

# THE LAST RESORT

Jewish South Beach, 1977–1986

THOSE OF US WHO GREW UP in Miami Beach in the 1950s and 1960s didn't quite get it. Palm trees were mops and the land was flat. We saw the sign on the MacArthur Causeway welcoming us to "America's Playground," but it meant no more to us than Jackie Gleason's tagline that the show was coming from "The Fun and Sun Capital of the World." Our world was isolated because Miami Beach was a barrier island. This was even truer for those who lived in the poorer end of the "Billion Dollar Sandbar," South Beach. We took for granted the aged Jewish population that was all around us while politicians would come to make fun of them, calling the community "God's Waiting Room" and "A Gerontological Ghetto," until they needed votes. Then they would come and sing in Yiddish at the small covered platform by the beach at Ninth Street and hand out Dixie cups of vanilla ice cream.

The Beach's glamour days waned as we were coming of age. Semblances abounded, though. A few of Carl Fisher's hotels remained but in varied stages of disrepair. My family had a cabana at the Floridian Hotel, where I photographed twenty years later. But by then it was the Biscaya, a halfway house of sorts, straight out of Fellini. The Fleetwood and the Flamingo hotels would fall during my childhood and become high-rise apartment buildings along Biscayne Bay—Forte Towers and Morton Towers, both fifteen stories of those grand tributes to modernism. Earlier on it was the bay, not the ocean, that attracted tourists. Boat races and a water-skiing elephant worked their marketing magic

then, and further north, the Nautilus Hotel, taken over by the army during World War II, became Mount Sinai Hospital, where I was born in 1951.

By then activity moved beachside, and swank hotel lobbies and extravagant entertainment abounded. This wasn't necessarily the opera or even the theater crowd, but at least if it was, people shed these activities for more pedestrian shows when here, on vacation from their northern homes, often enjoying headline entertainers at the Fontainebleau, Eden Roc, Deauville, and Carillon hotels along Millionaire's Row, which stretches further northward and far away from South Beach. Scores of smaller, less opulent hotels lined Collins Avenue. The stylish Saxony, Sea Isle, and Seville filled those ranks, while still smaller hotels were lined one after the other along Ocean Drive in South Beach. Entertainment budgets changed; poolside dances, bingo games, and hot dog parties were staples the further south one stayed. Those smaller-scale hotels were well complemented by Lummus Park across the street (no development was permitted between Fifth and Fourteenth Streets) with the hundreds of coconut palm trees' bases painted white and illuminated with colored spotlights and a full moon lit a silvery ocean while its breezes swept inland.

Miami was a physically hostile frontier when Isidor Cohen settled there in early 1896. He was not the first Jewish person, but he was the first permanent resident along the shores of Biscayne Bay. He opened a dry goods store on Avenue D (which became Miami Avenue) while what would become Miami Beach was a mangrove sandbar waiting to be dredged and filled to become incorporated in 1915. A Jewish community existed on Miami Beach well before 1935, which was the year that the nucleus of Jewish presence shifted from Miami to Miami Beach, across the causeways, separated by Biscayne Bay.

The seeds for Florida, Miami Beach in particular, being the place to realize the American dream were planted from the start, and grew as soon as Henry Flagler's railroad tracks unfurled south along the east coast, reaching a fledgling Miami. Mythology grew into reality. The land was steamy and fecund, a wild place for the adventurous. After the

*Swimmers at sunrise, 1982*

People congregated regularly at Tenth Street Beach to begin the morning in a therapeutic ocean. This practice ceased in 1981 as the crime rate increased, and they no longer made their way to the beach for sunrise.



*Morning prayer, 1983*

There was considerable orthodoxy in South Beach. Many of the hotels along Ocean Drive, Collins Avenue, and Washington Avenue converted card rooms and social halls into makeshift shuls (synagogues) to accommodate their clientele's needs of twice-daily prayer. The shuls are gone now, replaced by bars and restaurants.



*Exercise group, 1978*

Exercise groups formed most mornings along Lummus Park, a strip of land that ran between the beach and Ocean Drive. Rose Silverman, who often started the session by doing a headstand, led this group, the most popular one.



*Porch sitters, 1978*

Porch-sitting was a favorite pastime, particularly at the hotels along Ocean Drive because of the lovely views they offered of palm trees, sky, and ocean. These porches were wider and designed for socializing, unlike those of the hotels along Collins Avenue and Washington Avenue.

