

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



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**Wedding Portrait
Anniston, Alabama 1946**

Sophie Nathan Nathan **1921 - 2002**

Sophie Nathan Nathan, the daughter of Georg and Thea Nathan, was born and grew up in Emmerich, Germany. Although some Jews began to leave Emmerich after Hitler's appointment as Chancellor of Germany in 1933 (and after the dramatic worsening in anti-Jewish feeling and actions), others were not yet ready to leave their homes. When anti-Semitism first increased, Georg Nathan thought he and his family would be safe because he served in World War I (and earned the Iron Cross). Georg realized, however, that his earlier decision to stay may have been misguided after the destruction of Kristallnacht (November 9th and 10th, 1938, "the night of the broken glass.") Windows of Jewish businesses, homes, and religious organizations in Germany were smashed and the insides ransacked. Hundreds of synagogues in Germany were robbed, vandalized, and burned along with 7500 Jewish businesses and thousands more Jewish homes. Unfortunately, Georg learned his families' quota number was too high, and they would not be able to get out. For simply being Jewish, the Nazis took Georg prisoner on Kristallnacht, and marched him through the town to the police station, but he was not charged and was released after several days. (Fortunately, he was kept in a local jail instead of being sent to a camp.) Sophie, who had attended a Jewish grammar school and a Catholic school in Emmerich, had been sent to Cologne, Germany to learn a trade-how to care for a home--and was not at home on the night the SS ransacked their home. Their dishes and crystal were broken and family photographs were smashed. Emmi, Sophie's younger sister, was home, however, and when Sophie returned home, Emmi told her all about it.

Prior to Hitler's rise to power, life had been good for the Jews of Emmerich, but things soon changed. No one would speak to them; they were ostracized by those who had formerly been friends. In September of 1939 Sophie was working at a Jewish institution that prepared people to live in Israel and also provided a home to Jewish children who could no longer go to school. (The Nazis forced Jewish children to quit school after Kristallnacht.) Sadly, Georg was no longer allowed to work; his heart was broken and he had almost lost the will to live. On December 10, 1941 the deportation of all Emmerich Jews under the age of 65 began. In November of 1941, when Sophie's family received their notification of deportation, they decided that they would stay together. Sophie and Emmi (who had been living in Frankfurt) came back to Emmerich. Jews by then were wearing the yellow star to identify them as Jews. Georg and Thea believed the family would eventually return. On December 10, 1941 Thea, Georg, Sophie and Emmi (wearing double layers of clothing for warmth) were taken to the train station and shipped to Dusseldorf. Each person was allowed to carry one suitcase, which could not weigh more than forty pounds, and a bedroll. (Their few possessions were taken away from them as soon as they -- and 16 other

people from Emmerich -- boarded the train to Dusseldorf.) 1000 Jews were gathered and deported to Riga, Latvia. On the trip some were allowed to get off the train, and they gathered snow so the ones who could not disembark would have something to drink. Once in Riga the doors on the railway cars opened and the Nazi SS officials, armed with drawn rifles and accompanied by German Shepherds, told them to get out and march into the Ghetto -- a walk of 30 to 45 minutes. (During WWII Ghettos were areas -- usually enclosed -- where the Germans forced the city and sometimes regional populations of Jews to live, usually in wretched conditions; the Ghettos separated the Jewish prisoners from the non-Jews and from other Jews who came from different areas.) When they arrived at what was to be their "home," there were clothes in the closet and food on the tables; they discovered that Latvian Jewish women and children and men who did not or could not work were killed (recently) to make room for the new arrivals. Here, twelve people lived in a small room with a kitchen; they all slept on the floor with no bedding, blankets, or pillows. The Latvian Jews stayed on one side of the street and the German Jews stayed on the other; the Latvians of Riga were told not to speak to the German Jews. Occasionally, the railroad workers gave the Jews a little extra food to supplement the slice of bread and bowl of soup (basically a bowl of hot water with a small piece of vegetable added) they were given each day.

