

Raananah Park, a Jewish summer colony in the town of Highland Mills, New York, played a central role in the story of these Oral Histories. Many of the subjects had been founding members of the community and had summer bungalows there. On a summer day in the early 1970s, Fan and Jack Koenigsberg talked to Lucille Brown and her friend, Laura Koslov, about the history of this special place.

Lucille Brown: Fan, start with the story you told us about the beginning of Raananah. When it started, how and the purpose behind it.

Fan Koenigsberg: Almost 33 years ago...

LB: About 1940? (1)

FK: Yes. A group of people who formerly met every summer in a colony about 3 miles from here called Shadow Lake, met year in and year out. And one day one of them was inspired with the idea, why not organize our own little colony.

LB: May I interrupt a minute? You say a group of people met every year at Shadow Lake?

FK: A summer place. Very crude dwellings. Some of them were in tents, water taps were outside the little bungalows, for those who had it. That was they way they spent the summers and loved it very, very much.

Laura Koslow: Would you rent those tents and those bungalows for the summer and come in from the city to spend the summer with your families there?

FK: That's right. One man, Mr. Furman, Jushka Furman, conceived the idea of getting as many of the people who met during the summer months to organize; to buy property that was somewhere in the vicinity and form their own little cooperative community. The camp, which was originally Camp Gregory, a Catholic camp for boys, was for sale. And being it was adjoining the ground of the Unzer Camp, a Jewish camp, they thought this was the most likely place to buy and set up this co-op.

LB: It was to be a Jewish co-op?

FK: Well, yes, because all these people were Jewish. The original group were 29 families who invested in this plot of ground. We got 70, 80 acres. About 80 acres of land. (2)

LK: When you got the thought, was a committee organized to search for a place that might be appropriate?

FK: No. They heard of this place. And the reason that they knew of this place (was) because they know camp. They were on campgrounds most of the time because ...

LB: Unzer Camp?

FK: On Unzer Campgrounds for their Friday nights, probably, or Saturday night. Because Unzer Camp always had cultural activities and social activities. And they were members of the [Farband](#). Unzer Camp is a Farband camp.

LB: How old was the Unzer Camp?

FK: Fifty years.

LK: And what is Farband?

FK: Farband is the Labor Zionist (movement). So the 29 families, each one was allotted about an acre of ground, which they don't own; it is owned cooperatively. They had to invest to cover the initial investment. So it was divided among the 29 families. And they built 29 homes, exactly the same off an assembly line. No one was allowed to have more than the other one. They would have the kitchen, the bedroom and a little living room. And they were allowed two outside porches which converted to an eating area. And the other porch was for extra sleeping quarters. Nobody had more. Nobody had less. And this was the way it was originally.

LB: You had a bathroom, too.

FK: Oh yes. Of course, a bathroom. And in the course of years, families grew, additions. The children got married. And with each need, the houses were expanded.

LB: Did they have to vote to get permission to expand?

FK: Yes. Nobody can do any alterations in their home if it went beyond the area of the lot that the house covered. They had to have permission because you were already encroaching on your neighbor, towards your neighbor. You had to have x number of feet away from your neighbor on all sides. I don't know just what the measurements were. So, later on in years, the children grew up and some wanted to build their own. So the only time we sold property, only to the children of the members. They were the only ones. And in all these years, only three children built. (3)

LK: So you have 32 houses here?

FK: Only 3 children built, but they have additional. Now we have, all told, 39. That meant seven newcomers came in about the time I came in, which was about 28 years ago. And 3 additional homes were built by the children. 39 homes now. Of course, with affluency the nature of the houses changed. They enlarged the rooms and converted the porches into additional rooms. And the 7 newcomers built extremely beautiful homes compared to what ours were.

LB: They were permitted to do this?

FK: They were allowed to do it. Yes. It hasn't changed since then.

LK: When was the swimming pool added?

