

Recalling a dark time in LI's past

The Off-Broadway production 'Camp Siegfried' explores when American Nazis came out to Yaphank in the 1930s

BY VERNE GAY
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The corner of Mill Road and Main Street in Yaphank hasn't changed all that much over the past 85 years. If you happened to have been there in the summer of 1937, you might almost even recognize it today.

What might not be recognizable were the sights and sounds, haunting this former farming community for decades to come.

Far off to the south on Main, columns of goose-stepping marchers would come into view, dressed in the uniforms of American Nazi storm troopers, the so-called Ordnungsdienst, or "O.D." for short — black breeches, boots, gray shirts, black ties, military belt slung over their shoulders. The leaders carry two giant flags, billowing in the summer morning breeze. To the left, there'd be an American flag and to the right, a German one emblazoned with a giant black swastika.

Turning sharply west onto Mill Street, the marchers in precise step would take another quick turn. Greeted with roars of approval and a brass band, they'd enter Camp Siegfried passing under a wide banner that read: "Herzlich Willkommen." "Warm Welcome."

'HOW EASILY DARKNESS CAN SNEAK UP ON US'

A new Off-Broadway play, "Camp Siegfried," refocuses attention on that dark side of Yaphank's history just before World War II. There are few physical reminders from that brief span in

the hamlet, and what happened there less than 90 years ago may seem unfathomable to Long Islanders today.

"Some people say there's a bad vibe in here but I don't get that," said Wendy Gillette, a 20-year resident who lives on nearby Cedar Garden (formerly "Berliner") Boulevard, in German Gardens, right next door to Siegfried Park, which itself was once a subdivision attached to the camp. "It's a nice community. People are friendly. We look out for each other."

Carol Klimek, who also lives in German Gardens but grew up in Patchogue, said: "A lot of people who moved here in recent years don't know the history, especially the younger generation. From what I've read, I do know about a Bund camp, but as far as the really [deep] history, I wouldn't know anything either."

How the camp came to Yaphank and the resistance to it is a convoluted tale. It's also one that some community members say few residents know about, and the few who do are reluctant to discuss. Others consider the mysterious neighborhood in their midst — site of the old camp itself, long called Siegfried Park, now Lakeview Village — unknown territory.

Meanwhile, in this extended moment of reckoning with some darker chapters in the nation's past, historians wonder how Yaphank should reckon with its own.

Camp Siegfried began in 1935, when the German-American Bund — a domestic pro-Nazi group, then named "Friends of New Germany" — bought the old Coombs farm on the west side of Upper Lake. Then called Swezey's Pond, the lake is still there just north of the Long Island Expressway off Exit 67, along with the dam that created the pond in the 1920s.

The camp ended when the

U.S. government's Alien Property Custodian seized both the camp and the adjoining development called Linden Park (now German Gardens) in 1941.

There are no plaques or markers indicating what was once here in this hamlet of about 6,000 people. The only sign outside the original Camp Siegfried now reads "private" and the main street through the old camp, later owned by the German-American Settlement League, is called Private Road.

One doesn't discover Camp Siegfried as much as stumble upon it. That's what happened to a Brooklyn playwright during the pandemic in 2020.

A mom of three looking for something to occupy her kids, Bess Wohl did what most parents do under those circumstances: She Googled activities in the Yaphank area and the search engine turned up something about a former Nazi indoctrination camp just about 6 miles up the road from her Airbnb in Bellport.

"I wish I could really remember exactly what Google search term would me up down that rabbit hole," Wohl, 47, said in a recent interview. "But the shock of the images sort of obliterated that."

The grainy pictures of Camp Siegfried have proliferated on the internet where Wohl first encountered them. The eye invariably drifts to the swastikas. They adorn flags, banners, armbands, caps, uniforms, knife handles, the porches above camp cottages, and even a giant totem pole made of boxwoods and salvia.

The Tony-nominated Wohl got to work and began conceiving a play about the human urge to belong and how that can so easily be twisted by a venomous ideology. After a successful run in London, her 90-minute play, "Camp Siegfried," opened at the Second Stage's Tony Kiser Theater in Manhattan last Tuesday and runs through Dec. 4. To quote the playwright, this two-hander about a pair of young campgoers who fall in love, offers a reminder of "how easily darkness can sneak up on us."

