

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



Sherry Blanton

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WWII Soldier 1945

Heinz (Henry) Nathan ***1920 - 1974***

Henry, like his wife Sophie, was born in Emmerich, Germany. Henry, the youngest child of Felix and Regina Nathan, had two sisters, Helen and Greta. Under the Nazi regime, life for German Jewish children and teens was a very lonely one because non-Jewish children and others were not allowed to speak to them. They could not use public transportation, attend a theater, cinema or a public bath; gas and telephones were shut off; radios were given up; they could not have pets. They could shop only during certain hours and, if Jews were renters, they had to move. Jewish children could only attend Hebrew school--no public school. On September 1, 1941 the Nazis began to make all Jews wear the "Jewish Star" on their clothing; they were even required to purchase it themselves. The Nazis did not allow Henry to complete high school.

In December 1936 Felix, believing that things would only get worse in Germany, sent Henry and Helen to the United States and then on to Alabama. (Greta was already married when Henry and Helen left Germany. Greta and her husband, Rudy, did not arrive until 1937.) Lee Freibaum, their mother's brother, took Helen and Henry in when they arrived in Anniston. Since Lee was president of Classe Ribbon, Henry's first job in this country was at Classe Ribbon. Felix and Regina arrived in Alabama in 1937, just a few months after Helen and Henry got here. Henry also worked in the Nathan's Lunch, his father's business and he and Helen lived in the back rooms. Henry wanted to join the Army after Pearl Harbor but Ina said no; he was, however, drafted in 1943 and became a US citizen later that year. He served in Yugoslavia and Italy as a member of the Army Air Force where he received three Good Conduct Medals, two Soldier's Medals for Heroism, an Army of Occupation Medal (Germany), and a World War II victory medal, among others. When he returned from the war, Henry worked at the family store until he married Sophie. Then he purchased a business in Jacksonville, Alabama and eventually worked as a salesman in the food and chemical fields. Henry and Sophie and their children moved to Birmingham in 1959 where Henry remained until his death. Henry is buried in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Correspondence with George Nathan, in writer's file, December 2, 2009.

Correspondence with Don Kemp, in writer's file, November 17, 2009.

Emmi Nathan Loewenstern, *Biographical Essay of the Nathan Family*, December, 1998.

Interview with Sophie Nathan, Interview Code 15654, Interviewed by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education.

Photographs courtesy of Don Kemp and George Nathan



**Wedding Portrait
Anniston, Alabama 1946**

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.

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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