Nitgedaiget: A Vanished Utopia

by Diane Lapis

Camp Nitgedaiget is a place as complex to explain as it is hard to pronounce. Nitgedaiget was a vacation resort for both Jewish progressive liberals and Communist sympathizers who held an idealistic worldview. Nitgedaiget attracted some of the leading entertainers, literary luminaries, and political activists of the times. Its origins, activities, even its mysteries and sudden demise, make this vanished utopia one of the more intriguing stories in Dutchess County history.

Camp Nitgedaiget, pronounced Nish-guh-die-get, meaning "no worries" in Yiddish, was also known as Camp Beacon. It was the first cooperative proletarian year-round adult vacation resort in the United States. It operated from 1922 until the mid 1950s and was located in southern Dutchess County, New York, in the hamlet of Dutchess Junction, approximately two miles south of the city of Beacon.

Nitgedaiget was one of 27 socially progressive camps and resorts operating in New York State in the first half of the twentieth century.² Additionally, 300 camps with similar philosophies were scattered across the United States.³ The main purpose of these camps was to provide an inexpensive vacation for members of the working class while expanding their cultural horizons and strengthening their political values.⁴ The camp founders and patrons sympathized with labor unions and the Communist Party USA (hereafter "CPUSA") in order to achieve their common goals of decent working and living conditions, civil rights, social security, and health and unemployment insurance.⁵

The Beginnings: the United Workers Cooperative Association

The story of Nitgedaiget begins around 1910, when a group of young, Yiddish-speaking immigrant garment workers, all who held similar social and political values, formed the United Workers Cooperative Association (hereafter "the Association"). The purpose of the Association was to improve living conditions for its members who were living in Lower East Side tenements. The group leased a five-story apartment house on 1815 Madison Avenue in New York City and created ten cooperative apartments, a restaurant, and a library.⁶ Then in 1922, the Association purchased 250 acres of land in Beacon, New York, and developed a cooperative camp in

order that its members could vacation in the countryside with like-minded individuals.

By 1926, the Association grew to over 1,000 members. The founders' continuing efforts and the success of the camps led to the construction of cooperative housing on Allerton Avenue in the Bronx, called the Coops (pronounced as Coops, not Co-ops). According to the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Coops is considered "not only distinguished for its architectural merit, but is historically significant as one of the most important of the non-profit cooperative housing complex in New York City during the 1920s." Four buildings contained over 700 sunshine-filled apartments with cross-ventilation. Apartments faced either Bronx Park or beautiful courtyards and provided a respite from the factories and tenements. The founders theorized that the experience of running a large collectively owned enterprise would prepare Association members for the day when workers would govern society. Workers "would be able to participate in the democratic functioning of all types of educational, social, artistic, humanitarian, and economic enterprises." They also believed that this environment would provide an atmosphere that would enable their children to thrive both physically and mentally while developing a social conscience.7

While the Association originally sponsored the camp, the Needle Trades Union and the United Jewish Peoples Order/International Workers Order (Communist-affiliated insurance and fraternal organizations) purportedly funded the camp at different times throughout its tenure. The Association posted advertisements for Camp Nitgedaiget in the *Daily Worker*, the official newspaper of the CPUSA, and its Yiddish language paper the *Freiheit*, as well as various garment industry magazines. The Association/Coops management arranged transportation for patrons from the Coops to Nitgedaiget. The camp was not restricted to garment workers and residents of the Coops. Patrons also came from the tri-state area and were engaged in a variety of working-class trades.

The Nitgedaiget property was located on both sides of Route 9D in Beacon. Starting modestly with only tents and dining under the stars, the camp quickly grew to accommodate up to 1,000 patrons daily. The west or riverside of 9D featured a four-story hotel, a dining hall, sports facilities, a lake, and access to fishing and boating on the Hudson River. The east or mountainside included a pool and waterfall, the business office, bungalows, platform tents, and a casino (casino is defined here as a large gathering hall for dancing, lectures, and entertainment, not for gambling games).