'LETTERS TO HITLER STREET'

The original camp, which still can be seen just beyond



Bess Wohl's "Camp Siegfried" will run through Dec. 4 at the Tony Kiser Theater. **Video:** newsday.com/theater

the curtain of trees along the shoreline of Upper Lake, ran up its west side, occupying about 44 acres. During its run, Bund members and storm troopers built dozens of cottages along that lakeshore and around the other side. Trim and sturdy, most remain

to this day. They've been added on to, but it's still easy to envision the outlines of cottages once named "Ridgewood," "Jamaica" and "New York" for the home precincts of the Bundists who built them.

In the middle of the development still lies the centerpiece

of Camp Siegfried. It was then called Hindenburg Platz for former German president Paul von Hindenburg, who appointed Adolf Hitler as chancellor in 1933. Slightly larger than a football field, this is where the O.D. — those storm troopers modeled on the Nazi's S.A. — marched in formation and the Jungenschaft, or "Young Siegfrieders," gathered to play baseball, soccer and football. This is also where an undercover reporter, John Metcalfe, who wrote a 1937 expose on the camp, concluded that Siegfried was all about "... Hitler, hatred and heils."

On the north end of the field, the construction of a bandstand was ordered by the German-American Bund's "Bundesführer" (leader) Fritz Julius Kuhn, who was also the putative head of Camp Siegfried.

That's long gone, but John Roy Carlson, author of another expose ("Under Cover: My Four Years in the Nazi Underworld of America," 1943, Dutton), recounts what happened on this field during the first German "Volk" Day celebration in 1936:

"The O.D.'s then appeared with flags, banners and pennants, massed them at the head of the troops and at the word 'march' led the procession down Hindenburg Field. Grim and defiant, father, son and daughter obeyed all military commands. Massed American flags fluttered between dozens of Bund banners and Bund emblems. Some of the American flags were on flagpoles surrounded by swastikas."

The speakers on stage were greeted with "considerably more cheering," and then, concluding the festivities, Carlson paraphrased an exultant Kuhn: "A little piece of German soil — a Sudetenland in America! — [is] planted on this side of the ocean."

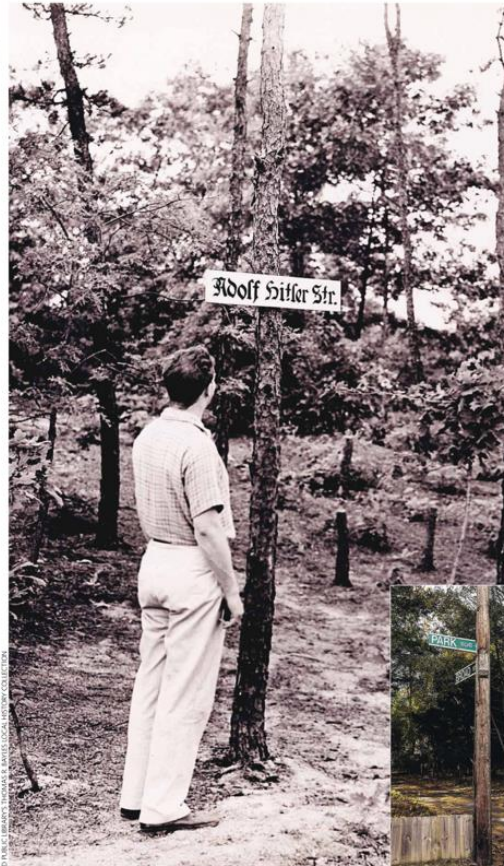
To the west of the old camp lies German Gardens. Now also a quiet bedroom community, when the Bund bought the land here in 1936, this was envisioned as an "Aryan" community — a more robust, year-round counterpart to the summer camp next door.

The plans filed with the Brookhaven planning and zoning commission revealed both the scope and spirit of the enterprise. A couple of hundred lots were carved from the 40-plus acres, bisected with streets named after Nazi leaders Joseph Goebbels and Hermann Göring. "Adolf Hitler Strasse" ran up the east side of German Gardens, modeled on the Nazi's S.A. — marched in formation and the Jungenschaft, or "Young Siegfrieders," gathered to play baseball, soccer and football. This is also where an undercover reporter, John Metcalfe, who wrote a 1937 expose on the camp, concluded that Siegfried was all about "... Hitler, hatred and heils."