FK: We had a swimming pool in the woods and we had trouble because the growths. The foliage would always cause a lot of trouble. So we had to dig one out in the open field. So the pool is about ten years old. The tennis court is about four, five years old. And shuffleboard. This is an added attraction.

LK: And what about your meetinghouse, that lovely little shul there?

FK: That has always been. But we added a room for the children. When they were little we had our own counselor on the ground, but eventually the children went to sleep-out camps or day camps in the neighboring area. It gave the mothers more freedom.

LK: Was it built when the first 29 houses were built, the meetinghouse?

FK: We had a main house where the trailer is and they had somebody who took care of the children there. Somebody got a free room. Down at the entrance, there, where the trailer is. They called it the Main House because the caretaker lived there and they rented a few rooms there. And the nursery teacher and her husband had a couple of rooms there. And the children had sort of a classroom in that building. But the Casino came on later. The house had to be demolished because it went into wrack and ruin and they had to raze it. We were lucky to get this lovely Mr. Peterson to come up. He was very glad to be able to move on Raananah grounds. So he's now our caretaker when we are not here.

LB: Where does he live now?

FK: He lives in the trailer. And he's an ex-policeman so he had the license of carrying a gun. So the year before he came we had breaking in, in some of the houses here. And since he's here we have had no trouble because he goes around, actually policing two or three times a day. During the off-season, he'd go around with his car and look to see if there's any damage done or there's shutters off; any winter damage. If there's a roof blown off or a tree down. He has our phone number and addresses so he notifies. At least, if somebody did break in, he can notify the police. So he's been keeping an eye on the grounds.

LB: How is the place run? Is it run by a committee that's elected?

FK: We have a Board.

LB: How many members on the Board?

FK: That Jack will have to tell you. I think there's ten or twelve members. I'm not sure. Why doesn't Jack listen in on this? He can tell you.

Jack Koenigsburg: Yeah, every year we have elections. One year for 6 and one year for 7. We are 13 members on the Board. Anybody elected to the Board is eligible for higher office in the Board. From these 13 elected, serving on the Board, elect one president, a vice president, a

recording secretary and a treasurer. And usually about 2 or 3 volunteers without pay to run the commercial side of it; arranging for electricians, plumbers. You know, whatever might be here for any improvements to the grounds, taking care of the road and so on and so forth. And then, this has been a big problem ever since the colony exists, has been a problem of water. We have our own wells. We have no city water. We could get city water but the price is prohibitive. So we have our own. We operate on 3 wells. One has been ruled not drinking water, so we use it for the pool. And two wells, which one, by the way, is going dry now, but one well supplies enough water still for the entire colony. We are in the process now of building a fourth well, which, as far as I know, will materialize in 1973.

We are serviced by a plumber, constantly, and we maintain two men which do the labor; cutting the high grasses, maintaining our social hall which we call our Casino. We also have, in the social hall, one room assigned for services- where we conduct our services without commercialism. We are inviting neighboring colonies. Everybody is welcome to come and pray without having to buy or purchase a ticket or anything else. As far as performing the services, we have our own talent. Among the 39 families, up til now there's always been two or three volunteers. We have quite a group that's very well versed in Jewish customs and performing the prayers. All the necessary items have been contributed to us. One of the members has contributed to us a Torah. Another has contributed a Torah which is quite expensive- usually costs about \$1000 each, if not more. We have heat installed, so if we have a cool day we can have heat, if the Jewish holiday came late in the season.

LK: Do you come here for the High Holy days?

JK: Yes. It's very pleasant. All the members are here, usually.

FK: It's not much, but it's something to look forward to.

JK: It's usually 100 percent attendance, but it's attracting our children and grandchildren. It's been done on a very high-class basis.

LK: And the members themselves conduct the services. It must be beautiful, because it sounds like a family affair.

FK: Exactly what it is. It's done with all the decorum.

LK: And the children participate and the grandchildren are around?

