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The Catskills Institute has been the beacon for over two decades of historical and archival work to preserve the amazing century of Jewish

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*Framing
and
History*



Introduction

Phil Brown and Holli Levitsky

We provide here for the first time a collection of the most important writing that explores the stories and struggles of Holocaust survivors in the Catskills, as well as the experience of those already living in the United States who were in the Catskills during the Holocaust and the immediate years following. We present new and existing works of fiction and memoir by writers who spent their youth as part of the Jewish resort culture. Through these primary works, we explore how vacationers, resort owners, and workers dealt with a horrific contradiction—the pleasure of their summer haven against the mass extermination of Jews throughout Europe. We also examine the character of Holocaust survivors in the Catskills: in what ways did these people find connection, resolution to conflict, and avenues to come together, despite their experiences that set them apart? We took the opportunity to conduct more original research on the Holocaust and the immediate after-period in the Catskills. And we asked each author whose work is reprinted here in whole or part to reflect on the significance of their work in hindsight. Most of these reflections are written by the authors themselves, except in three cases where a wife, a daughter,

or a scholar of the deceased writer provided the reflection, and one case where the author could not do so.

How We Conceived of This Project

Two main phenomena fostered our collaboration on this book. First, we were both involved in the film *Four Seasons Lodge*, a beautiful documentary of a bungalow colony collectively owned and run by Holocaust survivors. Phil was on the advisory board, having been asked to help because of his long-standing work in preserving the Jewish Catskills legacy via the Catskills Institute, and having written one book and edited another on the subject. At the thirteenth annual History of the Catskills Conference, he brought director Andrew Jacobs and two colony leaders to speak about their home and to show rushes from the film. Holli was involved in an associated project that did not come to fruition: a photo exhibition and book created from the same material as the film. The strength and creativity of the “lodgers” captivated us, as we came to see them as a unique contribution to Catskills history, and more broadly to Holocaust studies. Andrew Jacobs’ essay in this book gives a full picture of the Four Seasons Lodge story, so we will not dwell on it here.

The second factor leading to our collaboration was a deep, shared appreciation of Reuben Wallenrod’s novel, *Dusk in the Catskills*. Once we began to talk about how people in the Catskills lived during the Holocaust, we understood that Wallenrod portrayed this experience in a fashion unparalleled by others. Certainly Wallenrod’s eloquent juxtaposition of genocide and pleasure made for a jarring, yet necessary, understanding. But more than that, Wallenrod told his story over the entire season of the Rosenblatt Hotel, from pre-season preparation all the way to post-season closing down. In the process, he recorded the life not just of a hotel, but of a people. We were glad to have had many years of contact with Wallenrod’s daughter, Naima Prevots, who provides us with a reflection on her father’s work. That contact gave us much more insight into this central work of Catskills Holocaust history, as we engaged with Naima’s own interactions with students and scholars who were writing about Wallenrod’s literary contributions. In *Catskill Culture: A Mountain Rat’s Memory of the Great Jewish Resort Area*, Phil had already

explored Wallenrod's fiction, as well as the work of other authors whom we include here. The present book was a welcome opportunity to expand Phil's earlier work, adding new historical research and Holli's knowledge of literary and Holocaust studies. In the second essay in this book, we explore *Dusk in the Catskills* in detail.

Our research on Reuben Wallenrod did uncover a literary prize that his family, upon his death and in partnership with the Hebrew Writers Association in Israel, established in his name.¹ The discovery of the Wallenrod family prize came after we had already taken the opportunity to run a pair of essay contests—one for fiction and one for nonfiction—that would produce original writing on the Catskills Holocaust experience. We are pleased to include the winners in this volume. Bonnie Shusterman Eizikovitz is co-winner of the fiction contest for “Catskill Dreams and Pumpernickel,” a short story about a girl given the nickname Pumpernickel by a woman bungalow colony resident, a Holocaust survivor who is a parent figure for the youngster. The woman and her husband, despite his mechanical assistance to whomever asks a favor, are still outsiders because of their unique experience, while young Pumpernickel berates her own parents for their derision of these “greeners.” Memories of the smuggled *shofar* in the concentration camp mingle with the current holiday in America.

