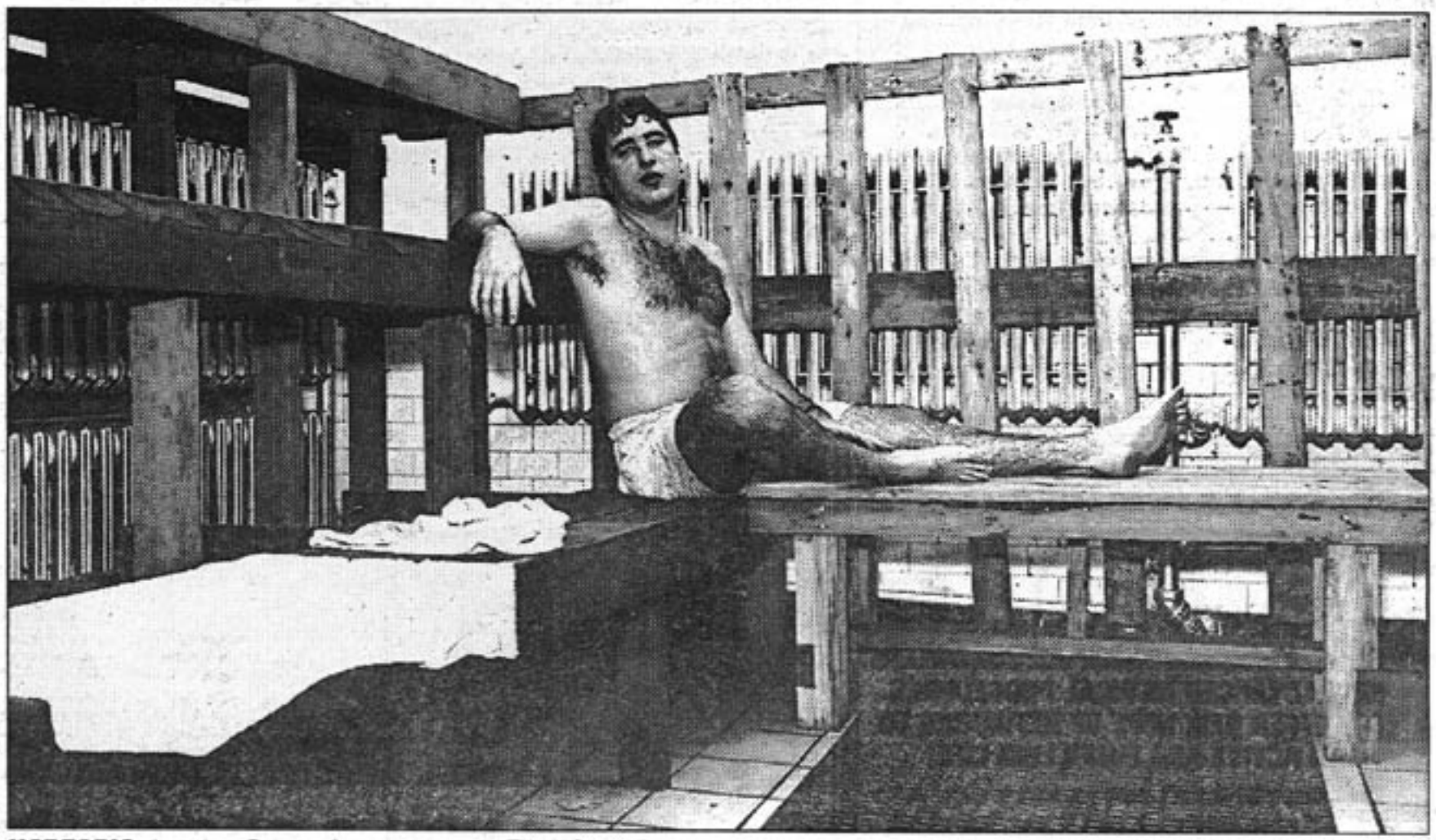
THEY GOT STEAM HEAT

A film maker evokes warm memories of the city's public baths in 'The Shvitz'

By KAREN KRAMER



HOT TOPIC: Jonathan Berman in steam room at Tenth Street Baths

ROBERT ROSAMILIO DAILY NEWS

"WHAT IS A SHVITZ?" asks Jonathan Berman at the beginning of his new film, "The Shvitz," which premieres tonight at the Margaret Mead Film Festival at the Museum of Natural History.

Then for the next 47 minutes — using spontaneous humor and a cast of natural storytellers — Berman shows us this most wonderful of New York institutions.

"It's part of my heritage as a New Yorker," says the 31-year-old film maker. "The tradition of the shvitz is a mostly, but not only, Jewish-New York-male tradition. It used to be like a New York version of the Catskills. This is sort of a look at my roots, in a way."