JK: That's right. We have in our constitution, actually, who may be a member of this group. We've never been tested in court, of course. Only one who believes in, as it prescribes in the

Good Books: We are to help each other and help the people of Israel to further their learnings and further their existence in the best manner. We're having every year, once a year, a charity drive. Out of 39 families we raise as much as \$30,000 which is distributed by a committee, usually by the elected officers on the Board. And we also had a bond drive.

FK: Israeli Bond drive.

JK: We had one last Saturday night. We probably will reach \$15,000.

LK: That leads to another question. This was organized thirty years ago. At the time was Zionism a strong influence here?

JK: Very strong, in fact you'd have to be a supporter of the Zionist thought. You may be Socialist, you may be radical, but you must be - in order to join this colony- a supporter of Zionist ideas.

LB: So, before you sell a house to someone, do they have to somehow assure you that this is what their belief is?

JK: Well, we haven't been as strict about it as it might seem. But we usually demand...

FK: It's not sold to the outsiders. It's only by recommendation. And people more or less of the same caliber come back.

LB: But they're all really interested in Zionism? This is the force that holds you together.

FK: Yes, yes. The common denominator.

LK: This also brings another question. These people, 30 years ago, were interested in Zionism. How many of them came from Europe with that interest and how many of them acquired it here?

JK: None of them. 30 years ago there wasn't a single American born one. Now they have some. It's the second generation.

FK: Raananah is 35 years old.

JK: 37 years old. That means that's the second generation of children of immigrants are now members of this group. They seem to be, although not on the same path, not the same course, not with the same enthusiasm. But they didn't feel or understand the persecution ...

FK: As you knew it...

JK: ...the immigrants felt in Europe. You know, most of them came from Russia and some of them came through pogroms and discrimination, prejudice and so on and so forth.

FK: But what's of great interest, many of the children and grandchildren have visited Israel on one or more occasions. They are really thrilled with the idea of Israel.

LB: When people first started this colony, you were fairly young then. They were maybe not quite so ardent Zionists as they became with the passage of time. Is that correct?

JK: I would say the influence came to the camp which is right adjoining to this property. This camp has been set up by Zionists, who were Zionists, I would say, from birth probably. And being next door, we were constantly fed with propaganda and the importance of better, equal rights for Jews and so on and so forth. They have embraced this thought because it's brought back to them, the days when they were discriminated against. When the war came on and with the tragedy (?) of the Jewish people probably enhanced that thought to a great degree. Because it was really the worst during the War time. Here, we were constantly collecting money. In fact, many of them were even involved, some of them, in gun-running for...

FK: ...the underground

JK: ... for Israel, before it was established. During the Jewish-Arab war.

LK: So it was their great interest that influenced you? It wasn't an influence that you had in Europe?

JK: The fact is, I would say 95% of the people in Raananah Park had lost their relatives in the German homes and have been shot and killed. I don't think there's one family who escaped.

FK: It was bad.

JK: So, at that time they were fighting with all they could to open the gates of Palestine so the Jews had a pace to go.

FK: They're ardent Zionists. If you want to take the overall picture, they're all ardent Zionists. The women, alone, in this colony have meetings to raise funds for Israel. Nothing to do with the rest- we raise funds. This is set aside. Women of Raananah Park have to do their bit.

JK: They're supporting those Jewish, I mean, Yiddish and Hebrew periodicals. And this is probably, percentage wise, more people speak Hebrew in this colony than any place in the world. Out of 39 families, I know about ten who speak Hebrew. This is a tremendous...

LK: And they're not Israelis?

JK: Not Israelis. No, not Israelis.

LK: Well, to read and write Hebrew is one thing. Many of us know how to read and write but we can't speak it.

JK: No, they practice it here.

LK: You mean conversational?

FK: ...belong to Hebrew clubs.

JK: We have a Hebrew club. And we speak. We meet and discuss and we conduct our business in the Hebrew language all the way through.

FK: As a matter of fact, this week alone they're holding a Hebrew convention at the Pioneer Club, in the mountains. We were supposed to be present there.

