Survivors' Stories: Anniston's Temple Beth El and the Holocaust

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Alfred Caro
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Alfred Caro was born in Samter, Germany, also the birthplace of his mother, Frida, and his father Sally. Alfred was one of six children, three boys and three girls. His mother's parents originally came from Czechoslovakia and the Caro family came from Rogasen near the province of Posen which used to be Germany and is now Poland. Alfred's family moved to Berlin after a few years in Samter when it became part of Poland. In Berlin, Sally Caro was a butcher and owned his own butcher shop. As a young man Alfred enjoyed all sorts of sports, especially boxing. After completing grammar and high school where he was frequently the only Jewish student in the class, Alfred worked for his father for one year and then went to Halberstadt to learn a trade, to become a butcher, and also to learn to cook. It took three years to complete this program. After he completed the program he returned to Berlin.

Before the Nazis, the relationship in Berlin between Jews and the non-Jews was good, and Alfred had many non-Jewish friends. In 1933 life began changing for the worse for German's Jewish citizens. Hitler and the Nazis had taken power in Germany and the entire existing structure of Jewish life in Germany had collapsed. On April 1, 1933 the first large scale anti-Jewish demonstration took place in the form of a boycott against all Jewish-owned shops and offices of Jewish professionals. Consequently, his father lost his business. In 1935 police actions in Germany against the Jews were beginning, and in the years 1937-38 the Nazis were arresting Jews. The first ones arrested were political opponents of the Nazi regime; for these the internment or concentration camps were set up. Police actions increased and more arrests took place as the months passed by. In addition to the opponents of the Nazis, those arrested also included Jews with whom the Nazis had personal accounts to settle. Many were arrested, however, for no reason. Also, the Nazis intended to insure the gradual removal of Jews from various professions. However, there was a turning point in the Nazi policy against the Jews in 1938, with the arrests increasing even more.

In 1938 the Nazis were carrying out a police action that involved arresting one person from each Jewish family (mostly the men) -- to investigate and to make each family somehow responsible to the Nazi regime. The police came to the Caro house in June of 1938 to see how many men were in the home and to get one of the men to come in; Alfred hid for a few days with relatives. But he knew that someone would have to go to "be investigated," so he volunteered to go with the police. Although the police arrested him, he was not immediately taken to jail but to a closed room. Just three hours later he was transferred to the Presidium, the central police station in Berlin. There were hundreds of Jewish people in one big room there who had no idea of what was going on, because these particular Jews were not politically active. The day following his arrest,

more were arrested. Alfred stayed two days, but no one ever asked him a question while he was there. Although those taken into custody knew of the existence of concentration camps, they did not know they were to be shipped there because, up to that point, only the "contra-nationals" had been taken. Those arrested in this particular action, ordinary citizens, were now put into two big trucks and driven two and a half hours from Berlin to Sachsenhausen, a concentration camp in Oranienburg, Germany. During the trip their destination remained unknown to them. Sheer brutality and abuse were used to empty the truck; the people, whether old or young, were pulled off by the feet and legs. The people were screaming: they had been free people and now they were marched in by the SS, the private army. Soldiers called the names of the prisoners. As the prisoners left the truck, they were beaten over their heads with sticks and then lined up at their destination; thirty to forty feet from the spot where the prisoners stood were the gallows, empty at the moment. The colonel in charge told the prisoners that they must follow the rules or they would be hanged. Although this particular group of prisoners was all Jewish, in the next days Alfred and the other prisoners heard that Jehovah's Witnesses had also been arrested.

