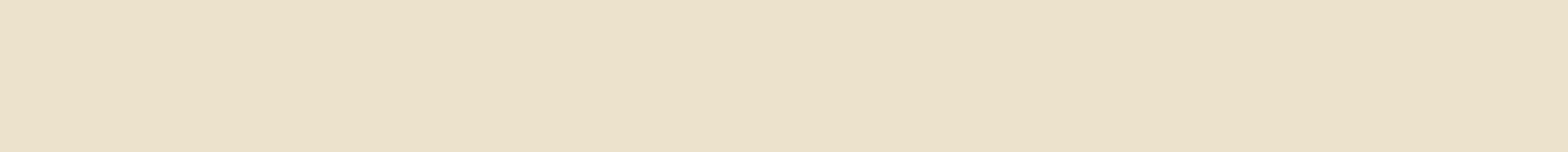
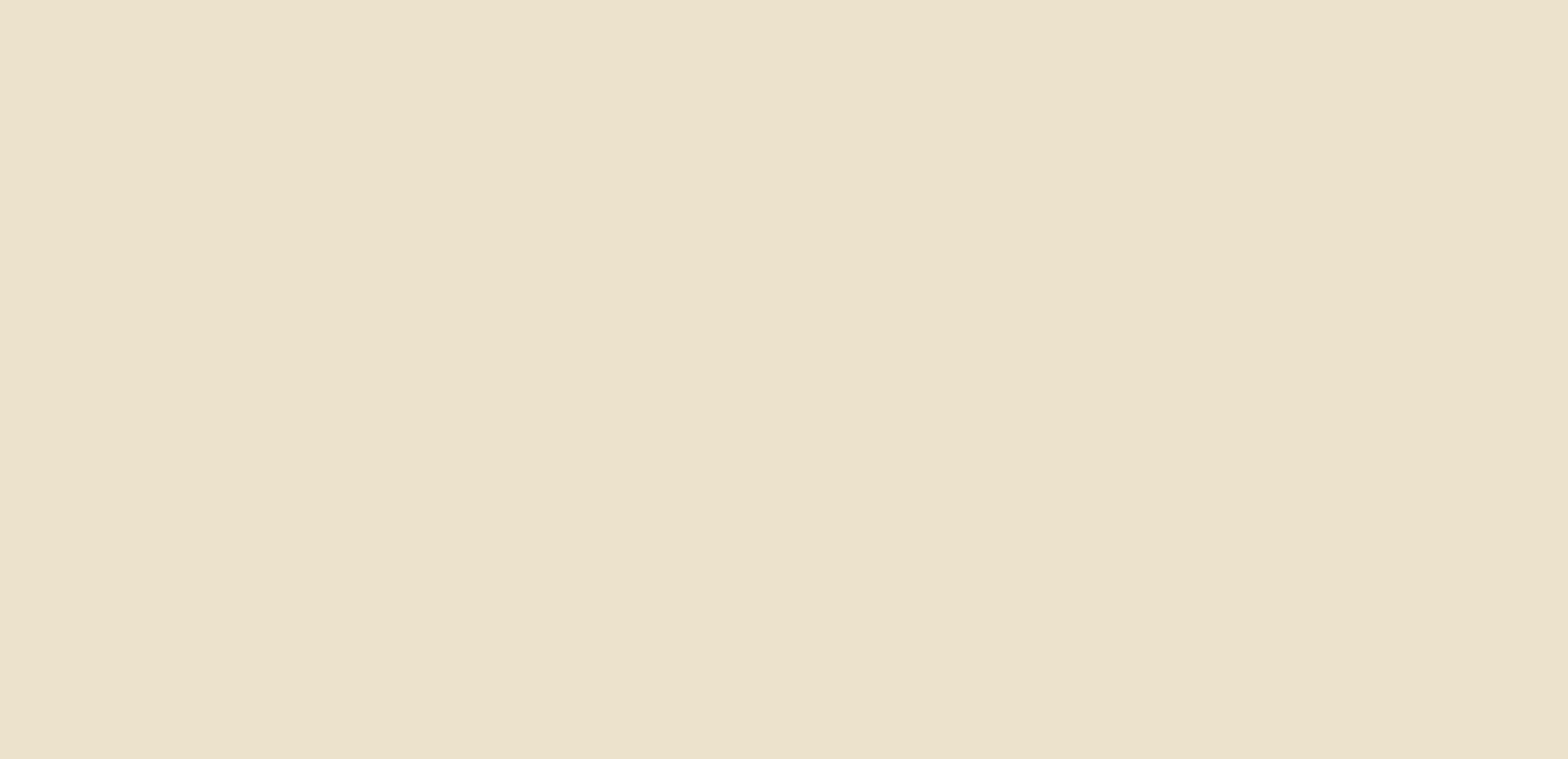