Rita Calderon is the other fiction co-winner for “Your Dovid,” a short story centered in 1938 on a girl and her family’s effort to bring her father’s brother to the Catskills hotels where her mother is the chef. Uncle Dovid arrives, but alone, since visas were denied to the rest of his family. Memories of other brothers punctuate the conversations, and we see the juxtaposition of Catskills’ pleasures with Europe’s horrors. Through these lenses, family secrets are revealed, while Dovid returns to France to try to get his family out.

Michael Kirschenbaum won the nonfiction contest for “Forgiving God in the Catskills,” a chapter from his forthcoming memoir, *Not to Believe*. “Forgiving God in the Catskills” focuses on a Holocaust survivor

¹ Benjamin Andrew Lerner, “A Portrait of the Hebraist as a Multifaceted Man: Using Reuben Wallenrod’s *Be’ein Dor* to Examine American Hebraism.” BA Thesis, Harvard University (2011), 23.

and his sons' visit to Kutsher's Country Club in the Catskills to celebrate *Rosh Hashanah*. Memories of the Holocaust punctuate the holiday services, as the Catskills are themselves memorialized as the places where "The *greeneh* were happy to mingle with the others who still embraced a Jewish culture with European roots."

It was a delight to be able to recruit new writing on this subject, and to add to the genre of "Catskills Studies" that has proliferated quite remarkably since the 1990s, and has engaged some of the top talent in Jewish literature.

A Brief History of the Jewish Catskills

The history of the Jewish Catskills begins with the farmlands of Ulster, Sullivan, southern Greene, and a tiny sliver of southeastern Delaware Counties. The year-round Jewish population of chicken and dairy farmers had a hard time making a living on the poor soil there, and began taking in boarders. Eventually many made that into their main enterprise. Some boarding houses became *kuchalayns* ("cook for yourself"), where rooms were rented in a boarding house in which kitchen and dining room were shared. These facilities housed ten to forty guests. *Kuchalayns* frequently developed into bungalow colonies, in which individual small cottages complete with kitchens were rented out. Some *kuchalayns* later turned into hotels. *Kuchalayns* and bungalow colonies provided a familial milieu: people were together the entire summer, forming very close connections.

By the 1950s few *kuchalayns* remained, all but replaced by bungalow colonies and hotels. The small- (50-250 guests) and medium-sized (250-500 guests) hotels retained the *kuchalayns'* intimacy. The owners, often a pair of in-law couples, were always present. They mingled with guests, many of whom were relatives and friends. Even in large hotels (500-1,000 guests), owners, guests, and staff often knew each other. Smaller hotels frequently employed "solicitors" to recruit guests from their city neighborhoods, and hotels acquired a local culture that continued into the rest of the year. Guests returned year after year, and often from generation to generation—a child in the day camp might later be a junior counselor, later he or she might work as a busboy or waiter in the dining

room, and then return once again as a guest with a spouse and children. Guests developed a loyalty to the hotel and its owners, based on family, friendship, and on participating in a miniature society where relationships were amplified by the proximity. Many of the workers developed close bonds with each other, with the owners, and with longstanding guests, and many friendships lasted past the summer. Staff-guest romances were also not uncommon.

Guests made frequent visits to delis and shops in nearby towns, strolled past other resorts, and visited friends and relatives in other hotels and bungalow colonies. Bungalow dwellers were always sneaking into hotel casinos (which were social halls and night clubs, not gambling casinos), guests at small hotels were doing the same in larger hotels, and staff were perpetually visiting other hotels for romance. The Catskills Institute's research has located 863 bungalow colonies and 1,172 hotels that operated in the Catskills. At any given time in the golden era of the 1950s and 1960s, there were about 500 colonies and 550 hotels operating. An estimated one-half million people vacationed there annually in that period. No matter where you went in the Catskills, you were never far from a hotel or colony.

