

# Strangers in Paradise

## A Century of Jewish Settlement in Aiken, SC

by Alyssa Neely

Aiken is “a place you could only dream of in Europe,” wrote Hiram Surasky to wife Friedel in Poland in June 1902. “No matter what street you travel on here there are parks and alleys full of delightful aromas.” The Suraskys were among several members of their extended family who settled in Aiken, on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River, lured by descriptions of the town relayed by *landsmen* who preceded them. It is “paradise itself . . . the Garden of Eden.” A letter writer tells of mild winters and parks “between every street.” Most important of all, “we’re making a living here.”

Long before the first Jews arrived in Aiken, the town had acquired a reputation as a healthful spot and a retreat for people with pulmonary problems. Thus, in addition to farming and the mining of clay, tourism developed as a significant industry. By the 1890s, Aiken had become a sports and recreation center for hundreds of wealthy winter residents who came to ride horses, hunt, and play polo, golf, and tennis. The town’s year-round population more than doubled between 1889 and 1935, with the greatest growth occurring in the 1920s. Eastern European Jews contributed to this population spurt in a chain migration initiated by H. L. Polier, who came in search of better health.

Diagnosed with tuberculosis, Harris L. Polier settled in Aiken in the early to mid-1890s on the recommendation of his doctor. Accompanied by his wife and his brother,



*Laurens Street, Aiken, SC, ca. 1922.*

Morris S., the Poliers opened two dry goods stores and encouraged their brother-in-law, Benedict M. Surasky, to join them. B. M. peddled, carrying an English-Russian dictionary with him, until the Poliers put him in charge of one of their stores. Just after the turn of the century, four more Surasky brothers and a sister left their hometown of Knyszyn, Poland, and followed B. M. to “paradise.” For one brother, however, the Garden of Eden became a nightmare. In 1903, while out in the country peddling, Abraham Surasky was brutally murdered by an anti-Semitic farmer whose acquittal compounded the tragedy with injustice.

According to her daughter Esther, when Sarah Anna Polier Surasky joined her husband B. M. in Aiken, the Polier families were not keeping kosher and had abandoned many other Jewish traditions. Sarah insisted on observing the laws of kashrut and immediately began taking routine train trips to Augusta, Georgia, to stock up on kosher products. In her zeal, Esther noted, she had “soon converted



*Mrs. M. S. Polier's millinery shop, Laurens Street, ca. 1915. Courtesy of the Historic Aiken Foundation.*



*Surasky Bros. store, early 1920s. Gift of Mordecai Persky. Special Collections, College of Charleston.*



her relatives.” She and B. M., who had been a rabbinical student in Poland, were primary figures in the push to form a congregation. B. M. served as lay leader, acting as cantor and rabbi at services held in homes of the congregants or in the Masonic Hall above one of their stores. Sarah rejected B. M.’s qualifications as shohet (kosher butcher), however. Because he kept his store open on Saturdays—the day farmers came to town—she found his slaughtering of chickens unacceptable.

In the decades that followed, Jewish-owned stores dotted the streets of the business district, particularly Laurens Street, the main corridor. The Polier brothers’ dry goods stores were joined by Mrs. M. S. (Augusta) Polier’s millinery shop, and three Surasky stores: B. M. Surasky, Surasky Bros., and H. C. Surasky, all purveyors of men’s and ladies’ clothing. M. S. Polier opened a barbershop next to his wife’s store. The Rudnicks got their start in dry goods and furniture with credit extended by Rubin of Columbia, Schneider of Augusta, and Karesh of Charleston. Other store owners included Nathan Poliakoff, Julia Wolf, George Payeff, Nathan Persky, Nettie Franzblau, and Nathan Franzblau, a hardware merchant who had moved to Aiken because of his asthma. Isadore Efron ran a garage and taxi service. One of his fares was a little boy he picked up at the train station with a request to drive him to his grandfather’s plantation near Barnwell. The boy was George H. W. Bush, visiting his mother’s family, the Walkers.

