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Borscht Belt Bungalows



Synopsis

Every year between 1920 and 1970, almost one million of New York City's Jewish population summered in the Catskills. Hundreds of thousands still do. While much has been written about grand hotels like Grossinger's and the Concord, little has appeared about the more modest bungalow colonies and kuchaleins ("cook for yourself" places) where more than 80 percent of Catskill visitors stayed. These were not glamorous places, and middle-class Jews today remember the colonies with either aversion or fondness. Irwin Richman's narrative, anecdotes, and photos recapture everything from the traffic jams leaving the city to the strategies for sneaking into the casinos of the big hotels. He brings to life the attitudes of the renters and the owners, the differences between the social activities and swimming pools advertised and what people actually received. He reminisces about the changing fashion of the guests and owners-everything that made summers memorable. The author remembers his boyhood: what it was like to spend summers outside the city, swimming in the Neversink, "noodling around," and helping with the bungalow operation, while Grandpa charged the tenants and acted as president of Congregation B'nai Israel of Woodbourne, N.Y. He also traces the changes in the Catskills, including the influx of Hasidic families. Richman talks about what it's like to go back and to see the ghosts of resorts along the roads he once traveled.

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Customer Reviews

For more than half a century, until about 1970, legions of middle-class Jewish workers and

businessmen moved their families each summer from crowded New York quarters to Catskill bungalow colonies and communal settlements known as kuchaleins (literally: ``cook alones"). This is the colorful but hitherto scantied kuchalein story. Richman's (American Studies and History/Penn. State Univ.) family owned and managed a typical colony during the heyday of the bungalows. He fondly recounts seemingly everything about the business. Mothers and the kids would occupy the rustic mountain dwellings for ``the season" (July Fourth to Labor Day) and fathers would appear, frequently burdened with provisions, for the weekends. (The provisions were often considered contraband because the owners, playing ``farmer," sold produce to the captive guests.) The story is knowingly presented from the point of view of the landlord, traditionally depicted as a penny-pinching villain, but here naturally presented in fuller dimensions. Along with business matters, there is much about traditional cuisine and amateur theatricals, kids' frolics, water and sewer arrangements, swimming in the Neversink, daily routines, and holiday practices. Particulars abound regarding sneaking into the grand hotels nearby or fishing for trout with rye bread for bait. There are descriptions of artifacts like cow flop, ice cream frappes, and flypaper. Richman's style is simple and direct. The text turns a tad wistful as he describes the scene today, dominated by coops with Hasidim and the newly Orthodox. Sure, the old days were halcyon, but the unrelenting sifting through the detail is like sitting in a schvitz (a sweat lodge with a Yiddish accent) with a genial but garrulous old uncle blessed with total recall. A pleasant Borscht Belt memoir, much like a Borscht Belt meal: excessive beyond nourishment, but hey, why not try a little? (62 b&w photos, not seen) (For the grander side of life in the Catskills, see Richard Grossinger's Out of Babylon, p. 1622.) -- Copyright ©1997, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.

"Richman is particularly suited to give us this historical overview, as a professor of American studies and history and as one who has made the pilgrimage to the mountains nearly every summer of his life, first to the bungalow colony of his grandparents and later as an employee at similar establishments. ...Richman is nostalgically superb in his recall of the importance of these annual gatherings in the communal context of an immigrant people, liberally quoting from fiction and nonfiction writings on this era and this place."-Publishers Weekly "A Jewish-American pastoral? Thoreau in the Catskills? Irwin Richman's marvelous Borscht Belt Bungalows is as much a literary work-a retrospect of country summers, now history-as a scholarly study....Let no reader of this lively first-person narrative be deceived that this is just a reminiscence, without scholarly depth. Richman collected an amazing range of information on Borscht Belt life and gracefully folds it into his memories." -Anne C. Rose, Pennsylvania History "Richman's style is simple and direct....A pleasant

Borscht Belt memoir, much like a Borscht Belt meal: excessive beyond nourishment, but hey, why not try a little?"-Kirkus Reviews "Richman delights the reader, not only with portraits of the people who rented the bungalows, but with the activities that occupied their time. He tells us of the small time entertainers who often began their careers in the mountain hotels and casinos and more often than not, ended their entertainment careers there too....well worth reading and, for some of us, evok[ing] long forgotten, pleasant memories."-Jewish Journal "There are very few people who could do such a fine job of recapturing for us the remarkable world of the Catskill bungalow colonies."-Phil Brown, Brown University

Mr. Richman tells a story that only he could tell. His humorous, nostalgic account of the Catskill's golden era and its decline is one worth reading.

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