Since these were the days before Auschwitz, the camps consisted of big barracks only -- as yet no ovens. Every day there were more transports to the camp and more prisoners came in. There were no women or children in Alfred's group. Martin Niemoller, a German Protestant churchman who spoke out against Hitler, was imprisoned in the barracks across from where Alfred was placed. On Alfred's first day there forty people were sleeping on straw on the floor. The second day each prisoner got a hair cut, clothing, and a star with the word Jude (Jew) written on the star. Prisoners were not allowed to speak to each other. At night to go to the latrine one had to crawl under the windows because a spotlight constantly went around the front of the barracks. If a person walked straight, he would be seen in the shadows; shooting would then begin and possibly a prisoner might be killed. Each day the prisoners' names were called to go to work. They either moved sand or stone. Very seldom could a prisoner be sick; permission was needed to be sick -- first from the barracks person and then his superior in the SS, who finally made the decision if a person was sick. If one was not judged sick, there might be punishment. Daily the prisoners went out into the field where the sharpshooters were training. The prisoners' time was occupied with the task of moving sand from one side of the field to the other. Around the field where the prisoners worked, every thirty meters was a tower about ten meters high with a machine gun on it There was also a line in the sand marked by little flags; sometimes the flags were covered by the sand, so as not to be visible. If the prisoners crossed the line, they would be shot. The soldiers constantly would call to the prisoners to come toward the line, and when the prisoner was almost to the line the soldiers would have them turn round and round until the prisoner was so disoriented that he would cross the line; the shooting would then begin, many of the prisoners being called in this manner. Food was mostly soup (hot water with a little vegetable) and maybe a piece of bread. There was a lot of violence towards the prisoners by the soldiers. Alfred stayed there six weeks. One morning as names were called Alfred was told to stand aside. He was marched to the office (without talking as always). No one would tell Alfred if anything was wrong; however, he was returned to the principal police station, and told to take his bundle. There he was told that he was free.

During his imprisonment Alfred's mother had been doing everything she could to find out why Alfred was in the camp. His mother had actually obtained his freedom. Mrs. Caro had earlier been to the Presidium to have an interview about her son with the Nazis; by happenstance she met a young SS officer who recognized her and asked what she was doing there. Fortunately, the young officer had lived in the same building as the Caro family when he was a boy, had played with Alfred and had eaten with the Caro family. This young officer had probably arranged Alfred's freedom. When Alfred was released, he was too numb to react or to feel any emotion.

His mother and sisters, Jennie and Norah, were at the station waiting for him. His family was shocked at the changes in his appearance: he had lost many, many pounds and his once beautiful hair was gone. Alfred's father was very upset when he saw Alfred because he looked so terrible. Three days after his release from Sachsenhausen, the HICEM, a Jewish international organization helping imprisoned Jews emigrate from the country, helped Alfred, then only in 1938 in his mid-twenties, leave for Belgium where his family had relatives. His mother had contacted them for help and, during those three days, he had obtained a passport. The remainder of his family stayed in Germany (his mother, father, three sisters and two brothers) unaware of the horrors that were to come in their native Germany. His sisters, Norah and Cecilia, were the only close relatives to survive; the rest died in concentration camps. An uncle, a maker of orthopedic shoes (considered by the government to be a valuable occupation), came to the states after the war and many years later told Alfred about his family's fate: they had probably perished after 1944 because Alfred had some contact with his parents in 1944. Alfred traveled to Belgium on a train; he remained there only three days on his journey as the Belgium government would not let him stay. He traveled to Paris, carrying with him not only a transit visa to Paris but also a letter from the HICEM to be delivered to the director of a Jewish organization in Paris. Although he did not know the contents of the letter, he did learn later that if he had been caught with it, he would have been shot.

Once Alfred arrived in France, he delivered the letter and contacted the organization helping Jews. As he waited to go overseas, he contacted this organization on a daily basis. While in Paris, Alfred met another Jewish immigrant; the two of them attempted to join the French Foreign Legion but were turned away. He traveled to Marseilles where he had an interview with the Consul of Colombia who gave Alfred and four to five others permission to travel to Colombia, South America. Alfred then returned to Paris where he stayed; during the month he lived in Paris, he traveled to Bordeaux and LeHavre, returning to Paris each night. The HICEM, in addition to paying his expenses, also paid the daily living expenses for hundreds of other Jews in Paris and gave him the funds to travel to South America. When Alfred departed from LeHavre, France, he traveled to Colombia on a French ship, the Cuba. On this ship there were Jews from Poland and Austria as well as Germany; none spoke French and most could not communicate with each other. Finally, Caro arrived in the port city of Barranquilla on the western shore of Colombia.

