyes directly on me and on Elly, who was sitting with other children in her group in the row directly in front of my seat.

"Yet to all who received him, to those who believed his name, he gave the right to become children of God," he shouted, "children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."

Elly stirred in front of me, and I saw her shake a little. Eternal damnation, the fires of hell, God's wrath – this was frightening stuff. Receive Jesus, Rusty continued: Come, come and receive Jesus as your savior. You must be born of God! You must be born again!

A number of campers popped up out of their seats and began to make their way to the front of the room. The organ music continued. Come, come receive Jesus, Rusty demanded again and again. Come: you must be born again!

Suddenly my sister stood, turned slightly, and seemed ready to walk down the aisle to the front of the Tabernacle.

I grabbed Elly from behind and bopped her on the head with my hand: Sit down! You're Jewish, I whispered between my teeth. I was angry.

I don't actually know whether anyone saw my intervention because it all happened very quickly. But I do know that the next day we were told that because of the demand for places, we would unfortunately not be able to stay for the additional third week.

That Sunday, on the Greyhound bus ride down to the city, it was my turn to be grumpy. But, at one point, Elly looked at me sweetly and said, Hey Poldi, cheer up! Listen to this:

To Hell you'll go

If you're not Saved

But itchy you'll be

If you're not shaved"

And together we laughed and exclaimed:

BURMA SHAVE!.....

Leo Spitzer

New York/Norwich, Summer 2013