



For many decades spanning the mid-20th century, set amidst the idyllic farmland of the Catskills a three-hour drive from the hustle and bustle of Manhattan lay Grossinger's Resort, or in novelist Mordecai Richler's words "Disneyland with knishes." This is the Catskills of Marjorie Morningstar, Dirty Dancing, and The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel. The place that brought the world Eddie Fischer, Mel Brooks, Andy Kaufman, and later Jerry Seinfeld. It is at Grossingers where so much of Jewish entertainment was born and where so much of the American Jewish experience was defined. It was a quintessentially and definingly Jewish resort — of, by, and for Jews.

This definitive feature documentary about the iconic summertime utopia will explore the creation of the post-war American Jewish identity through the lens of the Borscht Belt's crown jewel, Grossinger's. With exclusive access to the Grossinger family, the film will draw on the intimate personal experiences of those whose were a part of the Grossinger's experience and a vast public and private archive, bringing to life as never before this unique time and place in American cultural history.

In a moment when the world couldn't need it more, the film will celebrate the spirit of inclusivity and the embrace of diversity that was embodied - well ahead of its time - by Grossinger's. Poignant yet whimsical, we'll see the great entertainers, the grandiose dinners, the secret love affairs, the summertime fun - in a place where Jews could be Jews, when so often they couldn't be anywhere else. As the cliché goes, you laughed so you wouldn't cry, you played so you didn't have to contemplate, you gorged to compensate for the European Jews who couldn't, and you occupied yourself so you wouldn't have to remember.



THE STORY

Like many Jewish immigrants at the turn of the century, Selig Grossinger came to America (from the Eastern European region known as Galicia) with dreams of a better life. It took three years of drudge work in the garment trade, however, before he earned enough to bring over his wife, Malke, and their two daughters in 1900. Moving the family into a three-bedroom apartment on New York City's Lower East Side, Selig tried his hand at several businesses, including a butcher shop and a dairy restaurant, with little success. Then, in 1914, on the advice of doctors concerned about his health, he moved the family out of the city, buying a small farm in the town of Ferndale, some 100 miles northwest of the city in the Catskill Mountains.

He had no more success at farming, but quickly found there was money to be made by taking in boarders. The Catskills were becoming a popular summer haven for Jewish immigrants who wanted to escape the steamy, crowded streets of the Lower East Side. The family took in \$81 from boarders its first year, and business grew steadily from there. By 1919 Selig was able to buy a larger hostelry, the Terrace Hill House, in the nearby town of Liberty. Rechristened Grossinger's, it became the most storied of the Catskills resort hotels that catered to Jewish vacationers and for decades defined what became known as the Borscht Belt.

GROSSINGER'S is a documentary that will tell the colorful story of that fabled resort: a wonderland of summer recreation, nonstop entertainment, and Jewish bonding. The hotel flourished in the

1920s; survived the 1929 stock-market crash (thanks to Selig, who ignored friends' advice to invest his profits in the market); and enjoyed its heyday in the postwar 1940s and '50s, when new prosperity and easy highway access attracted hordes of New York City vacationers, as well as some of the top entertainers in the country. Grossinger's would eventually encompass 35 buildings on 1300 acres, complete with three swimming pools, a 1700-seat theater, 18-hole golf course, ski slope (with the nation's first artificial snow), as well as its own newspaper, post office, and even an airstrip.

Most important, Grossinger's was a place where Jews could be Jews. At a time when many hotels, resorts, and country clubs were restricted — i.e., barred to Jewish guests — the Catskills hotels were a refuge, a place to celebrate Jewish culture and tradition, and a little touch of home. After Selig's death in 1931, his daughter Jennie presided over the place with her warm and gregarious hospitality — greeting each guest personally, often with a hug — like a traditional Jewish balaboosta. The food was familiar, plentiful (four soup choices at dinner; seven kinds of herring at breakfast; heaping portions of cake for dessert), and strictly kosher. On the advice of a Talmudic scholar, the Grossingers would lease the resort every Friday evening to a Gentile employee for 24 hours, so that they would not be violating Orthodox law by working on the Sabbath.

The hotel catered diligently to its guests, but also took an active role in events outside. During World War II, Eddie Cantor hosted a war-bond drive at Grossinger's that raised a quarter-million dollars, earning Jennie a special citation from the Secretary of the Treasury. After the war, the hotel raised money to support the creation of a Jewish homeland. And when the new state of Israel was running low on eggs and poultry, the hotel got a local poultryman to donate 1,000 ready-to-hatch eggs, crated them up carefully, and had them flown to Tel Aviv. Not a single egg cracked.

