

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



Sherry Blanton

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***Rudolph (Rudy) Alfred
Kempenich (Kemp)
1911 - 1999***

Rudolph Kempenich was born in Emmerich, Germany, the son of Max and Margarete Kempenich. Rudy had two brothers and a sister -- Erich, Heinz (Heinrich), and Erna. Rudy's family was prosperous; Max (with Hugo Weinberg) owned the largest department store in Emmerich, Nathan and Gompertz; they lived in an apartment over the store but eventually moved to a house in the country. Max and Margarete were so much a part of the community of Emmerich that they even sang in the city choir. His father died when Rudy was eleven and his mother had died when Rudy was five. Like other Jews in his community, the Kempenich family lived peacefully with their neighbors. When Hitler was named Chancellor of Germany on June 30, 1933, the

Emmerich, Germany 1934

situation immediately began to worsen for the Jews of Emmerich. On April 1, 1933, the boycott of stores owned by Jewish merchants started. Uniformed storm troopers stood in front of store entrances and signs saying "Jews not wanted" appeared. Jews were also marched through the streets carrying signs that said "I am a Jew." The Jews were not allowed to advertise their businesses and some were even made to scrub sidewalks with toothbrushes. In Emmerich, Jewish stores began to close. Jews, including Erich Kempenich who went to Israel and Heinz Kempenich who went to Brazil, began leaving Emmerich for places around the world. The Holocaust was only beginning.

Rudy married Greta Nathan in the Emmerich synagogue on October 10, 1935, the last couple to be married in the synagogue. The final Sabbath service was held there on August 14, 1938; after 126 years as a house of worship, the building was turned into a furniture store.

Soon after Hitler came to power in 1933, Rudy worried that he might have his American visa and his passport removed from him by the government, so he pretended to lose the original passport and had a duplicate sent to him. In April, 1936 after visiting his brother Erich in Palestine, Rudy and wife Greta began to plan their escape from Germany. While visiting in Palestine they received a telegram telling them that the Germans had confiscated their money. The Germans felt that the Kemps were not going to return to Germany, so this was a good opportunity to seize their money. Upon their return home, the Kemps were informed by the Germans that they could only withdraw 500 marks a month (of the Kemp's own money) from their bank account. Each month they managed to save a bit and Rudy smuggled money across the border into Holland. To get it out of the country he both rolled up the money and put it into the handlebars of his bicycle and he put it in the panel of the car door between the metal and the paneling. The day that Rudy Kemp feared happened when the Gestapo ordered him to report within forty-eight hours for an accounting; the Nazis wanted Rudy to show how he had been spending his 500 marks, and the

Kemps did not want the Germans to know that they had been saving it. When they arrived in the United States the couple had a nest egg of \$20,000.

The young couple had not yet worried too much about what their future might hold as they were already planning their departure from Germany. One relative had already managed to get to Brazil; Erna Einstein, Rudy's sister, was living in France with her husband and son. Since Greta's parents, Felix and Ina Nathan, as well as her sister (Helen), brother (Henry), and uncle (Lee Freibaum) were already living in Anniston, Alabama, they decided to keep one side of the family together and join those already living in Anniston. They had written earlier to Greta's uncle, Lee, for an affidavit to come to the United States. Lee asked them to bring his 88 year-old father Salomon Freibaum -- Greta's grandfather -- as well as Lee's sister, Meta, to this country with them. Since Rudy and Greta lived very close to the border of Holland, escape would not be out of the question. On the day that Greta and Rudy departed Germany, Greta was at the beauty parlor. Rudy came to the shop and told Greta to tell them that she had to go and would be back later. He and Greta went to some Jewish friends' home and then left for the border -- with Greta carrying only her purse. Greta and Rudy had been staying with cousins for the previous six months; in preparation for their departure they had left their home. Their china, and crystal, and furniture had been shipped to Belgium to be stored until they knew where they were going to live. Rudy and Greta took a taxi up to a point near the border since walking about was no longer safe. They waited until the border guards passed; then 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 while they waited for their visas to become valid for their trip to the United States. When Rudolph Kempenich became a naturalized citizen of the United States, the Judge suggested that he "shorten the tail," and Kempenich became Kemp and Rudolph became Rudy.

In LeHavre, France, Rudy and Greta met Meta and Salomon Freibaum and the four of them boarded an American ship. Since Meta and Salomon had lived in Westphalia, a different part of Germany from where the Kemps lived, the first part of their journey had been made separately. The four of them arrived in America on December 16, 1937. In an interview in *The Anniston Star* Rudy said: "We were chased out of Germany. We lost our jobs. Of 100 Jews from Emmerich only thirty-two escaped alive." Twenty-seven members of Rudy's family died in Nazi concentration camps. Arriving in Anniston Rudy and Greta had to learn a new language -- neither spoke any English -- as well as the ways of a new country. For the first four weeks in Anniston they stayed with Greta's family. Felix Nathan, Greta's father, owned Nathan's Lunch, a combination restaurant and country store located on Walnut Street across the street from Utica Mill and near Classe Ribbon. They served lunch daily to Anniston's factory workers and others. Henry and Helen Nathan, Greta's brother and sister, and Meta, Greta's aunt, helped in the business. Rudy himself sometimes helped out at lunch. In Germany Rudy had started his own company, making and selling cosmetics, when the Germans no longer let him work; in Anniston his first job was at Classe Ribbon where his uncle, Lee, was the president. From his job at Classe Ribbon, Rudy became the proprietor of a bowling alley (on Wilmer and Tenth Streets) after the soldiers at Fort McClellan suggested that they would really like a bowling alley in the

community. During this time Rudy was still classified by the government as an enemy alien (as were all new arrivals from Germany during this period). When the war began, Rudy went to work at Anniston Ordnance Depot while he waited to be drafted (which he never was). In February 1946 with Lee Freibaum and several other local businessmen, Rudy founded (and became president of) Tape-Craft Corporation, a manufacture of narrow tape for zippers, clothing, labels, and book binding, etc. The company started with two dozen workers and 12,500 square feet of space, eventually employing more than 250 and going through sixteen expansions before it merged in 1969 with Chelsea Industries of Boston, MA.

