



Guestwords: Summer Camp for Nazis

By [Helene Forst](#)

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Once upon a time there was a summer camp on Long Island that taught Nazi ideology, a camp with no conscience or moral responsibility. Strategically located by Camp Upton's military facility, now known as Brookhaven National Laboratory, Camp Siegfried was one of 25 Nazi youth camps that spread like a plague across the United States of America.

This sleeper cell, disguised as an enchanting summer getaway camp for children of German lineage and an entertainment campground where German adults could explore the rural outdoors, swim in the freshwater of Upper Yaphank Lake, known then as Swezey's Pond, and drink lots of Schaefer and Lowenbrau beer, was the perfect cover to prepare fragile youth for leadership roles once the Nazis took over America. Behind this facade, a dark mission of indoctrination to embrace Aryan racial superiority could be heard on a quiet summer evening breeze as the campers gathered around bonfires to sing the Nazi national anthem that called for the spilling of Jewish blood followed by the Hitler salute and the shoutout of "Sieg Heil."

Camp Siegfried opened its doors in 1935, under the leadership of Fritz Kuhn, a naturalized U.S. citizen who was proud to be known as the American Führer and the head of the German American Bund. Under the fluttering flags of the German swastika, his leadership encouraged the grooming of Aryan children to dress as Hitler youth as they physically trained, learned outdoor survival skills, and achieved proficiency with firearms.

For the thousands of adults who attended weekend rallies, the draw was a reminder of the summer lodgings they'd left behind in the fatherland. On any given summer weekend, 40,000 visitors would arrive to drink sometimes up to 10,000 gallons of beer, sing oom-pah-pah songs, and partake in the festivities. Some would drive to the camp while others would travel from Penn Station on the "Siegfried Special." Upon the train's arrival at the Yaphank railroad depot, camp youth members, dressed in their Hitler youth uniforms, would greet the visitors with the Nazi salute.

Together, they'd parade through the streets of Yaphank, then a small farming hamlet in Suffolk County, until they reached the entrance to the camp. To protect the marchers, Kuhn organized hundreds of storm troopers to watch over them as the loudspeakers poured forth antisemitic speeches. By 1937, however, suspicions grew within the community as local, state, and federal officials began to question the dark goings-on at the camp.

In 1938, Marvin Miller, a history teacher from Commack High School, published a book about Camp Siegfried titled "Wunderlich's Salute," in which he noted, "In the 1930s, one of every

seven inhabitants in Suffolk County belonged to the Ku Klux Klan, and were especially well represented in Yaphank.” It was a perfect wooded lakefront environment to breed the cancer of hate.

Arnie Bernstein’s book “Swastika Nation” pointed out that the hidden truth behind this wholesome haven was “the emotional, intellectual, sexual, and physical abuse of the children.” Only German was allowed to be spoken at the camp. If anyone by mistake spoke English, they were punished. Goose-stepping was practiced daily as was the forced study of German culture, which was followed by rigorous written tests.

Mark Furr, in his article “Camp Siegfried: Just Another Regular Long Island Summer Camp — With a Nazi Twist,” wrote that “Leaders would wake the kids up in the middle of the night, force them to strap on thirty-pound packs, and then have them march through bramble-covered trails, often getting cut up as they marched along.” The more scratched up they got, the more praise they received.

Bund leaders used forced child labor to construct camp facilities to avoid paying union members they believed were Communists and Jews.

In addition to Nazi indoctrination, Kuhn, like Hitler, desired to breed more Aryans. This was accomplished through dissemination of propaganda, the allowance of teen consumption of beer, and the encouragement of teen boys to be sexually active with teen girls, many of whom left summer camp pregnant. Accounts emerged years after the closure of the camp that male counselors had forced themselves on female campers, a practice that was not frowned upon by camp directors.

One of the youth leaders, Tillie Koch, was so distraught about the immorality taking place at Camp Siegfried that she chose to stand outside the girls’ tent to protect them from sexual harassment. Over several days of driving, cold rains, she contracted pneumonia and died. Her death could have been avoided if a doctor had been called, but Bund leaders felt that she’d been a threat and hadn’t demonstrated the loyalty and tenacity a German should exhibit.

On Feb. 20, 1939, 20,000 German-Americans marched through the streets of Manhattan, waving German swastika flags alongside American flags. They gathered at a rally in Madison Square Garden, where Fritz Kuhn orchestrated the largest Nazi assembly in America. Shocked by the display, New York District Attorney Thomas Dewey went after Kuhn on tax evasion charges, accusing and then proving that he’d been skimming money from the Bund and from the coffers of Camp Siegfried.

In August of the same year, an investigation of un-American propaganda activities in the United States took place, with hearings in the House of Representatives during which testimony was heard from key witnesses concerned about subversive, Communist activities. Included were interviews with the Bund leader, Fritz Kuhn, and Helen Vooros, a Brooklyn Bund youth leader who had been a friend of the deceased, Tillie Koch.

Over the course of their friendship, Tillie had shared with Helen her concerns about what was happening at Camp Siegfried. Helen, age 19, bravely agreed to be interviewed by the House

committee, confessing that on a trip to Germany, paid for by the German American Bund, she'd been sexually assaulted by a Bund leader. When asked at the hearing if this practice of allowing boys and girls to follow their instincts was moral, she said that she was taught that breeding more Aryans inspired purity of their race. When asked why she left the movement, she said she was disgusted by camp conduct and needed to stand up to the horrific teachings of the Bund:

"They tell us that we are pure Aryans, and that we are not to mingle with any other race because they say that would be the most disgusting thing that could happen. They say that our race would be ruined. . . . Small children, from 8 to 12 years old, are given books published by Julius Streicher, an antisemitic German publicist. They are the kind of books that children would get in kindergarten. They would have pictures of Jews with blood-dripping fingers, and under the picture there would be rhymes. We were told that later we could have children, and that our children were to be in favor of the same government . . . that is, the German Nazi theory of government, because it was the only way to get along."

Older groups were taught to spread propaganda and forced to read Hitler's "Mein Kampf."

The final blow to Camp Siegfried took place in November of 1939 when Judge Gustave Neuss, who'd consistently opposed the Bund's presence on Long Island, requested that Brookhaven Town's alcoholic beverage board rescind Camp Siegfried's liquor license. The camp never recovered.

Fritz Kuhn was deported after the war, imprisoned, and died in Germany in 1951. Julius Streicher ended up as a convicted war criminal. He was hanged in Nuremberg on Oct. 16, 1946.

The spread of hate that flourished in Camp Siegfried is captured in the lyrics of a Rodgers and Hammerstein song from "South Pacific," "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught":

*You've got to be taught to hate and fear,
You've got to be taught from year to year,
It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear —
You've got to be carefully taught!*

*You've got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade —
You've got to be carefully taught!*

This glimpse into a little-known 1930s page in Long Island history reveals the dark dangers of extremism, prejudice, and hatred that still echo throughout our country and around the world. The power of propaganda and the spewing of hatred for specific groups of people are reminders that we must never be complacent and never look away.

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