When he left Germany, the HICEM had given Alfred a check for $54 dollars -- all he had to his name. That check was his first time to know dollars; he had known only marks: at that time the dollar was three marks. There were two Jewish organizations in Barranquilla -- one for the Turkish and one for the European Jews, the Ashkenazis. These organizations not only provided food and shelter but also tried to help the emigrants earn a living. Soon out of money, Alfred decided to head for the gold mines. Aboard a river boat, really a barge with a motor, he traveled for fourteen days. Conditions were deplorable -- with an unbearable stench and nowhere to sleep.

A member of the Jamaican crew, whose job on board the ship was to push the barge out of low waters with a long pole, allowed Alfred to use his hammock to sleep when the man worked his four hour shift. Finally, Alfred arrived at the mine to find Germans, not Jews. He did, however, make the acquaintance of one Jewish man. He remained in the mines one year, but contracted malaria and returned to Barranquilla. There he met a young German Jew, George, who made teeth. They became friends and Alfred decided to accompany George to a job in Cucuta in south Colombia, near the border of Venezuela. However, while traveling on the ship to Cucuta, Alfred's malaria recurred and the engineer put him off the ship because of the illness.

Alfred asked his friend not to leave him and the two of them traveled to Cucuta over the mountain where he recovered from malaria and worked there for a time. From Cucuta Alfred traveled to Bogota where life began to improve dramatically as he worked wherever he could, often making plenty of money. His sister, Cecilia, was living in Bolivia and Alfred was able to bring her and her husband to Bogota. He worked as a cook in one of the best restaurants in Bogota, and became an expert in this craft, even catering meals for the government. He had learned about food from his parents because they had owned a butcher shop. With a wonderful ability to make friends wherever he was, in whatever situation he happened to be in, Alfred became friendly with a jockey who brought emeralds from the mountains and had become tremendously wealthy. He was developing a new area in Bogota and offered Alfred a building to house his own butcher shop and restaurant. There Alfred remained, running his own shop for fourteen years and earning the respect of those around him: they referred to him as Don Alfredo. He finally decided to come to America where his sister Norah lived in New York City. He arrived in New York in November, 1952. There he worked as a butcher in a delicatessen. His employer later sent him on a vacation to the Catskills where he met wife-to-be, Helen Nathan Arkus (sister of Greta Nathan Kemp) from Anniston. Helen's son, Allan, promptly asked Alfred to be "his new daddy." Alfred and Helen married in 1954 in New York but returned to live in Anniston. At this point Caro spoke Spanish and German but had to learn English. Alfred and Helen had one daughter, Alice. In Anniston Caro first worked in the store/restaurant owned by the Nathan family where he also cooked. Then Alfred leased The Annistonian Restaurant for one year, but, seeing its potential, bought it at the end of the year. He sold it in 1976. The restaurant (as Alfred said "often imitated but never duplicated") became famous for its wonderful food and became a gathering place for the prominent citizens of Anniston.

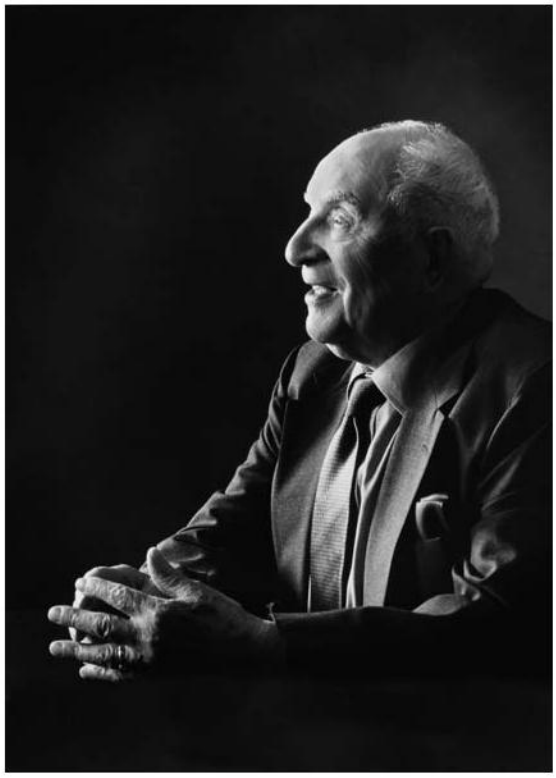
Alfred loved creating food and sharing his food with others, oftentimes taking no payment for his meals as was the case with the Israeli soldiers stationed at the local army base, Fort McClellan. They often dined in his restaurant, but because Alfred would not accept payment from the soldiers, they rewarded him with gifts of their medals. In spite of two fires, the restaurant and Alfred prospered. Alfred gave back to the community that rewarded him with its continued patronage. The entire congregation of Temple Beth El was his guest at a Yom Kippur break-the-fast dinner at the restaurant for many years. Alfred, from a conservative Jewish background, fasted on this holiday and kept the business closed; however, he supervised his staff in the preparation of this special meal, frequently attended by sixty or seventy members of Temple Beth El.