La Baie / Bath Scenes

Laurence Salzmann





La Baie / Bath Scenes Laurence Salzmann



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Foreword

The public bath is a familiar experience of Western man. It has almost become, recently, an intergral part of his health program, as jogging or racquet-ball playing. Laurence Salzmänn's intense preoccupation with the Bathhouse of Radauti reflects more than just a study of the Male Nude: there is a certain curiosity about the nature of social relationships there. As he writes elsewhere, "the whole bathing process represented a kind of social ritual; the same men met there week after week, joking gossiping and telling stories to catch each other's attention." These men seemed to develop bathing into a group activity. They washed each other's backs, beating them with oak branches (an ancient custom), or they would bend down and massage an aching foot. Even though the communal aspect of bathing is clearly emphasized in Salzmänn's photographs, individuals are caught in a state of silent meditation, as well. The ambience of the Bathhouse interior is simple and naked, in a sense, matching with the clear outlines of these relaxed bodies. The fat pipes with over

sized faucets, the wide oak benches, and the plastic buckets near each body are all part of the starkness of the environment. Though we cannot hear it we can sense the heavy monotone of the steam as it belches out of the ancient cast iron stove. Such a feeling of warmth envelops the relaxed, drowsy bodies, then! Salzmänn's bath people are set in motion, they look and feel at home with their bodies; the old and the fat mingle with the young. One sees a fat bald man facing the wall, in a half-bent position; another is reclining on the lower bench in half-stupor while a firm, upright body is looking down. In this book of 32 photographs, Laurence Salzmänn's vision has, once again, penetrated deeply into people's private selves. But, also, he has added a new dimension to his craftsmanship as a portrait maker: the subtle motions of the total body, in harmony with the environment. And, above all, the beauty of these photographs lies in the total composition of the natural bodily gestures.

Ayse Gürsan-Salzmänn

Photographer's Note: I initially asked Saul Bellow to write the introduction to these bath pictures.

I remembered in his Humboldt's Gift several very funny sections where the main protagonist described an old fashioned bath on Chicago's East Side. And , I thought that my bath photographs might inspire Mr. Bellow to write a few more words about bathhouses, and in particular, my photographs. His response was:

5 December 1978

Dear Mr. Salzmänn:

The photographs are quite extraordinary; and I am familiar with the Old World communal baths. My father used to take me to them when I was a kid more than fifty years ago. But I can't write an introduction to the portfolio you plan to publish. These days I can manage only one thing at a time. Not even that, perhaps. But thank you for asking and good luck. My wife, who comes from Bucharest, was enchanted with your work.

Sincerely yours,

Saul Bellow

Not wanting to bother another famous author with the task of writing an introduction to these photographs, I decided to write it myself.

Introduction

On Sunday mornings men carrying bunches of oak leaves were to be seen in the streets of the town. They walked in small groups headed in the direction of the Jewish Bath on Strada Baia.

The bath pictures were taken during the time I lived in Radauti, 1975-76, in northeastern Romania. While there, I dedicated myself to photographing what remained of Jewish life. This work developed into an intimate, in-depth photographic essay entitled: ***The Last Jews of Radauti***.^{*} The Baths, a vital part of the community life, were owned by the Jewish community and used by both the Jews and the Romanians. I went there mainly to photograph things of Jewish interest – the **Mikveh**, a traditional religious bath – and the Jewish men and women working there.

I found that the Baths were about the only place where one could really get warm during the long, cold winters. So, I became a frequent visitor to the steam room and the

hot showers. They were open Thursday, Friday and Sunday; the morning hours would be reserved for women one day, and for men the next day. At all times, though, one could rent a private room with a tub. Friday was the busiest day, for it was the day of the Market, and it also marked the day before returning to their villages (after selling their goods at the market) would stop for a bath and many members of the Jewish community would complete their Sabbath preparations with a bath.