Riga was very cold, with temperatures sometimes around 45 degrees below zero; thus, one of the main labors for the young Jewish women, including Sophie and Emmi, was clearing the streets of ice and snow. They often stood in the ice and snow for hours at the time before receiving their work assignments for the day. Sophie and other young Jewish women were also sent to the beach at Riga, Latvia to clean houses. Occasionally, German soldiers gave them a little extra food. Georg Nathan died on May 10, 1942; from the hours spent standing in the ice and snow, his toes had frozen. His frozen toes had been amputated and gangrene had set in. He was sent to what was considered a hospital; there were doctors and nurses but no medications. Georg was moved to a house across the street from where Sophie and her mother and sister were staying. One day Sophie went to visit her father, only to discover that he had died. She returned home to tell her mother. Thea learned that he had been dumped into a mass grave with many other Jews -- with no funeral. During this time the family knew little about what was going on outside their Ghetto but they knew that transports left Riga bearing prisoners who were never seen again. In June, 1942 Sophie was sent to work removing clothing from the boxcars reaching Riga. Often the occupants were gassed en route, so Sophie bundled their clothes, which were then sent back to Germany. On October 31, 1942 she returned to the Ghetto from her job to discover that thirty-nine young Latvian Jewish police officers had been shot because they had dug a bunker to receive arms and medicines. Again Sophie was given new responsibilities; she and four other young Jewish women were sent to a big building to clean the apartments of SS officials and also the places where the Latvian Jews worked to provide the supplies for the SS officers -- leather boots, etc. During this time life was a little bit better as Sophie got more food to share -- food being very important as it meant survival. Thea separated the dirty clothes brought back from the front; Emmi washed the clothes and Sophie began working with them also. Emmi and then Sophie were sent to cut turf; conditions were like those in a swamp as they cut pieces of turf and left them out to dry. Emmi got sick and was sent back to the Ghetto. On November 2, 1943 Sophie came home from work to

find the Ghetto emptied and many dead. Sophie, Thea, Emmi, and others were sent to live in barracks outside of Riga (Muhlgraben). Here the Nathans got the dirty clothes from the front lines and sorted them for laundering. It was common among the Jews to remove elastic and trade the elastic to the Latvians for food; if they were caught trading the elastic, the punishment was death. Roundups, too, were a fact of life as people just disappeared. On July 28, 1944 there was another of these round ups. Thea was in the hospital for exhaustion when the SS were sorting out the sick and older people who were then being picked to be sent out. The soldier had chosen Thea but one of the soldiers spoke up that Thea worked for him and that she had two daughters who also worked hard for the SS -- and Thea's life was spared.

On September 29th, 1944 Sophie, her sister, and mother were shipped to Libau, Latvia. Sometime before their transport to Libau, the three were given a number, and striped clothes (a dress and jacket); their heads were also shaved. German soldiers showed them a little kindness on occasion, offering to them pieces of chocolate that the soldiers had been given to boost their energy. One of these offerings came on Kol Nidre -- when Jews are beginning their Yom Kippur fast during Jewish High Holy Days. (More often, hangings occurred on the Jewish Sabbath to enforce the Nazi's message to their prisoners.) In Libau (located on the coast) the Nathans lived in a big house. Sophie worked in a laundromat and then in a shoe factory; it was here that she got information about the war. Bombs dropped frequently; sometimes, the prisoners were escorted to a bunker; other times they were not. One night in a bunker someone offered Thea a seat in the front of the bunker as she had a very bad cut on her leg; she refused so she could go to the back to sit with her daughters. A bomb landed at the front killing those sitting there. Thea had been spared. People around them died every day -- killed by soldiers or punished and shipped out for no reason.