Photographs and postcards of the camp showed magnificent views of the Hudson River and the city of Newburgh.

Run as a not-for-profit organization, the camp advertised its rates as "reasonable" thereby allowing workers the opportunity to afford a vacation. For example, daily and weekend rates in 1933 were advertised at \$2.45 and \$4.65 respectively. In 1937, the \$14.50 weekly rate included three meals a day and two of each of the following: sheets, pillowcases, blankets, pillows, and cakes of soap. A 25 cent donation to the CPUSA was included in the rate.12



Figure 1. Postcard of hotel and bungalows at Camp Nitgedaiget, dated 1939. Collection of Roger and Rose Story.

Layout of Camp Nitgedaiget

The original hotel, known as the Winter Quarters, accommodated 80 guests. In the summers it was converted to a library and hospital.¹³ Sometime in the late 1930s, a four-story hotel was built, connecting the two buildings with a passageway. The new hotel, called Hotel Nitgedaiget, featured 56 rooms and accommodated 200 guests. The steam-heated hotels enabled the camp to operate year-round. A hammer and sickle, a symbol of international proletarian unity, adorned the hotel's main doorway as well as the bungalow doors, similar to ones that can still be seen at the Coops in the Bronx.14

Hundreds of guest bungalows dotted the mountainside. Each 7' x 7' unit contained two beds, a table, a closet and a small mirror. Behind each closet door hung a "Brother, The Daily Worker is My Paper" poster. Wooden platform tents in the woods were also available for guests. ¹⁵ Although Nitgedaiget was an adult resort, children would often accompany their parents on vacation.

The pool was one of the main attractions at the camp. In 1927, James Lynch and Sons, contractors and owners of a lumberyard in Beacon, created a large pool (180' x 70') formed by a man-made dam. There were five rows of stairs leading down into the pool enabling guests to sunbathe at the edge of the icy cold water. The dam was covered with large stones giving it a natural appearance. Beach sand covered the paths leading to the pool. Modern comfort stations with hot and cold-running showers were located nearby. In 1937, a reporter noted campers being led in a sing-along on the pool stairs. The camp's cultural director stood in the shallow end with a small pamphlet, as he conducted the swimmers in singing the *Internationale*, a left-wing anthem, *Red Army March*, *Whirlwinds of Danger*, and *Sit Down*, a Negro spiritual.



Figure 2. The pool at Camp Nitgedaiget, 1929. Photograph by Joe Wiener. Collection of the Tamiment Library, New York University.

Camp recreation facilities included a baseball field, handball and tennis courts, an area for track and field events, and a skating rink in the winter. Sports activities were scheduled throughout the day.¹⁸

The dining hall seated 800 guests, who called each other "comrade." Announcements for the day's events were made on a megaphone during and



Figure 3. *Ice skaters, undated. Real photo postcard. Collection of Roger and Rose Story.*

after the meal. Men were required to wear shirts in the dining room. A sign read, "Comrades, your bare backs are not inspiring to appetites. Comrades will not be admitted in the dining room without tops. Catch on?" The walls were decorated with a large portrait of Lenin, red banners, a 15'x10' painted sign stating "Strong Farmer and Worker Party in this Country," and a large scarlet hammer and sickle symbol.19

A bookstall outside the dining hall sold pamphlets, Marxist books, and newspapers such as the Daily Worker, the Freiheit, and the New York Times.²⁰ One reporter noted that the atmosphere was "electric" with patrons walking about with books and newspapers in their hands, reading, arguing, and lecturing about Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, and Engels.²¹ Patrons sang Communist songs as they walked to and from activities. One girl commented to the reporter that "we have to fashion our minds for the coming war of the classes and we have to make our bodies strong for the same thing."22