Catskills hotelkeepers pioneered the idea of the all-inclusive vacation, with three meals plus a nighttime tea-room, nightly entertainment, many sports and activities, and eventually day camps for children. During many decades when Gentile hotels barred Jews, the Catskills offered a vacation with kosher food, Yiddish conversation, and Jewish comedy and music as entertainment. Offering a range of prices, the resorts housed people of all classes and occupations. Even the more expensive resorts were still affordable to the average family for a weekend or a short stay.

In terms of origins, the Catskills were largely a bastion of Russian and Eastern European Jews. The Northern Catskills (Northern Ulster County and part of Greene County) in the area of Fleischmanns, Hunter, and Tannersville were largely German and Hungarian, though some Eastern Europeans were there as well. As Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* records, German was commonly spoken in that northern area, and Yiddish was disparaged. The "Yekkies" of German

descent commonly looked down on the poorer, more recent immigrants—an oft-told tale of American Jewish history. The vast majority of what we know of as the Catskills were in Sullivan and lower, western Ulster County, and the area had a decidedly Yiddishkeit culture. Yiddish was the first language for many hotel owners and guests in the pre-WWII era, and even after that Yiddish was commonly spoken. In 1913, Jewish farmers started the nation's first fire insurance cooperative, the Associated Cooperative Fire Insurance Company, since they faced problems of anti-Semitism and high rates. Business in the insurance co-op was conducted in Yiddish, including the meetings and minutes; the policies were written in Yiddish and then translated for legal purposes. Into the 1950s Hotelmen's Association meetings were full of people speaking Yiddish.

Some hotels and bungalow colonies were thoroughly Yiddishist, even into the sixties. The best known was the Grine Felder (Green Fields) literary colony in Woodridge, a major center of Yiddish writers, including Isaac Bashevis Singer. Merging both socialist and Yiddishist traditions, Grine Felder had bungalows named Emma Goldman, Karl Marx, and Mendele Sforim. Singer's Catskills background and interest shows through in his writings, including *Enemies, A Love Story*² and the short story "The Yearning Heifer"³ that features the traditional small farmer putting up boarders from the city. His experience with the Catskills began in 1938—just three years after immigrating to New York from Poland. The visit was an opportunity to join his young friend and budding theater director Zygmunt Salkin at the Woodridge, NY bungalow colony, where he would oversee the rehearsal in English of I. L. Peretz's *At Night in the Old Marketplace*. Grine Felder was pioneered (and staffed) by a number of notable Yiddishists, including David Pinski, Mendl Elkin, Nahum Stutchkoff, Samuel Charney, Peretz Hirshbein, Jules Fainberg, Lazar Weiner, and Moishe Rudinow. The community also included prominent Zionists and socialists such as Joseph Schlossberg, and Polish and Russian refugee poets, writers, dramatists,

² Isaac Bashevis Singer, *Enemies, A Love Story* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988).

³ Isaac Bashevis Singer, "The Yearning Heifer," in *The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983).

directors, producers, and critics such as Maurice Schwartz, Alexzander Mukdoiny, Abraham Shiffrin, Sidor Belarsky, and Rosina Fernhoff (whose father, Dr. William Fernhoff, was an Austrian-Jewish immigrant who made house calls in the Catskills to colonies such as Grine Felder). Much of the artistic material was produced in Yiddish, a common language among the immigrants. The persistence of Yiddish speaking, of Yiddish-English patois, and of Yiddish jokes in the Catskills after the Holocaust was a form of resistance against the Nazi attempt to destroy Jewish life. Most of the murdered Jews were Yiddish speakers, and the daily use of the language nearly died except for the Hassidic revival in the latter twentieth century and a smaller revival by secular Yiddishists.

