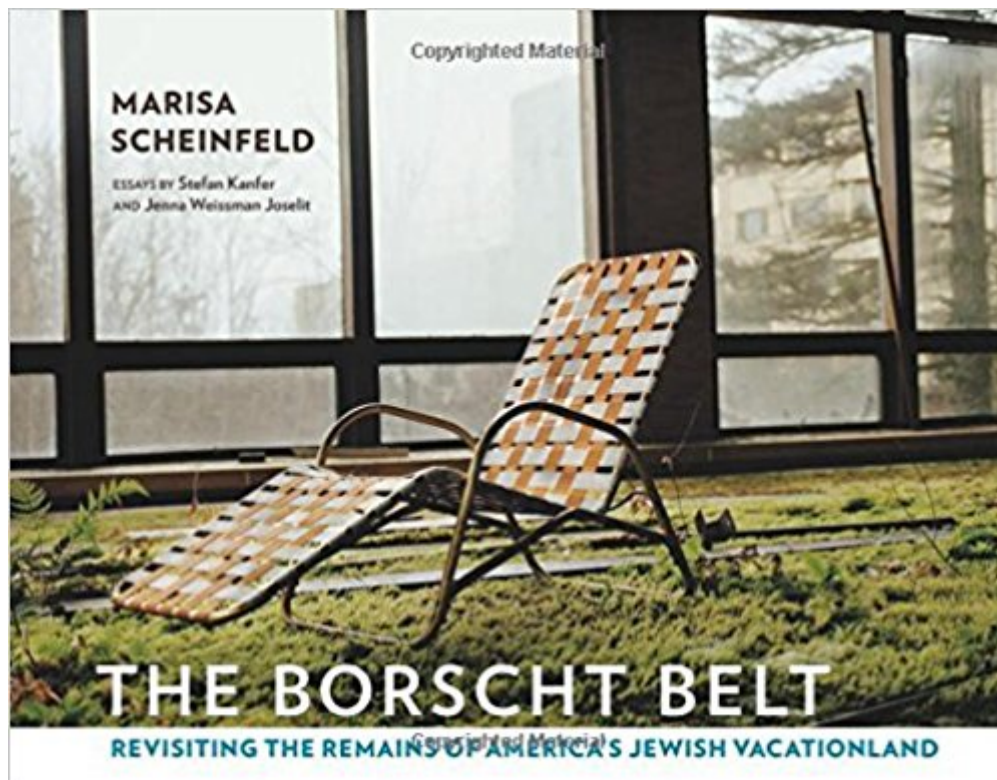




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The Borscht Belt: Revisiting The Remains Of America's Jewish Vacationland



Synopsis

Today the Borscht Belt is recalled through the nostalgic lens of summer swims, Saturday night dances, and comedy performances. But its current state, like that of many other formerly glorious regions, is nothing like its earlier status. Forgotten about and exhausted, much of its structural environment has been left to decay. The Borscht Belt, which features essays by Stefan Kanfer and Jenna Weissman Joselit, presents Marisa Scheinfeld's photographs of abandoned sites where resorts, hotels, and bungalow colonies once boomed in the Catskill Mountain region of upstate New York. The book assembles images Scheinfeld has shot inside and outside locations that once buzzed with life as year-round havens for generations of people. Some of the structures have been lying abandoned for periods ranging from four to twenty years, depending on the specific hotel or bungalow colony and the conditions under which it closed. Other sites have since been demolished or repurposed, making this book an even more significant documentation of a pivotal era in American Jewish history. The Borscht Belt presents a contemporary view of more than forty hotel and bungalow sites. From entire expanses of abandoned properties to small lots containing drained swimming pools, the remains of the Borscht Belt era now lie forgotten, overgrown, and vacant. In the absence of human activity, nature has reclaimed the sites, having encroached upon or completely overtaken them. Many of the interiors have been vandalized or marked by paintball players and graffiti artists. Each ruin lies radically altered by the elements and effects of time. Scheinfeld's images record all of these developments.

