

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



Sherry Blanton

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**Age 15, Frankfurt, Germany
1938**

(one year before he left Germany)

Ernest Ferdinand Kohn **1923 - 2004**

Ernest Kohn, the son of Irene and Leo Kohn, was born in Frankfurt on Main, Germany, into an upper middle-class family who traced its roots back to the 1500s. He had a younger brother, Herbert. Leo worked in a leather business in Offenbach across the Main River, manufacturing ladies' handbags. His grandfather, Julius Kohn, a doctor who served as a surgeon in World War I, died in 1927 before the terrors of the Nazis began to grip German Jews. His grandmother on his mother's side, Sophie Simon, owned a wholesale fruit and vegetable business; she came to work at 3:00 AM to sell wholesale vegetables to store owners and then opened up a fish market at 7:00 AM. Although Frankfurt had a relatively large Jewish community of about 40,000 people, Ernest's family lived in the suburbs where there was not a large population of Jews. He attended public school until 1933-34 when he, like other Jewish students, was not allowed to go to public school any more. He and Herbert attended a Jewish gymnasium (school), the Philantropin, which was very strict like those of the Germans. His father took a job at the school when he lost his other job. The increasing restrictions against the Jews had led to his father losing his position at the leather business. As a result of The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 that had forbidden non-Jews to work for Jews and had forbidden Jews to work for non-Jews, the family could no longer have any non-Jews work in their home. Close to the time of Kristallnacht the Nazis fined the Jews, taking money out of their bank accounts. The Jews were no longer allowed to go to public places, and Ernest's family became isolated. During this time, there was a German woman who offered, for a fee, to help the German Jewish families smuggle money across the border: Irene thought it might be a good idea but Leo said that he did not want to be involved -- the right decision -- as the woman and five hundred Jews who attempted to hide their money were tortured and murdered. When the Kohns finally were able to leave Germany, they left with hardly a dollar to their name. Leo Kohn, sensing that the situation would only get worse for Germany's Jews, began looking for a means to get his family out of harm's and Hitler's way. He drew up a family tree in 1936 or 1937 and began writing letters to all the relatives seeking a sponsor to help the Kohns leave Germany. Dorah and Mervyn Sterne of Birmingham, Alabama responded, sending a letter dated October 15th, 1938 providing the guarantees necessary for the Kohns to immigrate to the United States. Although they had exit visas for the United States, due to the American government's quotas for immigration, their visas to the United States were not valid until 1940 -- more than a year later.

On Kristallnacht, November 1938, the Nazis came to their house. While his mother hid Ernest and his brother, the Nazis took his father and his grandfather Simon. Although the two of them were arrested, they managed to return that same night. Unfortunately, the next day the Nazis

returned and arrested his father who was just one of many on a list of those to be arrested. Leo Kohn disappeared. Irene went to Gestapo headquarters to attempt to have her husband released, but was unsuccessful because she did not know where he was. She knew, however, she had to make sure her husband could leave immediately when and if he came home. In hopes of obtaining the necessary guarantees to get Leo out of Germany, Irene researched Leo's family tree and located a relative of their great-grandmother on his father's side (Cecilia Schwarzschild), a brother who was now a resident of London, England. Ernest's great grandmother, Cecilia, having been forced to leave her home because of her religion, lived with the Kohns until her death in 1937. Irene contacted the brother who (in a telegram) agreed to provide a small amount of money to pay for Leo's housing and some living expenses in London. Therefore, Leo could get a transit visa. This transit visa to London did not allow Leo to work in London. Three weeks after he disappeared, Leo appeared again, wearing only a raincoat -- no clothing underneath -- in the midst of the German winter; he had come home on a train. On the night he returned the family spent the entire night listening to Leo's story with no interruptions. At the time of his imprisonment Leo was 39 years old; upon his return his hair had turned completely white and he had lost 30 pounds. The Germans had told him not to say anything. The reason, ironically, that Leo had been released from Buchenwald, a concentration camp, was that the Nazis found a copy of an award certificate in his wallet saying that he had received the "Hindenberg Honor Cross for Front Soldiers in the name of the Fuehrer and Chancellor"-- for Leo's efforts for the German army during World War I. The day after his release Leo Kohn departed for England.

