

THE BORSCHT BELT

REVISITING THE REMAINS OF AMERICA'S JEWISH VACATIONLAND



“On the deserted grounds of these former retreats I have found an enchanting solitude—a seclusion that is empty and uncontrolled. Yet the stillness is deceptive. 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. 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.” - from the *Prologue*

BOOK 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. **THE BORSCHT BELT** will be released on **OCTOBER 4, 2016**.

BOOK TALK DETAILS:

Marisa is available as a guest lecturer to present selections from her book which contains 129 photographs, Borscht Belt ephemera and a re-photographic series of “now” and “then” imagery composed by using found postcards and creating a mirror image of their present day depictions.

BIOGRAPHY:

Marisa Scheinfeld was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1980, and raised in the Catskills. She received a B.A. from the State University at Albany in 2002, and a MFA from San Diego State University in 2011. Her work is highly motivated by her interest in the ruin, or site and the histories embedded within them. Marisa's work has been exhibited nationally and internationally and is among the collections of The Center for Jewish History, The National Yiddish Book Center, The Magnes Collection of Jewish Art & Life, The Simon Wiesenthal Center and The Edmund and Nancy K. Dubois Library at the Museum of Photographic Arts.

TRAVELING EXHIBITION:

Developed and curated by Yeshiva University Museum and Marisa Scheinfeld, **THE BORSCHT BELT** is also a traveling exhibition. The exhibition is ready to install and exists of thirty (25" x 35" in size) custom framed images and a large selection of Borscht Belt ephemera for display in a case.

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www.borschtbeltbook.com VISIT WEBSITE FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

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EXCERPTS FROM *THE BORSCHT BELT*:

"The chairs. Oh, those chairs. One floats in the weeds of a local watering hole, bringing to mind the baby Moses adrift in the bulrushes; another stares out the window... Elsewhere, they form a straight line or huddle in a circle. But there's more here than visual provocation. There's history, too... Every one of them tells of a time, some fifty to sixty years in duration, when American Jews, largely from the East Coast, ventured to the Catskills, to its hundreds of bungalow colonies and equally large number of resorts, for fun and games, for a respite from the summer heat and the pressures of daily life. But that's all gone now and what remains are Scheinfeld's canny images, which bear witness to both change and stasis. Her artistry makes us see that the past doesn't vanish so much as startle. Just when you think there's nothing left from an earlier era, you happen upon something that stops you in your tracks, some quirky detail that puts you in mind, ruefully, perhaps, of the odd juxtaposition of human and natural history." — [Jenna Weissman Joselit](#)

"Gazing at the orphaned objects of Marisa Scheinfeld's pellucid lens, it seems hard to believe that they were once the evidence of immigrant triumph. As Scheinfeld demonstrates in her evocative and haunting pictures, nature is green in tooth and claw. Vegetation has come to reclaim its turf. Weeds grow out of the cracks in empty swimming pools—surely the most poignant of all ruins. In one of Scheinfeld's most memorable works, a row of bar stools awaits customers who will never return, at the edge of a counter long since removed by jobbers or vandals. The seats recall the foreground of an Edward Hopper painting enveloped in a clamorous silence... Let your fingers do the walking through this exhibit of ruins. You will not be the same person as the one who first opened this magical volume." — [Stefan Kanfer](#)

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR *THE BORSCHT BELT*:

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](#)

"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](#)

"These photographs capture the decay of what once 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](#)

"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. With 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](#)

"Marisa Scheinfeld's "Borscht Belt" pictures capture that sweet spot between the exquisite pain and the beauty of decay – Brava to Scheinfeld for giving us this skillfully composed archive of what remains of the splendors of the Catskills past. My own family history with the Catskills spans many generations. My mother spent childhood summers at the Tempel Inn at Shandeleo. My father was a counselor at Camp Ranger in Bethel. My sisters and I were taken to The Laurels and the Nevele, and straight out of art school I lived with a group of friends in Roscoe, where I first picked up my own camera. Years later my husband and I decamped to Beaverkill to escape the city when our eldest daughter was born. I've always been hyper-conscious of both the repurposing and eventual destruction of the magnificent places I knew so well. Scheinfeld's documentation sensitively shows us the innate elegance and grace within impermanence." — [Laurie Simmons, Artist](#)

"In New York's Catskill Mountains, a party began in the 20th 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. The 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 & The World Without Us](#)

"Lord Action 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 Catskill 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](#)

"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 photographs 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, Ph.D., Founder & President of the Catskills Institute](#)