Luminaries from the Entertainment and Literary World at Camp Nitgedaiget

The casino featured a stage with two dressing rooms and a parquet dance floor. One thousand guests were entertained on a grand scale on Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings. The casino was an important venue for Yiddish theater, Marxist dramaturgy, musical concerts, motion pictures, and guest speakers.²³

Many leading musicians, actors, dancers, poets, and theater directors of the day, worked or performed at the casino. These artists were part of a larger cultural scene from New York City. They traveled to a variety of Jewish camps and resorts such as Unity, Kinderland, Lakeland, Boiberik, and Wo-Chi-Ca imparting leftist social and political values as well as Yiddish language and culture. ²⁴ The Yiddish programs were more prevalent in the 1920's and 30s. ²⁵



Figure 4. Interior of dining hall. Postcard, dated 1939. Collection of Roger and Rose Story.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, the Russian Futurist poet, playwright, artist and actor was invited to recite his poems at Nitgedaiget during his American tour in 1925. He invited Ellie Jones, a woman he met and fell in love with during his stay in New York, to accompany him there. The two lovers quarreled, inspiring Mayakovsky to write a poem entitled *Kemp Nit Gedayge*. Loosely translated, the verse captures his anguish about the argument, as well as his negative feelings about the social conditions and capitalism in America..²⁶

In 1926, Mike Gold visited Nitgedaiget. He was a champion for political action and social change, author of *Jews Without Money*, and columnist for the *Daily Worker*. He recalled a Friday night campfire in which Nicho-

las Buchwald, playwright and dramatic editor for the *Freiheit*, and Jacob Fenster, a Yiddish poet and playwright who worked as a camp waiter, read a burlesque weekly called the "Camp Yot" (Wise Cracker). Fenster's camp song helped to build a sense of solidarity among the patrons.²⁷ The song, translated from Yiddish is as follows:

Camp Nitgedaiget Kemp Nit Gedayget 28 In our Camp Nitgedaiget In unzer kemp Nit Gedayget We are all family and friends Zaynen mir ale yatn un khaveyrim (comrades). Work and struggle has united us. Arbet un kamf hot farbridert. Worry and need has made us Zorg un novt hot unz bafraynt, friends. We come here from the city and Kumen mir aher fun shtot un shap, factories. Hey Comrades! Hey, khaveyrim! We sing this song and here is the Zingen mir a lid un ot iz dos lid song No worries, no worries, no Nit gedayget, nit gedayget, nit worries. gedayget.

This refrain was included in a collection of camp songs arranged by Jacob Schaefer. Schaefer directed the Coops' Yiddish School chorus and worked at Nitgedaiget. He founded the first left-wing Yiddish workers choir that later developed into an international organization. Schaefer is considered the "father" of Jewish proletarian music in the US.²⁹

Jacob Mestel, a theater artist, writer, and historian, performed and directed Marxist plays as the camp's entertainment director. In *Undzer Teater (Our Theater)*, Mestel noted that these plays helped to "educate actors politically as well as artistically." Mestel founded the left-wing theater collective *Artef.* Nitgedaiget advertised in *Artef's* tenth-anniversary journal laying claim that "the Yiddish Worker's Theatre was born on the stage of Nitgedaiget." Mestel directed and performed in the play *Hirsh Leckert*, about an impoverished garment worker frustrated by corrupt unions, an oppressive government, and poor working conditions. Proletarian dramas like *Hirsh Leckert* "reminded its audience, that their harsh lives in Russia and the Socialist failures under the Czarist government were analogous to their present socio-political situation in the United States." Mestel subsequently directed and adapted plays for Yiddish film and radio, and performed in the television show *The Goldbergs* in the 1950's.³⁴



Figure 5. The play "Hirsh Leckert." Photograph, 1929. Collections of the Museum of the City of New York.