As the Russians advanced closer, Sophie and her family were sent on a coal ship to Hamburg, Germany on February 19, 1945. They traveled in the bottom of the ship, never being allowed to go to the deck; people were sick and the stench was horrendous. They arrived in Hamburg and were sent to a prison, Fulsbutell, where the men and women were separated into different parts of the building. Most of the men were sent to Bergen Belsen and perished there. Sophie found out after they were liberated that the men in the prisons were told to dig mass graves but were not allowed to talk about it. The Nazis again moved the Nathans, along with the other Riga survivors, to Kiel on April 12, 1945. Not even 100 of the original 12,000 at Riga were still alive! This terrible camp was a three day walk from Hamburg. Their feet were blistered and they were tired. Many of the women survived the walk only because their mothers were with them, encouraging them to persevere. Kiel had been almost completely destroyed; the women were put to work removing the whole bricks from the ruins. It was especially dirty work; there was no water and no soap. Food was scarce; some found whole beets and turnips and ate them raw. The women slept in farm buildings or sought shelter in the ditches during the bomb raids as they walked. Some of the women who were working for the German soldiers were so dirty they passed lice to Sophie and the other prisoners. Once in Kiel they slept three to a bed; to try to get clean they bathed in a small lake close to where they slept. They stayed there two weeks, receiving a slice of bread and a bowl of hot water (with a bit of vegetable in it) Nazi soup. Their only work there was stamping envelopes with the names of spices. They cleverly used some of these envelopes to create cross

word puzzles and poetry.

On May 1, 1945 the soldiers ordered the prisoners to stand in rows as they were to be freed. Sophie, Thea, Emmi and the other women were given dresses and told to take off their prison clothes. Drivers in large white trucks marked with Red Crosses told them to load up, as they were free and would be going to Denmark. The Danish Red Cross had freed them through the efforts of Count Bernadotte of Sweden -- possibly trading ammunition and weapons to Hitler for them. They were not to mention they were German Jews as the ransom was supposed to be only for East European Jews. Thea was so weak she almost had to be carried out to board the truck; the family refused to allow her to be put in an ambulance, but insisted she ride with them: they had promised to stay together. After three and a half years under the SS it was hard to realize they were really free. They boarded trains to Malmo in Sweden where they could get cleaned up and get rid of the lice. A school had been turned into a hospital and Sophie's earlier dreams of clean white sheets and a clean bed finally came true. They traveled to Smalandsstenar, Sweden by boat where they remained in quarantine for 10 days. Once quarantine was over, they went to a resort town (Holsby-Brunn), where Sophie and Emmi contacted Thea's sister, Paula. After all this time, Thea had managed to hold onto a tiny little folder which held her sister's phone number. Their Swedish relations helped Sophie and Emmi get jobs and Thea went to a rehabilitation center to get well and finally recover from the terrible injury to her leg. Sophie, Emmi, and Thea made contact with relatives in the United States who provided affidavits for them to come to the United States; they arrived in New York in April, 1946. Sophie went to New Hampshire to care for an ill relative. Her mother had made contact with Ina Nathan who put Sophie in touch with her daughter Helen. Through Helen, Sophie made acquaintance again with Henry Nathan, a very distant cousin with whom she had gone to school in Emmerich. They became engaged, marrying in Anniston, Alabama on November 3, 1946. Henry was already established in Anniston; the couple lived in Anniston until 1959. Life in Anniston was very good; there was a large extended family, many of whom had come from Emmerich. She and Henry were members of the Temple Beth El congregation. They were the parents of two boys, George and Mark (and a third child who died as an infant). In 1959 Sophie and Henry moved to Birmingham, Alabama where Henry opened a Chicken Delight business. She volunteered for more than fifteen years at St. Vincent's hospital, living in Birmingham until 1999 when she moved to Atlanta, remaining there until her death. Sophie died in Atlanta; she is buried in Anniston in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Talking about her life in the camps was not something Sophie did with her children or her husband, but according to her son George, "Sophie was thankful to have survived the war, thankful to end up in this country and marry someone she had known in Germany. Every day here was a good day regardless of life's daily ups and downs -- because she had survived."

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

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

Sophie Nathan, Interview code 15654, Interview by the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation for Visual History and Education.

Photographs courtesy of Don Kemp and George Nathan



**Wedding Reception
Anniston, Alabama 1946**



**George, Henry, Sophie and Mark
Birmingham, Alabama 1961**

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
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Temple Beth El
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Tyson Art and Frame
University of Southern California Shoah Foundation Institute for Visual History and Education