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LIFESTYLE | TRAVEL

How This 1930s Detroit Bathhouse Went From Gangster Den to Neighborhood Hotspot

Against all odds, as Detroit's North End has slowly emptied out, the Schvitz—a Jewish bathhouse—has persevered. For a glimpse into the city's past, plan a visit.

By Alexander Nazaryan / Photographs by Sylvia Jarrus for The Wall Street Journal

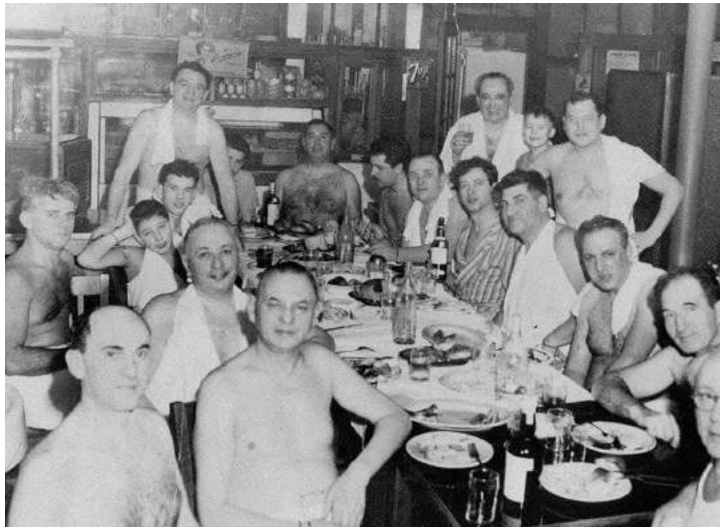
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For the Time Capsule series, we spotlight a cherished restaurant, hotel or landmark that's changed remarkably little over the years. This week, we visit the Schvitz in Detroit.

THEN

In 1930, entrepreneur Charles Meltzer bought a Jewish community center on Oakland Avenue in Detroit's North End, then home to a large Eastern European population. His plan: to convert it into a Russian-style *banya*, or bathhouse. He had a pool dug in the basement and, off the white-tiled main atrium, installed a steam room. Christened the Oakland Health Club, it quickly became a favorite hangout for the Purple Gang, a local outfit of the “Kosher Nostra,” as Jewish organized crime organizations of that era are sometimes called. According to a 1980 Detroit Free Press history, club patrons casually stowed machine guns in lockers.

In the basement, the Purples lounged unclothed on wooden benches, sweating out their sins. “It wasn't unusual to see federal judges, prosecutors and the boys make deals,” one local recounted to the Free Press. The Purples eventually lost their hold on the neighborhood. In the postwar years, white flight drove many of the area's Jewish residents to the suburbs, and investment in the North End, as in the rest of Detroit, steadily declined.



From left: The Schvitz opened as the Oakland Health Club in 1930; regulars gather at the Schvitz, probably in the 1940s.

THE SCHVITZ (2)

To survive, the bathhouse, now known as the Schvitz (after the Yiddish term for sweating), hosted “swingers’ nights” in the late 1970s, opening up the space for polyamorous encounters, as a poster in the men’s locker room still attests. In 2017, Paddy Lynch, a third-generation undertaker (whose funeral home inspired the popular HBO series “Six Feet Under”) bought the Schvitz. “I do believe that it’s a beautiful thing to maintain this place,” Lynch said. He removed drop ceilings and added a dry sauna while preserving the design details that make the Schvitz feel like a cross between a spa, a clubhouse and, what it once was: a community center.

NOW

As I entered a steam room at the Schvitz, I heard a word I’ve rarely encountered in the often-intimidating atmosphere of Russian banyas. “Welcome,” a rotund old-timer, dripping with sweat, cheerfully called out. Not only are the gangsters gone, but these days, Lynch tries to communicate to the neighborhood’s Black residents—and women—that the Schvitz is open to everyone. “You want people to take the place seriously,” he said, “but you want people to feel really welcome.”



Clockwise from top left: The Schvitz has occupied the same North End building since it opened; many of the bathhouse's original details have been restored by its new owner; the club room at the Schvitz where guests can gather for conversation; the bathhouse's cold plunge pool.

Descending into the basement, you pass beneath a wooden mermaid fixture. White subway tile gorgeously clads the airy downstairs atrium, trimmed in black along both ceiling and floor. Along one wall, ferns in planters hang from old exposed pipes, while bathers lounge in plastic beach chairs. Two rooms sit off to the side, one a “wet” steam room, the other a sauna blasted with intense dry heat. The suggested routine: Dip into the main atrium's cold pool between successive rounds of heat. Once the initial shock wears off, rush back into the “dry” room to experience the intense tingle of the rapid temperature change.

Ante up \$40 and one of the skilled attendants will flog you with a bushel of oak leaves, a supposedly healthful practice known as *platza*. Alternatively, splurge for an \$80 massage, no flogging involved. Or pay nothing extra to lounge on one of the leather couches upstairs. The restaurant serves unfussy but delicious fare from a menu that now reads more American than

Eastern European: lambchops, salmon, green beans. The Schvitz lacks an alcohol license, but encourages BYOB-ing. Orgies, however, are no longer allowed.

A Michi-Gander Through Jewish Detroit

The Schvitz is just one holdover from when Eastern European Jews settled in Detroit—and brought their traditions with them. Here, three other points of interest for anyone looking for the city’s sometimes-elusive Jewish history.

Now more than a century old, the **Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue** stands as a rare relic of Jewish culture in downtown Detroit. Today, the temple occupies an architectural marvel, a slim triangular building whose second floor features brightly colored square window panes. Over the years, the building served as the headquarters of a coal business, a women’s clothing store and an etiquette school, finally becoming a synagogue in 1964.



From left: As Detroit’s Jewish population moved to the suburbs so did its places of worship, leaving the Isaac Agree Downtown Synagogue as the only freestanding synagogue in Detroit proper; the Zekelman Holocaust Center in the suburb of Farmington Hills.

JASON KEEN (DOWNTOWN SYNAGOGUE); OWEN KAUFMAN (ZEKELMAN HOLOCAUST CENTER)

You’ll find the nation’s first freestanding Holocaust museum, the **Zekelman Holocaust Center** in Farmington Hills, a suburb northwest of Detroit. The many survivors of the Nazi concentration camps who lived in the area helped spur the museum’s creation in 1984. While rival institutions sometimes focus on the grotesque crimes of the perpetrators, the Zekelman notably centers on victims, with survivors hosting Sunday talks about their experiences, for instance. Exhibits include a boxcar used to transport Jews from Hamburg to their deaths in the charnel houses of Poland. On a nearby pedestal sits Phil Chernofsky’s remarkable 2014 conceptual work, “And Every Single One Was Someone,” a 1,250-page book that renders the word “Jew” six million times, once for each Jewish victim of the Nazis.

Tucked away in a nearby strip mall, the **Stage Deli** is, by local consensus, the best classic Jewish eatery in Greater Detroit. Unlike some of its East Coast cousins, the restaurant is airy and comfortable, if lacking somewhat in character. Most important though, it hews to tradition when it comes to essentials like pastrami and corned beef sandwiches.

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