Except they are not quite forgotten. According to Melanie Cardone-Leathers, history librarian and archivist at Longwood Library in Middle Island and an authority on the history of Camp Siegfried, new residents on Park will still occasionally "get bills from utilities with the name 'Hitler Street' on them."

Such letters are invariably an unwelcome surprise, she said. For years, the names of the old streets appeared on property deed maps that new homeowners

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"Adolf Hitler Strasse" ran up the east side of German Gardens in Yaphank in this 1937 photo. All of the Nazi road names have been changed; Park Boulevard, inset, is now the street once named for the Nazi leader.



A picture from 1937 shows the boys' summer camp tents. The sign "Jungenschaft" means "Young Siegfrieders."

A dark time in LI's history

CAMP from C4

ers received. Gillette, the longtime resident, said she's heard stories about those letters to "Hitler Street," too, and even knows of one neighbor who found old Bundist uniforms and guns when they moved in.

In the mid-'90s, former Suffolk County lawmaker Herbert Davis, who died in 2010, tried to permanently expunge the old Nazi names but was rebuffed by the legislature, which concluded it should not white-out local history, however repugnant.

Wohl, the playwright, recalls that during her research she drove through Siegfried Park and German Gardens "a dozen times because I had this fantasy that I would find something left over." Instead, what he found was "normalcy. Maybe I was projecting or was so immersed in the play, but I had this odd sense that something had happened there. I don't want to sound too woo woo [but] maybe the fact of the normalcy is what's odd about it."

'AT FIRST IT WAS A BOON'

How Camp Siegfried found its way to Yaphank is not entirely clear. The authoritative history of Camp Siegfried by Marvin D. Miller, "Wunderlich's Salute," (Malamud-Rose Publishers, Smithtown, 1983) noted that "one of every seven inhabitants in Suffolk County" belonged to the Ku Klux Klan in the 1930s, and was especially well represented in Yaphank. The Bund also had footholds in other communities with sizable German populations (and Yaphank had a large Polish one, too — and had organized marches in Lindenhurst. (Lindenhurst was once named Breslau, from where the original settlers came.)

Later, congressional and courtroom testimony also indicated that Siegfried and a dozen other Bund camps across the country may have been "Fifth Column" outposts, or sleeper cells, ready to rise up and assist invading German troops on "Der Tag," a phrase dating from World War I that signaled the beginning of hostilities.

According to such testimony,

that's why some of them were so close to military outposts. (The World War I training facility Camp Upton — now Brookhaven National Laboratory — is about 4 miles from the Siegfried site.) Miller, a longtime history teacher at Commack North who spent a decade researching Siegfried and who died in 2020, "did believe it was in preparation for when Hitler came to the United States, at some point in the future," according to his wife, Leona Miller, of Smithtown.

Yaphank may have also been a match of opportunity with necessity. As Marge Neussen, who grew up there in the late '30s and '40s, said, "We were just a little farm town and a perfect place to begin a rebellion that nobody would suspect."

After taking power in 1933, the National Socialist Party in Germany gave sympathizers in the United States permission to create their own organization — an extended hand of friendship, but really just an American-based propaganda arm. After a series of internal power struggles, leadership of the German-American Bund ("League") passed to Kuhn.

Described by historians as a "martinet," "popinjay" and "blowhard," Kuhn nonetheless shaped himself into a leading domestic fascist. His anti-Semitism was virulent, his long view coldblooded, and his plans for American conquest uncluttered by infighting.

His scheme to win American hearts and minds — or at least those of the more than 500,000 German immigrants who had left the fatherland after the cataclysm of World War I — was through propaganda.

And the best way to reach them was through their children. The construction of "youth" camps for the dissemination of propaganda took precedence. Kuhn needed a showplace that would accomplish a couple of goals, notably assuage an increasingly wary Washington.