Over his lifetime Rudy was very active in Anniston and at Temple Beth El. He served as a member of the congregation's board, as treasurer and as president, wrote the newsletter, and was a lay reader when the temple had no rabbi to officiate. A relative had suggested that, in addition to satisfying his religious side, being a lay reader would help Rudy improve his English.

One of Rudy Kemp's most controversial causes came about through his position as chairman and board member of the Public Library of Anniston-Calhoun County, then known as the Carnegie Public Library. In 1964 he helped pioneer the integration of the library as he stood at the entrance of the library on the day it was integrated to make certain there was no trouble when members of the African-American community entered the library for the very first time. He was once a member of sixteen separate boards and committees at one time and helped found the Anniston Soup Bowl (which serves a noon meal for the needy).

Rudy and Greta Kemp had four children, Jeanne (who lives in Texas), Don, Fred (residents of Anniston), and a fourth child who died as an infant in 1941. The generous and kind things that Rudy Kemp has done in his life are hard to enumerate, varying from the small and quiet remembering of birthdays of friends, relatives, and employees to his activism about the larger issues that affect both Jewish and non-Jewish humanitarians. Rudy 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 Michelle Kemp-Nordell, in the writer's file, January 9, 2010. *The Anniston Star*, no date available.

Photographs courtesy of Don Kemp



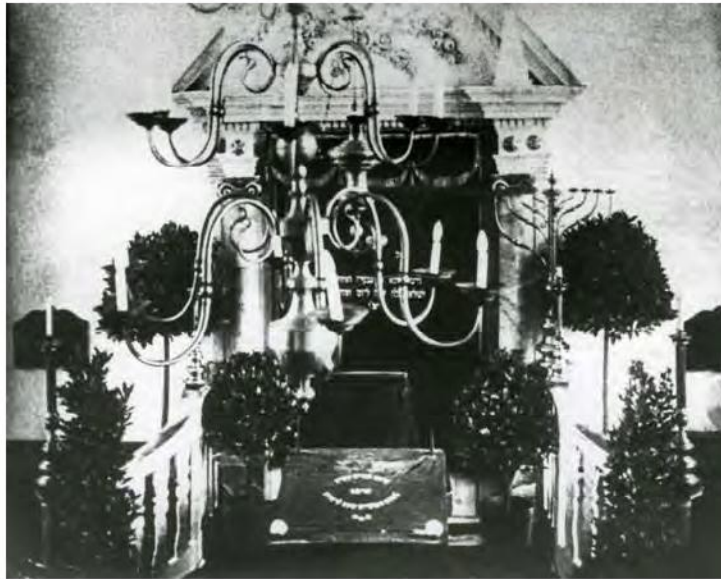
**Rudy and Greta
Emmerich, Germany 1935**



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



**Rudy, Felix Nathan, Meta Freibaum, Fred (Rudy's son), Ina Nathan,
and Don (Rudy's son)**



The Emmerich Menorah

Temple Beth El's bimah (elevated platform in a synagogue where the Torah is read) is the home to a survivor of another kind, a four-foot high brass Hanukkah menorah from the synagogue in Emmerich, Germany where Rudy and Greta Kemp married. The menorah, in the Emmerich synagogue from 1838 until 1938, came to its third "home" in Anniston in 1984. Rudy had been corresponding with Herbert Schuurman,

who made contact with the Kemp family through the mayor of Emmerich. As a member of the Historical Society in Germany, Schuurman had been attempting to gather information about the history of the Jews who lived in Emmerich for 400 years. He informed Rudy that on August 14, 1938 (months before Kristallnacht, November 9, 1938) the 126 year old synagogue (dedicated July 28, 1812) had been closed and turned into a furniture warehouse. When the synagogue closed, the menorah and a few other ritual items had been saved. A painter by the name of Terhorst purchased the menorah; Rudy located it forty-four years after Kristallnacht. Schuurman had sent photos of the menorah to the Kemp family who recognized it as the menorah from the bimah in the synagogue where they married. After six months of negotiations, the painter, almost ninety years old by then and in poor health, sold it to the Kemps after he understood that it would be placed in a temple where Jews from Emmerich worshiped. The purchase price was \$150--the same price the painter paid for it in 1938. Costs for repairs exceeded the purchase price. The inscription in the base of the menorah is: "The 2nd of the month of Iyar 1838 on the 50th anniversary of the Chevra Kadisha in Emmerich -- this was given to honor our God." Chevra Kadisha was the "Holy Brotherhood," a small group of men who performed burial rituals prior to the day of funeral homes. The engraving on the menorah was translated in 1986 by Major Alon Ahev-Ami of Israel, who was studying at the chemical school at Fort McClellan and was very interested in the story of the menorah.

Interview with Rudy and Greta Kemp conducted by Sherry Blanton, June 29, 1996.
Herman Schuurman, *The Life and Destiny of the Jewish Families in Emmerich, West Germany*, January 21, 1987.

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