JK: We were there on Sunday. Hebrew speaking people maintain two newspapers, the only Hebrew publications outside of Israel. One is a high class...I mean that one's far better than the [Harper's](#) magazine or the [Scribner's](#) magazine. On a much higher level. And then we had one that is less. Lesser degree but it can reach more people.

But purchasing this property is a very interesting story. It was owned by a Catholic group. And they were quite aware that this is. Jashka Forman was a man who was sincere and believed in co-op living. He went to Utah and organized the Mormons. (4) And there, where he got his experience he set it up, quite a name. Today there are still places marked with his name there. He is the one who started this co-op. And he lived there several years and then came back. He found it a little strange. His English was not too good; he spoke with a Yiddish accent and evidently didn't work with him. So he came back here, East, and found out this property. And when this Catholic group heard that there's somebody who organized the Mormons for co-op living is interested to buy this property; not to make any profit, not for to develop it for himself, and they sold it quite reasonable. Very reasonable, actually for a few thousand dollars. But there's one understanding: that no speculation. This should be people who want to buy the land to live off it.

FK: As a matter of fact, in our by-laws, you cannot sell your home for profit. You can only claim additional improvements. The money that you laid out for additional improvements can be included in the original cost of the house, but you cannot make money on your property. There's no speculation.

JK: Now we're making some allowance for inflation.

LB: Well, it sounds not only Zionist, but Socialist.

FK: It is. Absolutely.

JK: It is, it is. We all pay the same membership dues whether they have a house for \$50,000 or \$500... pay the same dues.

FK: You have the same rights.

JK: The same rights, the same vote.

LB: You have meetings; not just the Board, but you have community meetings?

JK: We have general meetings twice a year to conduct our business. Otherwise, we get together every Friday night. We conduct an [oneg shabbos](#) and occasionally we meet for Saturday morning services. The Board meets every second week. We have social gatherings. We meet in private homes very often, particularly before the season starts or after the season ends.

FK: Before we're involved with our own guests. It's a house-to-house thing. It's every night in someone else's home. Gatherings.

JK: Our membership dues are still the same as they were twenty years ago. \$135 a year.

FK: We don't encourage too much money in the till. Whatever the needs may be later on, we just raise the extra funds.

JK: When we needed a swimming pool, everyone was taxed \$300 and the swimming pool was built.

LB: Now that Unzer Camp being closed, somebody told us when we were walking around today that the [Lubovitcher](#) is considering whether they will buy it, or they...

JK: I understand they have bought it.

LB: Before there was constant traffic back and forth from Unzer Camp to here, right?

FK: Right. Correct.

LB: And a mixing of Yiddishkeit, Zionist, ardent group...

FK: Well, it's not only that, darling, the reason for this intermingling- they were also... We are Farband members just as they are and we knew people from the Farband.

LB: You are also Farband members?

FK: Yes, most of us are.

JK: Most of us are Farband members.

FK: So they were friends who would camp and they'd come to visit us and vice versa. Women who belonged to my club, the Pioneer Women, also part of the Zionist movement. And so it was our friends who vacationed there and so they came to visit. So there was constant traffic back and forth.

LB: There were groups over there who came temporarily and who then you formed friendships with them...

FK: Oh yes. Later there are people who, not only, not all Farband members came to the camp. They came there because they were interested in Yiddish culture.

LB: And you said there was a Hebrew week...

FK: And a music week, yes. A poetry week.

JK: Let me tell you about our Friday nights. Very interesting. We have, usually a minimum of religious ceremonies just to bring about, to tell people, this is the holy Sabbath. And then we have some singing, community singing and usually we have a lecture or a book review. Almost 100% local talent. We also have comments on the portion of the bible which is read that week. In fact, I've been working on one right now.

FK: It is read in Hebrew or Yiddish and somebody else reads it in English and then there's commentary on it.

LB: All right. Back to my original question. With the closing of the Unzer Camp and the Lubovitchers move in...

JK: That's a rhetorical question. We can't answer that.

LB: You don't know what will be in the relationship?