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Customer Reviews

"One winter I went with other teenagers to a convention at Grossinger's and remember my excitement at discovering the indoor swimming pool and the deep heat of their sauna. I recall that the whole place seemed to offer a wonderland of new experiences. I went to the convention again the next year, but I never went back after I left New York. There is a stark difference between my memory and the shell of a resort that exists today. But the past can be given form and detail by photography, and that is what Marisa Scheinfeld's photographs do. Visualizing the past this way can actually take the form of memory. Old and new pictures help us to experience any change that has happened, and I have found change to be the truest measure of time." — Mark Klett, photographer

"In photographing the ruins of the great Jewish resort area, Marisa Scheinfeld taps our memories of the great Golden Age of the Catskills and fills our hearts with recollections. In their whirlwinds of color, these photos sing the history of the hotels and bungalow colonies, putting us at ease by the pool, at sport on the handball courts, and always at the table in the dining room. It's a joy to step into these vivid images and relive such an important historical phenomenon." — Phil Brown, Founder and President of the Catskills Institute

"Photographer Marisa Scheinfeld has documented the end of the great resorts in *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America's Jewish Vacationland*, which features page after page of photos of waterless, cracking pools, dirt-caked floors, weathered and withered wooden cottages, gashed ceilings and gushing insulation, graffiti-bedecked walls, rows of bereft beach emptiness where there had once been fullness. Scheinfeld's photos remind one of the old Catskills' theme of nature despoiled, a contemporary counterpart to the desolate final painting in Cole's *The Course of Empire*." — Neal Gabler, *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2016)

"Those structures that haven't been repurposed as meditation centers or rehab facilities have fallen into that beguiling realm neither humanity nor nature can produce alone, with wild vegetation blurring, bending, and breaking the rigid geometries of civilization. The book notes Woody Allen's quip, no doubt delivered at some point from a Borscht Belt stage: 'Eighty percent of success is showing up.' Some might say that Scheinfeld arrived half a century too late, but her photos reveal that she showed up just in time to discover mutable beauty in tumbledown dreams." — R. C. Baker, *Village Voice*

"I will never forget my childhood in Brooklyn and my days visiting the Catskill Mountains. I worked one summer at Grossinger's as a busboy and it was a memorable experience in my life. It is sad to see these pictures of what once was and what will never be again. They are brilliant photographs and the memories will be indelible in my mind. This is sadly joyful." — Larry King

"I was there in the glory days of the Catskills and the audiences

were tough and demanding. They really sharpened your act. It was do or die. No Borscht Belt, no Mel Brooks." — Mel Brooks

Susan Sontag famously observed that 'all photographs testify to time's relentless melt. One could scarcely imagine a more observant and poetic testimony than Marisa Scheinfeld's eerie photographic record of the crumbling remains of American Jewry's mid-century Xanadu, the Borscht Belt. Scheinfeld has an archaeologist's attention to the accumulated layers of history and the passage of time; her melancholic images of ruins, detritus, and festering vegetation are haunted by an unseen and undefined presence, providing a visual meditation on abandonment and absence. These photographs invite us to consider the rich history of American Jewish life, the legacy of the Catskills, and the ways in which this complex history is enduringly present and woven into the very fiber of the region."

— Maya Benton, Curator, International Center of Photography

"It was my good fortune to land in the Borscht Belt in the summer of 1933. It had an active Jewish community and a bucolic countryside, in many ways similar to the shtetl life familiar to me in Lithuania. My cousin Seymour Cohen and I visited every major hotel in the area and carefully compared what they had to offer. I was introduced to some of the owners. I think I even met the legendary Jennie Grossinger. But all good things eventually end."

— Al Jaffee, ninety-five-year-old journeyman cartoonist

"These photographs capture the decay of what once was a rich cultural tapestry. I can even visualize it all coming back to life . . . the fun, the joy . . . places where I grew up, as a woman and a performer."

