

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



Sherry Blanton

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***Margareta (Greta) Sybilla Nathan
Kemp
1912 - 2007***

Greta Nathan, the daughter of Felix and Ina Nathan was born in Emmerich, Germany. She had a brother, Henry, and a sister, Helen. Greta attended a Catholic primary school and then high school in Emmerich. She worked in the "Ladies Ready to Wear" department at Nathan and Gumpertz, the department store owned by Max Kempenich, Rudy's father. Before her marriage she went to a Jewish boarding house to learn, with other Jewish young women, how to cook and set a proper table by preparing meals for the guests in the boarding house. She became engaged and married Rudy Kemp in 1935. In 1936 she and Rudy began to plan their departure from Germany. Other family members had already left, some settling in Anniston, Alabama; others

Emmerich, Germany

going to Brazil and Israel. Since many of Greta's family had already settled in Anniston, they chose Anniston, Alabama for their next home. In preparation for their departure their furniture had been packed and moved out of their home months before; husband Rudy had also been smuggling money across the border into Holland. When the Gestapo ordered Rudy to come to provide an accounting of his money, he knew it was time to go. He went to the beauty shop to find Greta and the couple left, going to the home of Jewish friends, with Greta carrying only her purse. Rudy and Greta took a taxi up to a point near the border since walking about was no longer safe. When the border guards passed, they made their way into Holland across one of the stone bridges across the Rhine. In Holland there was family to house them and eventually retrieve their personal belongings from relatives in Germany. From Holland they traveled to France and stayed with Rudy's sister, Erna, while they waited for their visas to become valid for their trip to the United States. In LeHavre they met Salomon and Meta Freibaum and boarded a ship bound for the United States; they arrived on December 6, 1937.

In Anniston Greta reunited with her sister and brother, parents, and aunts and uncles. She and Rudy had four children Fred, Don, and Jeanne, and a baby who died as an infant. Because Greta and Rudy chose to make the United States and Anniston, Alabama their new home, they adjusted well to their new environment. Greta became very involved in the activities of Temple Beth El and remained so over her lifetime. Greta died in Anniston and is buried in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Interview with Rudy and Greta Kemp conducted by Sherry Blanton, June 29, 1996.

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

Correspondence with Michelle Kemp-Nordell, in the writer's file, January 9, 2010.

Photographs courtesy of Don Kemp, Alice Caro Burkett, and George Nathan



Engagement Photo, Emmerich, Germany 1935



Greta



Rudy and Greta at the Rededication of the Ark in Rudy's honor at Temple Beth El, Anniston, Alabama 1933.

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