

Ah, Kinderland Mike Pevzner

A chilly morning in August, getting out of bed and right into my dungarees, a flannel shirt and over that, a Kinderland sweatshirt. Over that, a thin jacket zipped up. Off we went for the walk to the dining room for a hot breakfast. Singing, joking, pushing, running and into that cinder block building (at least I remember it as cinder block) to the noise, laughter, smells of disinfectant, and finally the food. Orange juice, hot Ralston cereal with a little sugar and a touch of milk, runny scrambled eggs, the perfect antidote to the chill outside. And then the walk back to our bunk; the sun rising, heating us; off with the jacket, off with the sweatshirt, off with the flannel shirt. Completing the journey in the white t-shirt that was our daily apparel.

Kinderland is those August chilly mornings - in 1957, waking up to a rock and roll record on a 78-rpm phonograph. If I was first to get to it, I'd put on a song called "Zoop" by a group called The Charts.

*When I first met you, you'll never know,
that my poor heart started beating so,
cause when I met you darling dear
my poor heart goes zoop, zoop, zoop, di-zoop.*

The words made no sense, but the rocking beat had us crazy boys dancing round the bunk as we washed, brushed teeth, snapped towels, jumped around, and did

whatever insanely energetic 15-year-old boys did. Ah, Benjy, Huey, Steve, Mike, Teddy and the rest of that bunch. We were breathing that brisk Sylvan Lake air and we were at an “all-inclusive” resort that enveloped our being all summer long.

Outside the bunk, we’d meet up with Mickey, and Barbara, and Dina, and Sue and all of the giggling girls who were also bundled up for the walk to get breakfast.

Ah, Kinderland, this was our little secret world. The rest of America didn’t know our secret or us, but they hated us in principle because they were told to hate anything that smacked of “Red.” But I didn’t feel any redder than any kid at any camp. It was camp. It was school vacation. It was comradeship.

It was a time of gingerly approaching the girls that you “liked.” Maybe a first kiss here and there. The dances. Folk dancing where you changed partners all the time and got to hold hands with, maybe squeeze a little, smile and laugh with, all the girls. Campfires, swatting at mosquitos; roasting marshmallows; a counselor with a guitar. All of us sounding mighty sweet singing *This Land is Your Land, If I Had a Hammer, Strangest Dream, Union Maid*, the rousing Kinderland song in Yiddish, *Saints Go Marching In, Down by the Riverside*. I thought everyone sang those songs at every camp everywhere. Hey, they’re camp songs. and we sounded great. We sang with improvised harmonies and elongated choruses and screwed up lyrics, and added lyrics; *Oh Freedom* could go on ad

infinitum as people threw in “no more slavery,” “no more Jim Crow,” and on and on into “no more liver and onions” “no more pot cheese,” or whatever.

I don't remember much about the “white salutes.” We put on white shorts and t-shirts. We marched. It was Sunday. Usually, it was pretty damn hot. What were we saluting; I don't remember. But we were together in hot heat; marching and singing. Couldn't wait to get back to our bunk and into bathing suits; grab a towel and run down to the waterfront to cool off. Jumping in and swimming and screaming and splashing and ahhh, cooling off. No air conditioning anywhere. Sylvan Lake was our air conditioner. Sylvan Lake. What a perfect name; conjures up woods and peace and quiet. The antithesis of our helter-skelter New York life. Random memories: Pete Seeger singing on the stage of the Casino. Did he actually chop a log as he sang? Yup. Seemed perfectly right at that moment. I remember *Abiyoyo* and Pete dancing all over the stage and all of us belting out *This Land is Your Land* as he topped us with his high tenor. Sitting on the floor in the heat and being drawn along with everyone else into the Seeger magical spell. Who knew he'd become the folk icon of our generation?

Edith Siegel, ageless, lithe, making us into dancers, speaking in that velvety trumpet of a voice. Modern dance. Stylized movement made us workers at a production line or out in a field. We were bending and swaying and keeping a serious face.