The bath house was over 100 years old. In a town where few of the houses had running water, the public bath became a frequently visited place. Very little seemed to have changed since it was first built, except that the wooden buckets which were given out to each bather were replaced with plastic ones. The men filled their buckets with cold water as they walked into the steam room (**arbur**). There were rows of wooden benches as in an amphitheater, the highest one was the hottest, naturally. The cold

water in the bucket was used to refresh one's face and cool off a little as the steam began to get unbearable. A shrill bell rang several times calling the bathers from other parts of the bath house to the steam room. Often, the room was so full that people were literally sitting on top of each other. The bath attendant opened the small iron door of the floor-to-ceiling stove. Cups of cold water were thrown over the red hot stones to let off more steam, and the men on the benches perspired more and more. Warm waves of steam floated about. The more hardy souls sitting on the upper benches would shout out, "Heat up the bath! (**incalzeste baia**)."

Then the whole process would start again.

As the room began to cool down, men would beat each other on their backs with clusters of oak leaves which they had brought along with them. The leaves stung the skin, but left a wonderful, refreshing feeling and a sweet smell. In the shower room there were always more people than

shower heads. Sometimes a father and son would huddle together under one shower. After soaping up and bathing, the bathers if so inclined, would return for another session in the steam bath. The last station of the bath were the benches in the locker room where the totally relaxed, limp bodies lay down wrapped in coarse, linen towels.

The bathing process was a ritual; one met the same men week after week, japing around, telling stories to each other. It seemed that in the bath the problems of the outside world were all washed away.

As one walked out of the bath house, near the locker room, one couldn't miss the following warning written in bold type: **"Omenii civilizati, ne scupa pe jos. Deci serviti-va de scupatoare!"** ("Civilized people, do not spit on the floor; therefore, make use of the spittoon!")

^{*} This project was sponsored by a Fulbright-Hays grant.

... Then every man, of every clime,
That prays in his distress,
Prays to the human form divine,
Love, Mercy, Pity, Peace.

And all must love the human form,
In heathen, turk or jew;
Where Mercy, Love & Pity dwell
There God is dwelling too.

William Blake, from
"The Divine Image"
Songs of Innocence



































Technical Information

I would like to state briefly some of the technical problems I encountered during the course of photographing in the bathhouse, for the benefit of those who might find themselves in tackling a similar situation. All of the photographs were taken with an Asahi Pentax Spotmatic 35mm camera, usually furnished with a 28mm lens. All used bounce flash from a Honeywell Stobonar 800 flash.

The film was for the most part, Tri X. Usually when I entered the baths I sat and talked for while with the men in the locker room. This gave me and camera a chance to acclimatize ourselves to the steamy conditions. Even so, I was only able to expose one or two rolls of film because as soon as water condensed on the battery terminals the flash would not go off and the unite would need several hours to dry out. The photographs exposed for La Baie were taken over a one and a half year period. The camera formed part of my bathing costume. I think the bathers got used to seeing me so often with my camera that the the photographs came out with a natural, unimposed feeling about them. After all, I was just another Tovaras, taking a bath as far as they were concerned.

Acknowledgements

There are certain people who along the way have helped make and contributed to making this volume what it is and I would like to thank them now and for ever. So, Robert Asman, Michael Becotte & Charles Gerhswin, Sam Maitin, Gail Kligman, and my wife, Ayse Gürsan-Salzman,

– thanks to you all.

For help in preparing the new version of La Baie/
bath scenes Aki Shigemori & W.Keith McManus



Laurence Salzmann, self-portrait at the bath

Laurence Salzmann is a native of Philadelphia who has worked as a photographer/ filmmaker since the early 1960's. His projects involve social commentaries on little known groups in America and abroad. They range from a study of the occupants of Single Room Occupancy Hotels in New York City to the life of Transhumant Shepherds of Transylvania, work on Mexican village life and an hour length film about the Philadelphia Mummers. His photographic study of a nearly extinct Jewish Community in Romania, "The Last Jews of Radauti," was published as by Dial/Doubleday, 1983, with text by Ayse Gürsan-Salzmann. Most recent work in Cuba La Lucha/The Struggle published by Blue Flower Press, 2007.

Salzmann training in anthropology provides him with a theoretical insight into how people adapt to their existing conditions; and with his images he illustrates people in relation to their environment. Salzmann's photographic method involves long term participation and observation of a group or event. And, then patience is the keyword.