A Glimpse into the Origin of the Jewish Catskills

There is a surprising number of *beshert* (destined) discoveries about the Catskills—finding connections with people and events that seem impossible. Indeed, Phil’s years of running the Catskills Institute have yielded innumerable requests for connections to people from many decades ago, connections that were often found. We began this project with a strong focus on the significance of Reuben Wallenrod’s *Dusk in the Catskills* as the emblematic examination of how the Holocaust was experienced in the Catskills. Wallenrod’s vantage point as a writer-in-residence at Rosenblatt’s Hotel (during the mid 1940s) is the underpinning of the very real basis for his work.

Rosenblatt’s later was called the Coronet, and then the Empress, as we learned from John Conway, the Sullivan County Historian. Caryl Ehrlich wrote to the Catskills Institute in 2008 that her father, who had leased and owned other hotels, bought the Empress. It’s another example of the endless connections that bring us into this web of Rosenblatt’s and early Catskills history. As it turns out, the village of Glen Wild, Rosenblatt’s location, is linked to even more important Catskills history. In particular, it has long been known that the first Jewish resort was started there in 1899, as advertised in the Ontario and Western Railroads’ *Summer Homes*, the primary listing for Catskills resorts, which were only Gentile up till then. John Gerson has been considered the first



Rosenblatt's Hotel. Courtesy of the Catskills Institute.



The lake at Rosenblatt's Hotel. Courtesy of the Catskills Institute.

Jewish farmer, arriving in 1892.⁴ I (Phil) had the great fortune to interview Gerson's granddaughter, Sylvia Ader, born in 1916. Yana (later changed to John) Gerson arrived in New York in the 1880s and worked in a bakery, which he didn't like. Having been a farmer near Vilna, and already running a small farm on Pitkin Avenue in Brooklyn, he followed that legacy and bought a farm in Glen Wild.⁵ His doctor asked if he would take in a patient who needed the healing mountain air, and he did so. The doctor kept sending people up but John didn't charge them anything until the doctor pressured him into that. Fairly soon there were enough paying boarders to put up a new building, which sadly burned just before the scheduled opening.

⁴ Abraham D. Lavender and Clarence B. Steinberg, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills: A Century of Survival* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1995), 31-33.

⁵ Lavender and Steinberg, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills*, 31-33.

Gerson's resort was called the Rock Hill Jewish Boarding House, as Rock Hill was the next and more significant settlement, slightly to the west along the Glen Wild Road. The *Summer Homes* ad indicated that Gerson's had room for forty people at \$6 per week for adults and half that for children.⁶

Gerson provided land for the Glen Wild *shul*,⁷ and had to know Louis Rosenblatt, whose hotel hosted Wallenrod, since Rosenblatt was a charter member of Congregation Anshe Glen Wild (the name of the Glen Wild *shul*). The *shul* construction started in 1912 and took two years to finish. Louis Rosenblatt donated funds in 1955 to build a rear wing, used as a social hall.⁸ When I (Phil) interviewed Abe and Dave Jaffe in 1993, they spoke about how proud they were to have had two *Torahs* in their house for services, for ten years until the Glen Wild *shul* was built across the road from them. They still treasured the *shul's* huge ledger-size minutes book that they kept in their house.

Abe's daughter Naomi Jaffe still owns the farm in Glen Wild (as of 2014) that her grandfather Simon Jaffe bought in 1919 (he arrived in Glen Wild in 1904). It is right across the road from Gerson's property, though Naomi thought she remembered that Jaffe's is actually on the site of John Gerson's boarding house. From the twenties through the late fifties or early sixties, it was the Jaffe House Hotel and later *kuchalayn*, though they called it a bungalow colony and rooming house. On the premises they had a chicken farm from the thirties through the



Glen Wild shul. Courtesy of the Catskills Institute.

⁶ Lavender and Steinberg, *Jewish Farmers of the Catskills*, 32.

⁷ Sylvia Ader interview (2004).

⁸ Kathleen LaFrank, "National Register of Historic Places Nomination, Anshei Glen Wild Synagogue," New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation (October 1998). Retrieved April 29, 2009.

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