Those who know him have truly benefitted from the way Alfred Caro had managed his triumphs and tragedies. He is the only member of the Jewish community to be significantly honored (i.e., the gift of a menorah mounted on the Temple Beth El tower) by the non-Jewish community; he was a true gentleman and a gentle man, one who never forgot, remembering birthdays with cakes and greeting those who knew him with a smile. He hoped that no one, whether Jewish or non- Jewish, would ever forget the Holocaust. Alfred died in Anniston and is buried in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Interview with Alfred Caro, conducted by Sherry Blanton, March 19, 1997.

Photographs courtesy of Alfred Caro, Alice Caro Burkett, Allen Arkus, Don Kemp, and Lance Johnson Studios.

South America, ca. 1938



In honor of his 88th birthday
Anniston, Alabama 1999

Notes on the Project

The congregation of Temple Beth El in Anniston, Alabama was founded in 1888 and its sanctuary built and dedicated in 1893. Over time doctors, lawyers, teachers, businesspeople, soldiers, and their husbands, wives, children, and extended families have filled the pews. Among the members of this congregation, probably never totaling more than fifty families, were sixteen individuals with unique pasts. They were Holocaust survivors. The Birmingham Holocaust Education Committee has defined a survivor: "A Holocaust survivor is any person, Jewish or non-Jewish, who was displaced, persecuted, or discriminated against due to the racial, religious, ethnic, social and political policies of the Nazis, and their collaborators between 1933 and 1945. In addition to former inmates of concentration camps, ghettoes, and prisons, this definition includes, among others, people who were refugees or were in hiding."

Some of Temple Beth El's survivors had very dramatic stories full of danger and intrigue; others had stories filled with horror and sadness. Walter Israel described his journey as an "adventure." But all lived under the terror of a regime that made them targets simply because they were Jewish. Our survivors settled here, finding safety and security in the Deep South; they faced a new way of living from adjusting to the climate, to learning to speak English (and understanding our famous Southern drawls), to working at jobs that were as foreign to some of them as the food. Many of them now worshiped with new religious traditions; some had been Orthodox . . . others Conservative Jews; now they worshiped in a classically Reform congregation. But all were survivors. They made new lives; they married; they had children; they operated successful businesses. "America," as Greta Kemp once said, "became our country of choice and Anniston became our home."

All sixteen of our congregation's survivors are now dead, but their stories of courage and tenacity will survive. Family members have shared family records and chronicles, photographs, and personal memories. Alfred Caro, Walter Israel, and Sophie Nathan gave testimony for the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education. (Alfred Caro's testimony has been posted on YouTube.) I was fortunate to be able to interview Alfred Caro, Walter Israel, Rudy and Greta Kemp, and Ernest Kohn many years ago. We can all only be better for learning about their experiences, their spirit, and their determination.

Sherry Blanton

Family Members of Our Survivors Who Helped with the Research

Alice Caro Burkett
Allan Arkus
Danny Einstein
Don Kemp
Else Israel Goodman
Fred Kemp
George Nathan Gil
Kempenich
Herbert Kohn
Michelle Kemp-Nordell

Birmingham Holocaust Education Committee
Public Library of Anniston and Calhoun-County and staff members, Teresa Kiser and Bonnie Seymour
Lance Johnson Studios
Temple Beth El
The James Rosen Charitable Foundation
Tyson Art and Frame
University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education