

# THE JERUSALEM POST

Books: Beautiful decay in the Borscht Belt

A coffee-table book provides a peek into the rundown, abandoned ruins of the Borscht Belt.

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Indoor Pool, Grossinger's Catskill Resort and Hotel, Liberty, NY. Courtesy Marisa Scheinfeld

What once were swimming pools for happy and relaxed vacationers are now cement gaps in the ground, some filled with debris, others turning green and damp with moss. Plastic lawn chairs where women once sat to chat and gossip are ripped and cast aside, plates that once served delectable meals have been left behind haphazardly on an empty kitchen counter, paint is peeling off buildings that once housed hundreds of guests.

These are just a few of the images captured by Marisa Scheinfeld, the photographer behind the poignant photographs in *The Borscht Belt: Revisiting the Remains of America's Jewish Vacationland*. In a photography book that is striking in the stark realism of its images, Scheinfeld pays tribute to the Catskill Mountains, which was known to many as the "Borscht Belt" and sometimes called the "Jewish Alps."

In the 1920s when anti-Semitism in the United States barred Jews from numerous hotels, Eastern European Jews began to flock to the Catskill Mountains to escape the summer heat of New York City.

Hundreds of hotels, resorts and bungalow colonies catered to the increasing

crowds of vacationers. Grossinger's, Kutsher's, Brown's, Homowack and Concord were names of just a few of the hotels where vacationers came to relax and socialize, splash in the pool, boat on the lake, play racquetball and tennis. Long hours were spent just hanging out with friends, new and old. Hotels served four meals a day, usually kosher, including a midnight snack. The Catskill hotels were well known for their evening entertainment.

Jewish entertainers like Mel Brooks, Danny Kaye, Jerry Lewis, Jackie Mason and many more got their start in Catskill hotels.

The era of the Catskills as a popular vacation spot for East Coast Jews continued through the 1970s, although a few hotels and resorts still functioned into the '90s.

What was left behind is what Scheinfeld so eloquently captures in her remarkable photographs.

Scheinfeld grew up in the Catskills where she lived with her family in the hamlet of Kiamesha Lake, where her father was a physician. As a young girl, she would go with her family to Kutscher's Hotel and to the Concord to swim or boat on the lake. She would visit her grandfather while he played cards in the Concord's card room and have lunch with her grandparents in the coffee shop. When she returned to the region in 2010 to photograph what remained, for her it was not only a creative challenge, it was also a personal homecoming.

Scheinfeld, who spent five years photographing the region, is not only an exceptionally talented photographer, she is also a thoughtful and expressive writer. In an 11-page prologue she sets the stage for a book, which is in essence a photo album of what once was and is no longer.

"By the fall of 2012, I had fully embarked on what would become a five-year journey searching for relics of this former era while also seeking to capture visually its peculiar beauty," she wrote. "My excursions with my camera took me to the locations of roughly forty abandoned hotels or bungalow colonies in various states of ruin, in all four seasons; some of the sites had been abandoned for twenty years and others for just a few seasons."

Scheinfeld understands the "peculiar beauty" she has captured with her camera as part of the cycle of human, economic and natural life in the Catskills. She sees

hope and renewal in the desolation; she sees new life.

“What appears to be abandoned is actually full of life and activity. One act of animated history has ended, but, as any visitor to these sites quickly learns, new acts have begun. Some sites have become free-for-alls, zones for scrappers, squatters, skateboarders, and paint-batters...

Nature has also made her lush return.

Guest rooms have become sanctuaries for birds. Leafy ferns have pushed their way through foundations and floors. Overgrown shrubs and tangled weeds have swallowed staircases.”

The Borscht Belt also includes two essays, the first written by Stefan Kanfer, an author and journalist, and the second by Jenna Weissman Joselit, professor of Judaic studies and history at the George Washington University in Washington, DC. The juxtaposition of three reflective and thoughtful essays with such striking photographs will not only be meaningful for people who remember vacationing in the Catskills, but will also strike a chord with anyone who once spent time in a special place that is now totally transformed.

<http://www.jpost.com/Magazine/Books-Beautiful-decay-in-the-Borscht-Belt-474154>