

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



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**Wedding Portrait  
Emmerich, Germany 1920**

## ***Thea Bendix Nathan*** **1892 - 1983**

One of five children, Thea (whose legal German name was Thekla) was born in Burgsteinfurt, Germany. She married Georg Nathan of Emmerich, Germany in 1920 and the couple made their home in Emmerich. Georg was a prosperous cattle trader and owned considerable land; the family was quite well off and their life was very good. Thea was a housewife and kept an immaculate German home. The family had "a laundry lady" who came in to do the family wash, also cooking, baking, and even keeping the books for Georg's business. But life changed dramatically for the Nathan family on Kristallnacht when their home was ransacked and Georg was jailed briefly. Thea's daughters could no longer go to local schools; they had to complete their educations in other cities. They returned home when the

notice of deportation arrived as the family had made the decision to stay together. On December 10, 1941 the Nathan family boarded trains, ending up in the Jewish Ghetto in Riga, Latvia. Life in the Ghetto was very hard for Thea and her family; it was bitter cold; living conditions were miserable and there was never enough to eat. While Sophie and Emmi went out every day to work, Thea remained inside to help in the Ghetto. Georg died in the Latvian Ghetto in May, 1942. Thea and her children, like others, worked to stay alive and to have food to eat. Occasionally they traded things for food, a very dangerous undertaking as prisoners could be shot for bringing food into the Ghetto. After the Ghetto was emptied of prisoners, the three Nathan women were sent to another camp only to be returned. In Armeekleidungsamt (the army clothing office), Thea separated the dirty clothes that came in from the war front. She cut the elastic off the glasses soldiers had worn and her daughters took the elastic into town to swap for other things. Meanwhile, all around the three of them men, women, and children were being taken off and killed.

Thea's life was spared on three different occasions. Once, she 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; one of the soldiers, however, 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.

She was spared again, rushing to a bunker in December of 1942 during a bombing at Liba. Because she had such a nasty cut on her leg, the people sitting at the front of the bunker offered her a place but Thea wanted to go to the back so that she, Sophie, and Emmi could stay together. The bomb fell, hit the entrance, and several people were killed. On liberation day May 2, 1945 Thea was so ill that she almost had to be carried out to freedom. Thea, Sophie, and

Emmi traveled to Denmark and then on to Sweden where Thea recovered. In April 1946 Thea, Sophie, and Emmi arrived in New York. Thea went to live with a cousin in New York. She alternated her time between her daughters, living part time in Anniston with Sophie and part time in Philadelphia with Emmi. She died in Philadelphia and is buried there.

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



**Thea with grandson George  
Anniston, Alabama 1950**

## 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