— Marilyn Michaels, comedian

"In New York's Catskill Mountains, a party began in the twentieth century that lasted decades. Party pictures filled thousands of scrapbooks — but now, the party's over, and the guests are gone, never to return. Enter Marisa Scheinfeld, whose camera finds profound eloquence in the silence that remains and hope in new life emerging from the ruins. This story was already ancient when Shelley penned "Ozymandias": that all things grand eventually fall. But Scheinfeld's work is all the more moving, because these things are ours, now."

— Alan Weisman, author, *Countdown* and *The World without Us*

"My mother spent childhood summers at the Tempel Inn at Shandeele. My father was a counselor at Camp Ranger in Bethel. My sisters and I were taken to the Laurels and the Nevele, and I first picked up a camera in Roscoe. Years later my husband and I decamped to Beaverkill when our eldest daughter was born. The Borscht Belt captures that sweet spot between the exquisite pain and the beauty of decay. Brava to Marisa Scheinfeld for giving us this skillfully composed archive of what remains of the splendors of the Catskills past."

— Laurie Simmons, artist

"These photographs are beautiful and at the same time terrible. And by that I mean, having spent forty years in many of these hotels, to see them again is

wonderful but at the same time brings heartache. All in all, this work is fascinating and will linger in my memory." — Freddie Roman, comedian

Lord Acton famously wrote that history is not a burden on the memory but an illumination of the soul. That sentiment comes alive in the photographs of Marisa Scheinfeld. This collection tells the fascinating story of the history of the once vaunted Catskills resort industry that at its peak included more than 500 hotels and 50,000 bungalows. This is the story of a paradise lost, and these photos are an invaluable tool in preserving the past for those who were not fortunate enough to have experienced it." — John Conway, Sullivan County Historian

Marisa Scheinfeld's photography has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is among the collections of The Center for Jewish History, The National Yiddish Book Center, The Simon Wiesenthal Center, and The Edmund and Nancy K. Dubois Library at the Museum of Photographic Arts. Stefan Kanfer is a contributing editor of City Journal and the author of *A Summer World: The Attempt to Build a Jewish Eden in the Catskills, from the Days of the Ghetto to the Rise and Decline of the Borscht Belt*. Jenna Weissman Joselit is Charles E. Smith Professor of Judaic Studies and Professor of History at The George Washington University, where she also directs two graduate programs in Jewish cultural arts. She is the author of *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880–1950* and *A Perfect Fit: Clothes, Character, and the Promise of America*.

I must preface this with a disclaimer: Marisa was a student of mine several years ago and I saw this project in its early stages. I am in awe of the final outcome. The book is hauntingly beautiful. Each image speaks volumes about the passage of time. What is remarkable is how Marisa has managed at once to be elegaic and yet celebratory, to evoke the sounds and crowds of the past and also the silent and desolate present. I heartily recommend this book to anyone interested in the power of ruins, memory, and nostalgia. It's an American equivalent of Piranesi's engravings of the glories of ancient Rome and Nabokov's lyric "Speak Memory." All week I've kept it beside me on my desk so that I can wander, repeatedly, though it, thankful for the pleasures of the images and the three essays, Marisa's most particularly. I plan to share it with the class I teach on memory.

I should have paid closer attention to the cover as this book is entirely depressing. If you hold fond memories of the heydays of the Borscht Belt, this is not for you. Fading, peeling, collapsing still life photos of what were once laughter-filled family and romantic palaces of good times, this book is a compelling but sad reminder of days long past. Photos are exceptional, printing quality good, but the

mood is likely going to send you scrambling for a Xanax.

I was disappointed by this book and the way it was laid out. The pictures are not labeled on each page. You must keep referring to the index to find out what hotel the picture is from. I would have enjoyed seeing photos comparing what is left now with the way they used to be

What a wonderful illustrated book. I enjoyed every page.

beautiful book from the past borscht belt

Ya gotta know the Borscht Belt to appreciate the depreciation of these once lavish Jewish resorts. They're decrepit now, but insets of old images recall the glitzy glory that was. Well worth the read... if you're interested; pointless if you've never been familiar with them or haven't been there.

Very well done and narrated. The photos will bring tears to your eyes.

great!!!

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