FK: If it will be good or bad for us? We don't know. We hope it'll be good because we understand that they are more liberal than the other sects are. So there may be some communication.

JK: But we may have some... our swimming pool's adjacent to their property and we may have some difficulties as far as swimming; women and men swimming together, not encouraged by the Lubovitcher. And that may make us all...

LB: But it's not on their property.

JK: I know. But still and all, it's very close. Somebody from their group might peek or might...

FK: Yes, we don't have to hide from them

LB: If they want to peek, that's their problem. Right?

FK: Right. You can't stop one from reading pornography in the privacy of the bedroom.

JK: We'll see, we'll see what they are. They may make demands on us being we're such close neighbors. We have no demands on them. All probably we want is to be left alone.

LK: I think that will be their attitude.

FK: Yes. I think so too. And they can have our blessings as far as that's concerned.

LB: You don't have any feeling about having a group next to you which dresses differently, you know, or has different customs and so on?

JK: No. Their main language is Yiddish. We are, in Yiddish, almost out in Raananah.

LB: It's out?

JK: Almost out. There are very few people. We have very few people that still speak Yiddish any more.

FK: It would be nice for our children to hear Yiddish constantly.

JK: Because our children don't speak Yiddish. And certainly, our grandchildren don't speak Yiddish.

FK: It's a very sad loss.

JK: It's a pity, but that's the way it is. I mean, it's a fact and that's all there is to it. I would encourage it even... they have Hebrew take its place. But I'm sorry, it does not.

LB: Are you saying the Lubovitchers speak Yiddish then there might be a communication problem? They must have to learn English, too?

FK: They must know English. They conduct their business in English, darling. What they do in the privacy of their home or in their community is their business.

LB: It's just that I've heard people comment about the Hasidim with distaste because they wore different clothing and they followed different practices.

FK: No, this sect seems to be...

JK: Still and all, I still foresee... some difficulty.

LB: I would imagine, no matter who moves next to whom, there's always a period of adjustment.

JK: Period of adjustment, that's right, that's right.

LB: Can you think of anything else you'd like to tell us about Raananah?

JK: Raananah life is probably very similar to the life of a small , little shtetl in Europe. There are little quarrels, intermarriages- inter-marry each other. We have constant bickering against neighbors. And no two people are alike. It is crazy, but we always... we always seem to be able to straighten it out.

LB: You feel overriding all is the concern for the community, then?

FK: All are interested in the concern of Raananah. Whatever is done, even if there is a bit of jealousy involved... but if they do something for Raananah, they want the honors.

JK: There is definitely jealousy. There's definitely jealousy involved because the last 25 years some of them have really prospered. Some of them became very wealthy. Literally millionaires. And some of them have stayed the same. To pay for the upkeep of their bungalow is still a problem to them.

FK: And yet, they will go out of their way, the families working together to raise enough money to maintain Raananah because it's become a way of life for them. And they don't want to give it up.

LB: So the community concern is overriding. It rises above whatever family jealousies, you might say.

FK: Yeah, that's right. Oh yes. Raananah comes first. Raananah comes first.

Notes: Comments and corrections are from Judy Woll who is Yushka Furman's granddaughter. Her mother (Alice Furman) married Misha Woll who was an early member of Raananah too.
November 2018.

1. 1937
2. 69 acres
3. At least six homes of children of Raananah were built: Lazar, Ziana and Misha Woll; Lefty Plitt, Vevie (Bill) and Yossi Newman. Also Ruthie (Plitt) and Murray Koenig had a house.
4. This is not true.



Raananah Circa Summer 1958

L to R:

Back Row - Ida (Adelstein) Gerzberg, Fanny (Adelstein) Koenigsberg, Standing- Carol (Koenigsberg) Wernick, Sonia (Uchin) Wernick

Middle Row - Steven Gerzberg?, Jane last name?, Mitchell?

Front row - Bea (Edelstein) last name?, Nina (Vogelfanger) Lehman, Ruby (Koenigsberg) Vogelfanger.