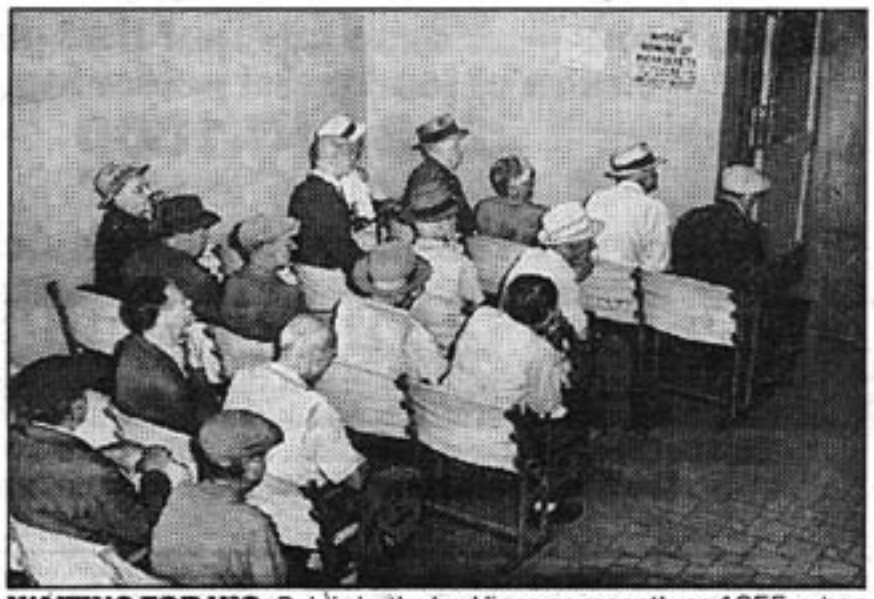
The shvitz, or steambath, was an important part of New York during the early part of this century. Most immigrants lived in cold-water flats. In order to bathe, a lot of them would go to the public baths.

They were city-run and designed to keep everyone clean and hygienic. But if you had a nickel or a quarter — depending on in which decade you needed a bath — you went to the privately owned steambaths where you could not only bathe but play cards and drink schnapps, and schmooze with your fellow countrymen.

Although Berman's father and grandfather both frequented the shvitz (shvitzes, actually: Silver's in Coney Island and Luxor's in Manhattan), Berman, who was born in Brooklyn and grew up on Long Island, never had much interest. In fact, he barely knew about them until a few years ago, when he worked on a kibbutz in Israel, picking bananas.

"My roommate was a guy named Tim Hunter whose family owned the Tenth Street Baths," he says. "So when I returned to New York, I went. Besides how great I felt afterward, I loved the tradition of it."

The tradition was originally one of the Eastern big cities. Although the shvitz was from Russia and Eastern Europe — wherever there was a Jewish ghetto — in New York it was used by many different immigrant groups.



WAITING FOR H²O: Public baths had lines as recently as 1955, when photo was taken at Allen St. baths.

But the institution has either nearly died out or begun to change with the times. For one thing, the Tenth Street Baths has done what might have been blasphemy in the old days: gone co-ed.

"In the film we profile two shvitzes," says Berman. "The one in New Jersey is more traditional, but the one in Manhattan has people of every shape, size, nationality, sex and color. I like that diversity."

The film also talks about some of the more colorful aspects of the shvitz' history. From poets to rabbis to gamblers to New Age masseuses, all have their reasons for loving the physical or communal atmosphere of the baths.

At one point in history, the shvitz was a favorite meeting place for gangsters who wanted to meet and discuss their business. After all, it's pretty hard to carry a concealed weapon when you don't have any clothes on.

The problem of wearing clothes in the shvitz even became a delicate issue for Berman and his crew, who didn't want to make people feel uncomfortable by their presence.

"Sometimes we shot in robes, sometimes in shorts, and sometimes we were buck- naked," says the film maker. "You want to look like the people you're filming."

And the people Berman films are all characters. "Thank God, I'm in here," says one elderly gentleman, rushing into the 260-degree heat. "It's so hot outside."

Another rhapsodizes about the air of camaraderie that would infiltrate the shvitz. "You'd meet strangers, they'd tell you their troubles. It was better than the psychiatrist's couch."

With the advent of modern plumbing, the shvitz began to decline, leaving only a handful in the New York area. The film helps keep their memories alive.

The Margaret Mead Festival, which runs through this week, features 60 films that deal with issues of cultural identity, assimilation and continuity. For ticket information, call (212) 769-5305.

(Karen Kramer is a freelance writer.)