Kuhn's uber-camp had to convey an all-American spirit, or his half-formed idea of whatever that was. This had to appear to be a wholesome



This photograph from May 1938 shows representatives of the German-American Bund visiting Yaphank's Camp Siegfried.

place where young people could get close to nature and learn various outdoor skills. Singing patriotic German songs and marching would be nice, too.

Nevertheless, Arnie Bernstein, author of "Swastika Nation" (St. Martin's, 2013), a

history of the Bund who also advised Wohl on her play, said that the children at the camp — more than anyone else — would ultimately be Camp Siegfried's primary victims: "They were abused emotionally, intellectually, sexually and physically," he said.

Mostly, this camp needed to be near New York City (the Bund was based in Yorkville) and rail lines. Yaphank would do, perfectly. The Yaphank train station remains less than 2 miles to the south.

In the midst of the Depression, many residents were happy to have this free-spending newcomer in their midst. "Economically it was important for the community because farmers could sell produce to them," said Cardone-Leathers. "It brought money to a community that was changing because the mills had left or were going away. They needed something else, and at first it was a boon."

'WE SIMPLY DON'T KNOW WHAT WAS GOING ON THERE'

Opening its doors in 1935, the new camp began modestly, if ominously. Named for the hero of German legend who had bathed himself in the blood of the dragon Fafnir, which made him impervious to weapons, Camp Siegfried also

adopted the Hitler Youth's "sig rune" symbol, which means "victory."

About 100 girls and 20 boys arrived that first summer, with the girls' camp about a quarter-mile to the northwest of the main camp. The boys' camp would later relocate to the northeast, on the other side of Upper Lake, near Yaphank-Middle Island Road. Meals were served at the old Whitmore's Tavern at the south end of the camp. The Whitmore was soon to become the center of the camp, converted into a restaurant called the Lakeview Inn.

By opening day 1936, Siegfried was booming. Thousands came by car, others by Long Island Rail Road. Kuhn organized "Siegfried Specials" out of Penn Station that brought thousands more out to the camp on weekends. Postcards sold at the camp read "it will remind you of those beautiful summer resorts in the old Homeland." At first privately, then publicly, Kuhn also promised an "Aryan paradise."

Another attraction was the beer. Camp visitors consumed an enormous quantity on weekends — nearly 10,000 gallons of Schaefer and Lowenbrau on particularly busy ones.

About this time, Kuhn also appears to have also realized that he had a growing public relations problem. Success began to draw unwelcome attention from the media, and then the government. The Bund needed cover and it would get that when he handed ownership of the camp over to the German-American Settlement League, which historian Bradley W. Hart has called a "puppet" of the Bund. Kuhn immediately installed himself on the GASI board, then continued to pull the strings.

By opening day 1937, Camp Siegfried had become known even in Germany, and a growing cause for concern here. Kuhn also began to reveal his true intentions. Storm troopers by the hundreds came each weekend, ostensibly as security. Marchers choked off the

What happened at camp?

How great a threat to national security was Camp Siegfried on the eve of World War II? FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover never seemed to have taken the camp seriously, but historian Bradley W. Hart, said "dangerous" activity did take place there, which House Un-American Activities Committee testimony had confirmed.

During an Oct. 1, 1940, hearing, a 36-year-old member of the Ordnungsdienst, or storm troopers, Richard Werner, told HUAC that the troopers marched obsessively at Camp Siegfried "in preparation for that day," when the troopers would "overthrow this government and establish one like they have in Germany."

Was "that day" the day "when blood would flow in the streets of New York?" he was asked. "Yes," said Werner, "when we marched and hung up all the Jews on a streetlight, and then went down to Wall Street and, I guess, raided all the banks."

The HUAC testimony of one of the camp's youth leaders made national headlines. Brooklyn native Helen Vooros, 19 at the time, told committee members that after



Dancing at Camp Siegfried. Camp life was also filled with propaganda.

she had joined the Bund, she was sent to Camp Siegfried where she and other members of the Jungenschaft were sent on night hikes through the woods and forced "to keep in line formation. The marches were to build up resistance [and] the more scratches we have, the better. You are supposed to be without feeling or pity. You are not supposed to show any sympathy."