England was merely a place to stay for some leaving Germany until the time came to travel to the United States. Although the family had guarantees to the United States, they did not have the necessary papers to travel to England. What Irene did have was a telegram from the London relative agreeing to pay a very small amount of money to subsidize Leo's living in England. Irene took the telegram from the relative to the English consul in Frankfurt; he asked to see their four passports. She told him that while she and the boys had the money to purchase tickets to travel, they had no money to live on in England and no sponsor there; thus, they would have to wait until her husband could send for them. The consul said that might be too late and, in a humanitarian gesture, he signed and stamped all four passports with exit visas. He saved their lives! While Leo left the day after his return, Irene and the boys stayed while she made sure her parents were taken care of, while she disassembled their home, and while plans were made for Ernest and Herbert. Six weeks after his father left for England, Ernest went to England, where he had a position as an apprentice; Irene and Herbert went in May, 1939. The family was fortunate to escape; but in doing so they left their grandparents behind. Irene's mother, Sophie Simon, died of natural causes; Irene's father, Friedrich Simon, wearing his yellow star, was picked up on the streets of Frankfurt to be shipped in a cattle car to a concentration camp in Minsk, Poland. On the trip he was crushed in transit and died before his arrival; he was an older gentleman traveling in a railroad car meant for eight cows or maybe 40 people but holding 140 to 160 people.

In England Leo and Irene had a one room place to live with cooking facilities; Ernest had an apprenticeship which took care of him, and Herbert went to a B'nai B'rith boarding school. On the first day of spring in 1940 the family sailed from Liverpool, traveling eleven days to New York City. Mervyn Sterne had paid for their passage on the Cunard. The family had tickets

already purchased for the Hamburg-American ship line; although the line had become defunct, the Germans had insisted that the family pay for the tickets anyway. When the Kohns departed Germany, their furniture was packed and shipped (with the costs paid for by the Sterne family) to a loading dock in New Orleans where it remained for one year waiting for the Kohns to find a home. In New York City Joseph Heyman, brother of Dorah Sterne, met them and put them in an apartment for two or three days. He had with him a letter from Mervyn Sterne who suggested to the family that, since there were so many refugees coming in the United States and going to the big cities, it might be better for the family to come to Alabama where they could learn how to farm. They traveled to Birmingham, a journey of three days and three nights on a bus with no air conditioning. The Sterne's had an apartment waiting for them. Their first real American experience was a visit to an ice cream parlor where they drank milk shakes and ate ice cream.

Mervyn Sterne then took the Kohns to Demopolis, Alabama where he paid Mr. Gillespie, a dairy farmer, to build the Kohns a house and teach them how to garden and dairy farm. Ernest Kohn would later in life refer to himself as "the only Jewish dairy farmer in the state of Alabama." Sterne paid all the families' expenses during this first year while the farmer taught them to farm; at the end of the year the house belonged to Gillespie. Irene adjusted to their new lifestyle much easier than Leo did. The Kohns learned English and learned to cook what they grew on the farm. When the year was up, the family moved to Gallion. They lived on an eighty-acre farm rented by Mervyn Sterne; they worked hard caring for the cows, and becoming self-sufficient. The local residents rode by the farm and pointed out the German refugee farmers. From his start in farming in Demopolis, Ernest's life-long career was dairy farming.

Ernest came to Anniston in 1949; Mervyn Sterne had purchased a 100-acre farm on Coldwater Road in Oxford, Alabama where Ernest farmed and operated a dairy. Sterne furnished the land and paid the taxes; Ernest furnished the labor and paid part of all the expenses. After one year under this arrangement he borrowed the money and repaid Sterne. Ernest joined the temple just a few years after his move here. In Germany his family had been Conservative Jews; he had a Bar Mitzvah in Germany at the temple in Frankfurt, walking a distance of three or four miles from his home on Saturday. His brother had a Bar Mitzvah in the B'nai B'rith boarding school. (In Demopolis they had attended the Reform temple.) From his early beginnings as a city boy, Ernest would later find freedom in America as a country boy! Except for a short time when he lived in Florida Ernest was a dairy farmer in Anniston. He died here and is buried in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Interview with Ernest Kohn, conducted by Sherry Blanton, July 19, 1997.

Interview with Herbert Kohn, January 10, 2010.

Correspondence with Herbert Kohn, in writer's file, January 10, 2010.

Photographs courtesy of Herbert Kohn.



**Ernest (r) and Herbert
Franklin, Germany 1928**



Vacation in Venice, Italy ca. 2000

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, ghettos, 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