Something called kassa? Right? Your folks left money in an account that you could spend at this little store. There was candy and other supplies like toothpaste.... but mainly there was candy. I could work on a tootsie roll all day.

My one full summer was my CIT summer, 1957, I think. And it was a complete lifetime in two months. I was reminded at our wonderful reunion at the current Kinderland in Tolland, Massachusetts, that back in that summer, we built an amphitheater on a shady hillside. Log benches and I believe a dirt floor for a stage. Wood floor to be added next summer. I remember no details of the construction, but I can picture the finished product and us sitting in it singing or listening to lectures or talks of some kind.

I took the politics for granted. To me, there was nothing unusual. My dad had been with the IWO and wrote for Jewish Life, which became Jewish Currents (AND STILL EXISTS). I guess he was a Communist, but he never specifically talked about that at home. He split from that after the Stalin revelations. I read The Daily Worker and the National Guardian and the NY Post sports and loved the Times theater section. Didn't everyone read those papers? Go know.

From a young age, my folks went to Lakeland, the adult camp that existed alongside Kinderland. I know they loved swimming in the lake, the pristine air, the companionship of friends. My dad lived for the softball games, and both my folks relished the meetings and the entertainment. Sometimes, my dad spoke.

Always raising money for some organization or another. I remember seeing cars with smashed windshields the weekend of the Paul Robeson Peekskill melee when “patriotic” thugs pelted the cars with rocks as they exited the concert.

I didn’t understand what had happened, but my folks sure did.

So, the politics of Kinderland was just the way it was for me.

I think the main reason the Kinderland experience (really only 2 and 1/2 summers) is engraved in my being is that friendships made at camp became my social focus back home in New York for many years. I went to the High School of Performing Arts rather than a neighborhood high school. I made friends there, but they didn’t live close. But my Kinderland gang stayed close. I lived in Manhattan, Benjy and Huey and Barbara and Mickey and so many others were in Brooklyn. The subway was our lifeline to friendship. We went to demonstrations, and hoots, and the beach, and of course we often slept over in each other’s apartments.

And then there were the Alan Freed Rock ‘n Roll shows at the Brooklyn Paramount and the Fox, and the Times Square Paramount and Loew’s State Theater, where we saw Buddy Holly, the Everly Brothers, Chuck Berry, Bo Diddley, Chubby Checker, Frankie Lyman and the Teenagers, The Platters, The Five Satins, and on and on and on. I wasn’t at Woodstock. That was a generation later. But with my Kinderland gang in New York, we experienced shows that were ten times Woodstock, without the mud and without the drugs. The shows were

relentless, with 20 acts stretching over two hours. Then there was a movie. Even better if it was an Alan Freed Rock 'n Roll movie. We'd stay for two shows. We were pretty groggy heading home.

So, that was my Kinderland gang. My two best guy friends were Benjy and Huey. Huey is the wonderful Eugene Falk who keeps our web communication alive after more than 60 years. And Benjy - Ben Wengrofsky - so many times we'd roam the city - laugh and sing on the IND subway - burn to a crisp at Coney Island. At the reunion at Tolland, we two 60-somethings shared a room and stayed up all night reminiscing. Two older guys reliving a halcyon time that seems now like pure joy. Benjy died a few years ago and I cried. My gal pals were Mickey Martin and Barbara London. When we were kids, we'd fall in and out of relationships. As adults, I feel like we're friends still, though out of touch. We've all drifted now, but I suspect we'd pick up that joy even today.

So, for me, the Kinderland politics was always the backdrop, but never the foreground, of my lifelong connection. We've watched as our multifaceted country has swooped back and forth toward and away from the freedom dream that seemed so real to us when we were young and singing about it. Well, we still dream. And it's not unusual, every now and then, for Kinderland on Sylvan Lake in Hopewell Junction, New York, to make a dreamlike appearance to me. Ain't old age something! Ah, yes. Ah, Kinderland.