In the 1930s, Jules Dassin served as the camp's entertainment director. He started his career in Yiddish theater and was later known for the smash hit *Never on Sunday*, which starred his wife Melina Mercouri. His brief affiliation with the Communist party in the 1930s caused him to be shunned by Hollywood later in the 1950s, during the McCarthy era.³⁵

John Garfield worked at the camp in the 1930s. He later became a Warner Brother's star noted for his roles in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Gentleman's Agreement*. When he testified before the U.S. Congressional House Committee on Un-American Activities, he denied Communist affiliation and refused to name names. Blacklisting ended his career and the stress of the ordeal caused his premature death of a heart attack at age 39.³⁶

Pete Seeger, folk singer and activist, often performed at Nitgedaiget. Referring to his performances there, he noted, "Be sure to mention that Woody Guthrie, composer of 'This Land is Your Land' (and I) performed there in 1940 and '41. Oh, we had some great programs. Sometimes we would have as many as a thousand people on a weekend."³⁷ Folk songs helped create unity among the working class, regardless of position, skill, gender, race or background.³⁸ In 1949, Seeger bought 17 acres of land adjacent to Nitgedaiget and built a log cabin for his family.³⁹

Always sympathetic to Communist causes, dancer Edith Segal performed and taught modern and Eastern European folk dances to audiences at the Coops, Nitgedaiget and Camp Kinderland. 40

Nitgedaiget appeared in popular literature. Harvey Kurtzman, the founder of Mad Magazine, included a comic reference to Camp Nitgedaiget in a comic strip called "Mark Trail" in which Boy Scouts repeatedly ask to see the "habitat of the Nitdedaiget Girl Scout Camp." His character Alfred E. Newman was the fictitious mascot for the cover of the magazine, and known for his signature phrase, "What, me worry?" Similar to Camp Nitgedaiget's slogan "no worries", both phrases attempted to make light of working class pressures.41

In 1936, S. J. Perelman, an American humorist, author, and screenwriter, known for his short pieces in The New Yorker, visited Nitgedaiget and wrote a play called Waiting for Santy: A Christmas Playlet. In the story, the main character is in love with his boss' daughter. He tells her, "I can't sleep, I can't eat, and that's how I love you. You're a double malted with two scoops of whipped cream; you're the moon rising over Mosholu Parkway; you're a two weeks' vacation at Camp Nitgedaiget! I'd pull down the Chrysler Building to make a Bobbie-pin for your hair!"42

The beat poet Allen Ginsberg referenced Nitgedaiget in Kaddish for Naomi Ginsberg (1894–1956), a poem about the life and death of his mother. 43 Ginsberg and his mother spent a few weeks at the camp in the 1930s.⁴⁴

Progressive political speakers were an integral part of the social and cultural scene at the camp. In 1924, William Z. Foster, the leader of the Industrial Workers of the World and General Secretary of the CPUSA spoke to a crowd of 3,000 guests. The evening activities also included entertainment by Metropolitan Opera stars and instrumental soloists.⁴⁵ An example of a schedule included guest speakers from the Daily Worker as part of the weekend entertainment.46

Saturday

- Morning Track and Field meet (prizes given)
- Afternoon Swimming races and tennis tournament, rowing on the Hudson
- Evening Daily Worker concert program: Nitgedaiget Trio; Daily Worker "Pageant; Children's play "Why," with a chorus of 50 voices; Nitgedaiget 4-piece Jazz Orchestra

Sunday

- Morning Carl Brodsky lecture on "The Role of the *Daily Worker* in the Working Class Movement"
- Afternoon Baseball Game
- Dancing

In addition to the various musicians and entertainers who performed at the camp, dances with live music were held on Saturday and Sunday evenings at the casino. Local residents and other vacationers were invited to attend evening festivities for a nickel.

