OBITUARIES

Asher O. Melzer, 78, the 'Dean' of Jewish Camping

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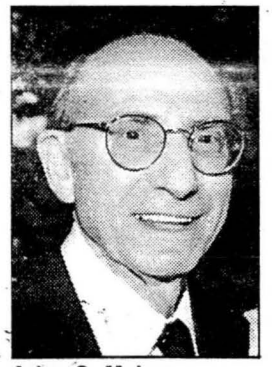
During the 21 years he was executive director of Surprise Lake Camp, one of the largest and oldest Jewish children's summer camps, Asher O. Melzer was widely known for his kindly mentoring of virtually everyone he encountered.

Melzer died of natural causes this past Sunday at his Great Neck home. He was 78.

"He was an incredible mentor to thousands of adults, children, social workers and camping professionals," said a son, Bruce. "He touched the lives of thousands of campers in a positive way." The younger Melzer recalled that his father was often referred to as "The dean of American Jewish camping."

Melzer supervised the 750-acre lakeside facility in the Hudson Valley some 60 miles north of Manhattan. A UJA-Federation agency, the camp next year marks its 100th anniversary.

Born in Bottrop, Germany, Melzer fled the country's Nazi regime with his family in 1936 and settled in Providence, R.I. To help support them, he dropped out of high school and worked as a tool-and-die maker in a defense plant during World War II. At the age of 22 he returned to school and went on to earn a degree from the University of Rhode Island and a master's in social work from the University of Pennsylvania.


Asher O. Melzer

In 1973 Melzer became executive director of Camp Ramah, a children's facility in Ojai, Calif. Returning to New York in 1976, Melzer served as the UJA-Federation's director of camping services during which time he also oversaw Surprise Lake Camp.

Melzer's accomplishments include initiating the first large-scale program to bring Israeli counselors to Jewish summer camps here. He was also instrumental in setting up the first Jewish summer camp in Hungary's post-Communist era. Melzer was president of the New York section of the American Camping Association and past chairman of its National Ethics Committee. He also was executive director of the Association of Jewish Sponsored Camps.

In addition to his sons, Bruce and Sandy of Seattle, Melzer is survived by Shirley, his wife of 51 years; a daughter, Shira Adams of Readfield, Maine; a sister, Claire Grossman of Providence, R.I.; and four grandchildren.

Services were held Tuesday at Riverside Nassau North chapel in Great Neck followed by interment at Beth Moses Cemetery in Pinelawn.