Daily camp life was filled with propaganda, she testified. "We were taught that we are pure Aryans and not to mingle with other races."

Vooros — who died in 2003 — told the committee that she finally quit the Bund after she was nearly sexually assaulted by other Bundists. She also

insinuated the camp wanted to encourage breeding for the propagation of the Aryan race.

There were girls' tents there near the boys' tents, and the parents complained about it. This was brought up with the youth leader at the time, and he later called a meeting and said that the boys and girls should go somewhere where people did not see them and should hide it better. They should follow their instincts."

Siegfried's top female youth leader, Tillie Koch, fought the order, Vooros testified. At nights, she stood guard outside the girls' camp "and while there contracted pneumonia and died." Koch — the only person known to have died at Siegfried — was 16. — YENGE GAY

'THEY'VE TURNED OUT TO BE A BUNCH OF HITLERITES'

Some Yaphankers suspected that munitions were stored at the camp, or that secret short-wave radio transmissions to Germany were originating from the newly built houses, according to a Yaphank Historical Society timeline.

One Yaphanker decided to take action. His name was Gustave Neuss (pronounced "noose"), a second-generation German-American and Yaphank's justice of the peace. In the summer of 1937, he told the local paper, the Mid-Island Call, that "when [Camp Siegfried] was first mentioned to me several years ago, I visualized a group of Germans of my father's type. But they've turned out to be just a bunch of Hitlerites."

Marge Neussen, Neuss' granddaughter, who now lives outside Cincinnati, said, "My family had strong feelings about what was right and wrong, and they saw things go on at Camp Siegfried that

shouldn't have been going on." Cardone-Leathers said, "He [Neuss] was the local hero, or the closest thing to a hero this story has."

Neuss conscripted members of a local boys club to copy down the plate numbers of cars parked in the overflow lot on an adjacent farmer's field, then sent those to the U.S. marshal in Patchogue who, in turn, handed them over to the FBI. Agency Director J. Edgar Hoover professed "concern" over the camp, but didn't do much otherwise. One witness had told FBI investigators that he "had seen nothing there that appeared at all impressive to him. They did appear to consume great quantities of beer and do a lot of marching and wearing uniforms."

Events were about to overtake Hoover and the FBI. In 1938, U.S. Rep. Samuel Dickstein (D-N.Y.), helped organize the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) to go after

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Melanie Cardone-Leathers, history librarian and archivist at Longwood Library in Middle Island, is an expert on the history of Camp Siegfried.

Fanfare

The origins of 'Camp Siegfried'

CAMP from C7

Siegfried. That same year, a New York-based lawyer and World War I veteran named Roy P. Monahan, who had been offended by Siegfried's antisemitic propaganda storm, told the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office that GASL had ignored a law requiring it to file its membership rolls with the state.

Just as a record 40,000 people were arriving for opening day in 1938, police raided the camp and arrested Kuhn and five other GASL officers. The trial began in early July and was over in a few days. The verdict was a foregone conclusion after one witness, a Bundist named Martin Wunderlich, was asked to demonstrate the Heil Hitler salute so common at Siegfried. "Is that supposed to be an American salute?" the judge snapped.

"No," said Wunderlich, "but it will be."

The convictions were later overturned, but Kuhn's Bundist leadership was coming to an end. After the Bund held a rally at Madison Square Garden on Feb. 20, 1939, New York District Attorney Thomas Dewey went after Kuhn on a tax evasion charge, which stuck. Dewey also found that Kuhn had been skimming money from the Bund and Siegfried. Deported after the war, Kuhn died in Germany in 1951 "unheralded and unsung," according to The Associated Press obituary.

Nevertheless, it was Neuss who may have finally struck the fatal blow. In November 1939, he got Brookhaven's Alcoholic Beverage Board to pull Camp Siegfried's liquor license. The camp never recovered.

'INDIVIDUALS OF GERMAN EXTRACTION'

After the war, the government handed Camp Siegfried back to the German-American Settlement League, and those 44 acres settled into quiet, postwar suburban obscurity. GASL became a homeowners' association, where members could buy homes but not the land beneath. German-American Settlement League remained the official name, but most people just referred to their quiet enclave as



The German-American Settlement League is now known as Lakeview Village.