Local Reaction to the Camp

Although its patrons held the camp in high esteem, many local community members were apprehensive and suspicious of the activities at Nitgedaiget. In 1927, the camp managers received a letter from the Ku Klux Klan. The infamous group wrote, "We demand that you withdraw from this territory or else we will take severe measures against you, and you know the methods and tactics that we apply. We close with despise and hatred to you."⁴⁷

A May Day "meleé" occurred, in 1931, at Bank Square in Beacon. The Worker's Party of Beacon and New York City requested a permit to assemble in honor of the International May Day Parade. Beacon's Mayor Russell refused the permit. Local and neighboring law enforcement anticipated 150 "imported Communists" from New York City to assemble, purportedly sponsored and housed at Nitgedaiget. In actuality, only five members of the Worker's Party appeared. One individual stood on a folding chair waving an American flag and shouting, "Workers of Beacon! Demand your right to free speech." When a police officer removed the first demonstrator from the chair, a second figure jumped on the chair and was immediately pulled down. The five activists were hauled off to the police station, but not before a hostile crowd of 1,500 locals attempted to maul them. Two of the demonstrators were from Nitgedaiget, the other three from New York City. Max Lieberman, the camp manager, acted in the role of negotiator from the International Labor Defense Fund to secure their bail and release from jail.48

Edward Folliard, a White House news correspondent for *The Washington Post*, reported on a "secret" Communist school in the basement of Hotel

Nitgedaiget in 1937. He claimed that the school trained seamen in the "red doctrine" thereby enabling them to gain a stronghold for the Communist Party on merchant ships. Banners supposedly adorned the classroom walls announcing the party goals: "Workers of the World Unite," "A Communist Unit on Every Ship," and "Communism is 20th Century Americanism". The ten-week-course of study was said to include the history of the American labor movement, trade union and political action strategies and tactics. After Folliard's exposé, the camp purportedly moved its "secret" school to Camp Unity and other locations in New York City. 49 Three years later, the editor of the Beacon News attempted to lay the matter to rest. The camp was flying the "Stars and Stripes" and not engaged in Communistic activity as in the past.50

The End of Utopia

A number of political and social events brought about the demise of Nitgedaiget. The founding members' goals of providing decent working and living conditions, social security, and health and unemployment insurance were largely achieved through labor unions and government programs. Many of the second-generation residents of the Coops moved from the working class to the middle class.⁵¹ By 1945, the Association, through a series of poor managerial and financial planning efforts, lost ownership of the Coops. The building complex was sold to a private landlord and a tenant association was formed to work with the new management.⁵²

Many Communist sympathizers became disheartened and disillusioned with the party when the political landscape changed due to the Hitler-Stalin pact that set the stage for WWII. The McCarthy period, starting in 1950, brought a sense of panic to left-leaning and Communist sympathizers. Five years later, the State of New York Legislative Committee on Charitable and Philanthropic Organizations began investigations into Communist camps. They set out to prove that the Communist party was infiltrating and indoctrinating children in Communist principles.⁵³ Harassment and fears of violence led many camps to close or move to new locations 54

It is not clear when Nitgedaiget shut its doors. Local residents guess that it closed between 1952 and 1954. The buildings and property lay barren until the hotel burned down in August 1963.55 The dining hall and casino burned down four months later. After a thorough investigation, Fishkill Fire Chief Scofield believed that the fires were due to arson. Louis Ritter Realty of Beacon owned the property at that time.⁵⁶ In 1967, the 186-acre property that included 168 cabins, a three-acre lake, the pool and roads, was put on the market for \$300,000.⁵⁷

Hudson Highlands State Park Preserve purchased the land and it is currently nestled within a 6,000-acre natural preserve. ⁵⁸ Today, hikers walking along the Notch Trail will discover rusty handrails and moss covered steps leading to a ravine and dam... all that remains of this once grand utopian enterprise. ⁵⁹



Figure 6. The original pool at Camp Nitgedaiget, now part of the Hudson Highlands State Park, 2015. Photograph. Collection of Diane Lapis.

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- ¹⁷ Arnold, August 6, 1937.
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- ²⁰ Arnold, August 2, 1937.
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- ²² Arnold, August 4, 1937.
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- ³¹ Finding Aid to the *Guide to the Papers of Jacob Mestel*.
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