Matchmaking was a particular specialty of the house. For years Grossinger's attracted Jewish singles, who came to scout out prospective mates at the hotel's many social events — always with the encouragement and counsel of Jennie's cousin Karla, the hotel's matchmaker-in-chief. (The Grossinger's mating dance was a model for novels like *Marjorie Morningstar*, movies like *Dirty Dancing*, and even a Broadway musical, *Wish You Were Here*.) At least 50 weddings a year, it was estimated, could be traced back to a meeting at Grossinger's — all of them dutifully reported in the hotel's newspaper.

Along with eligible Jewish singles, Grossinger's other great attraction was its entertainment. A peripatetic social director, known as a "tumbler," kept the activity going and spirits high between meals with jokes, banter, and games like "Simon Says." When vaudeville faded out in the 1930s, the Catskills resorts became a prime destination for top entertainers, from song-and-dance men like Eddie Cantor and Danny Kaye, to scores of stand-up comics who brought their distinctive Jewish rhythms and sardonic sensibility — and sometimes Yiddish punchlines—to an audience that didn't need any translation.

The Catskills comedians didn't just help Jews appreciate and laugh about their shared culture; they also helped introduce that culture to the rest of the country. Nearly all the major comedy stars of the early television era — Milton Berle, Sid Caesar, Phil Silvers, Jerry Lewis, Red Buttons — worked at one time in the Catskills. Dozens of stand-up comedians — Henny Youngman, Jack Carter, Myron Cohen, Alan King — who polished their Jewish-mother jokes in the Catskills became fixtures on popular TV variety programs like *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Younger comedians too, like Robert Klein, got their first taste of big-time showbiz by working summer jobs in the Catskills.

Grossinger's had plenty of competitors in the Catskills — the Concord, Kutscher's, and Brown's were among the biggest — but it became the most famous, thanks largely to a shrewd New York publicist named Sidney Blackstone. He kept the hotel in the news with a stream of famous visitors (Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Francis Cardinal Spellman). In 1934 he arranged for Jewish boxer Barney Ross to do his training at Grossinger's, in preparation for his welterweight title fight against Jimmy McClarnin. Most memorably, in 1949 Blackstone orchestrated the "discovery" of a young singing sensation from Philadelphia named Eddie Fisher, who opened for Eddie Cantor and won the star's endorsement as a major new talent. Fisher's career took off from there, and he remained forever indebted to Grossinger's, returning there in 1955 for his wedding to Hollywood sweetheart (a shiksa, alas) Debbie Reynolds.

By the 1960s the golden age of the Catskills resorts was starting to fade. Air travel was making distant getaways like Miami Beach and Las Vegas more accessible. More resorts were dropping their restrictions against Jewish guests. And the counterculture revolution — the Woodstock festival took place just a few miles down the road in 1969 — was ushering in a new era. Grossinger's tried to keep up with the times (Jefferson Airplane entertained there in 1968, to a mostly befuddled audience), but the decline was inevitable. The hotel lost its guiding spirit when Jennie died in 1972. It hung on for another decade, before closing in 1982 and being demolished in 1986. Eddie Fisher was on hand to watch the end of an era.

But what an era it was — a unique and irreplaceable chapter in both American entertainment and the Jewish experience in this country.



ABOUT BUNGALOW MEDIA + ENTERTAINMENT, LLC:

Founded in 2013 by CEO Robert Friedman, having held senior roles at New Line Cinema & Television, AOL, Radical Media, and a member of the startup team at MTV, Bungalow Media + Entertainment is an Emmy Award-winning integrated entertainment company that develops, produces and distributes content across all media platforms.

Bungalow's recently produced series include the four-part mini-series *Surviving Jeffrey Epstein* for Lifetime, the five-part mini-series *The Preppy Murder* for AMC/Sundance, *The Panama Papers* for EPIX, and *Roswell: The First Witness* for History. Others include the Emmy Award winning series *GIVE* for NBC, *Corvette Heroes* for the History Channel, *The Real SVU* for Lifetime, *Landmarks Live in Concert* for PBS, *The Big Bad BBQ Brawl* for the Cooking Channel, *36 Hours with the New York Times* for Travel Channel, and scripted dramas *APB* on Fox, Netflix's *Insatiable*, and Amazon's *Modern Love*. Bungalow has also produced the feature documentaries *Spring Broke* on Showtime, *We the People: The Market Basket Effect*, and the Clive Owen's feature film, *The Confirmation*, among others.





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