CHRIS VAHE

Siegfried Park. They congregated at the old clubhouse, also built during the Siegfried years. The Lakeview Inn had burned down in 1941.

Children played on the old Hindenburg Platz. The original Siegfried cottages were updated, then expanded. Families came and went. The past receded, and the sinister history that unfolded over a six-year period was largely forgotten.

But the past was not quite done with Siegfried Park. In 2015, a pair of homeowners, Philip Kneer and Patricia-Flynn Kneer, along with the Long Island Housing Service, filed a lawsuit against GASL, alleging they had been discriminated against because long-standing racial covenants had prevented them from selling their home on the open market.

In the words of the complaint,

GASL "ensures that Siegfried Park remains a white and German residential community by enforcing a number of rules that restrict homeownership to individuals who are required 'primarily' to be individuals of German extraction."

The Kneers and LIHS cited other restrictions (they couldn't advertise their house, for example). They also pointed to problematic symbols from the old days, notably that the GASL flag and stationery still incorporated the "sig rune" of the Hitler Youth — an old German symbol that long predates Nazism.

While thousands of private communities across the country are still believed to have similarly illegal racial covenants, the Camp Siegfried link made this particular dispute stand out. TV news crews

and the international media descended on Siegfried Park. GASL settled with the Kneers a year later and revised its bylaws. It settled with the state attorney general in 2017.

In one sense, Siegfried Park and GASL have moved on. In 2020, the League — without fanfare or news release — quietly changed its name. In a filing with the New York secretary of state's office, "the German-American League Settlement" was dropped forever, and "Lakeview Village" was adopted as the new name.

'WE DON'T ERASE HISTORY HERE'

Any look into Siegfried's past begins at the Swezey-Avey House, where the Yaphank Historical Society is based. Its president, Bob Kessler, who was also president of GASL during the time of the lawsuit, is in his 70s, and still has the robust build of someone who's spent a life working with his hands. He was a stonemason, in fact, and later helped restore the Swezey-Avey.

Outgoing but also wary of reporters, he declined to be quoted about anything to do with the lawsuit or GASL. "Every once in a while, [the story] rears its head up again," he said, "and [reporters] come around. I have no problem with it. It is what it is."

On a recent tour of the Swezey-Avey, Kessler led a reporter through rooms packed with pictures and mementos from Yaphank's deep past, when it was a booming mill community, then later filled with cauli-

flower and potato farms. Camp Siegfried doesn't assume a prominent role here, although one room contains a huge blowup facsimile of the Linden Park subdivision map, with the original Nazi names.

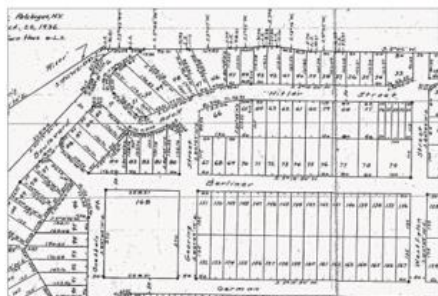
Yaphank and the custodians of its history do have a complicated relationship with this part of their past. Cardone-Leathers, of the Longwood Library, said one reason is that families who live here now have no ties to that time.

"If people want to learn more about it," she said, all they have to do is come to the library where she has collected a large archive of photos and news stories about Siegfried. Cardone-Leathers does concede, however, that most people in town don't know much, if anything, about its old Nazi ties.

Barbara Russell, Brookhaven's longtime historian, said Camp Siegfried had not been forgotten. "We don't erase history here. We certainly have many published pieces on Camp Siegfried. It's fairly well known and that's about all I could say about it."

Hart, the historian and author of "Hitler's American Friends" said: "How should Yaphank reckon with this past? It's one question I wrestle with as well." Bernstein, who wrote the history of the Bund, said there are no easy answers for Yaphank. An exhibit at the local libraries would be "wonderful," but "plaques would not be," he added.

Still, he said, the past "needs to be recognized."



A map of the German Gardens neighborhood where Camp Siegfried was located shows streets named after the Third Reich hierarchy.

LONGWOOD PUBLIC LIBRARY'S BAVELSOAL HISTORY COLLECTION