On January 7, 1913, as trustees of the “Sons of Israel,” the Polier and Surasky brothers and M. Poliakoff paid three hundred dollars to buy land for a burial ground. The first occupant of the Sons of Israel Cemetery was Ralph Panitz, husband to Sophie Halpern, the future Mrs. Morris Rudnick. Ralph’s tuberculosis precipitated their move to Aiken from New York, but his health continued to decline. It is interesting to note that he died the very day the cemetery was purchased.



*Adath Yeshurun Synagogue, 2007. Courtesy of Doris Baumgarten.*

The families with the most plots are the Wolfs, Suraskys, and Poliakoffs. The high number of Poliakoff plots reflects, in part, the desire of family members in Abbeville and Anderson to be buried in the cemetery with their Aiken relatives. A memorial plaque dedicated to the Poliakoff family posted at the cemetery’s entrance remains something of a mystery. How and why it was installed is yet unknown.

Adath Yeshurun congregation, founded by fewer than two dozen families, was incorporated in 1921. Because the congregation was small in size, members had to work especially hard to develop lasting institutions. The synagogue was built in 1925 with a three thousand dollar mortgage, and five years later a downstairs hall was added. After B. M. Surasky’s death in 1934, Nathan Persky, his son-in-law and a graduate of a Polish seminary, assumed the duties of lay leader. Services were held in Hebrew and the women were seated separately from the men. The Ladies Aid Society, which had provided care to needy Aiken families, was reorganized in 1938 as a local chapter of the Hadassah Sisterhood. Rabbi David Karesh of Columbia provided his services for ceremonies celebrating rites of passage such as marriage and circumcision.

Beginning in the 1950s, with the building of the Savannah River Plant which processed plutonium for H-bombs, the face of Old Aiken changed. An influx of workers, mostly from the Northeast, doubled the population. Jewish employees of DuPont and Allied Chemical boosted membership of the congregation. Still, gathering a minyan on Friday night proved difficult. Baby boomers fondly recall the warmth of holiday gatherings and the sense of family unity among the members, but they also report that Sunday school classes conducted in the basement of the synagogue were “dwindling.”

Adath Yeshurun moved away from the Orthodoxy of its founding members, assuming Conservative practices by the

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*Efron telephone directory ad, 1929. From History of Aiken Preparatory School by Donald Law, 1994.*

late 1960s or early 1970s. The congregation began to invite rabbinical students from New York to conduct High Holy Day services, a practice continued to this day. Difficulty engaging students each year prompted Adath Yeshurun to affiliate with a congregational union. Unable to comply with the requirements of the Conservative union, some 12 years ago the synagogue joined the American Reform movement.

Membership has increased slightly in recent years to about 45 families, but the average age has risen as well with the loss of several young families due to cutbacks at the “Bomb Plant,” as it is commonly called. Recent arrivals tend to be retirees or people associated with the equestrian enterprises for which Aiken has long been known. Congregants are pinning their hopes on a new company moving into the area to bring an infusion of younger members. Aiken’s Jewish community was created by a determined and cohesive group of Polish immigrants and its customs were shaped by their children and the post–World War II arrivals. From whence will the next generation of torchbearers come to carry on the traditions of the Sons (and Daughters) of Israel?

This article is excerpted from a history of Aiken’s Jewish community written by Alyssa Neely for the History Department at the Goldring/Woldenberg Institute of Southern Jewish Life in Jackson, Mississippi, as part of its digital archives project. Using documents and oral histories gathered in the course of fieldwork for the Jewish Heritage Collection, Neely has been commissioned to write histories of South Carolina Jewish communities for the Institute’s website. Later this year, ISJL will post a more complete account of Aiken’s Jewish history by Neely on its website, [www.isjl.org](http://www.isjl.org).

For more information about Surasky’s murder, see Patrick Q. Mason, “Anti-Jewish Violence in the New South,” *Southern Jewish History* (2005). For a short account of the Montmorenci immigrant colony (popularly known as “Happyville”), see JHSSC newsletter, Summer 2004, at [JHSSC.org](http://JHSSC.org).

If you have photographs, documents, or stories about Jewish life in South Carolina, contact JHC archivist Joseph Rubin at [jrubin@knology.net](mailto:jrubin@knology.net).