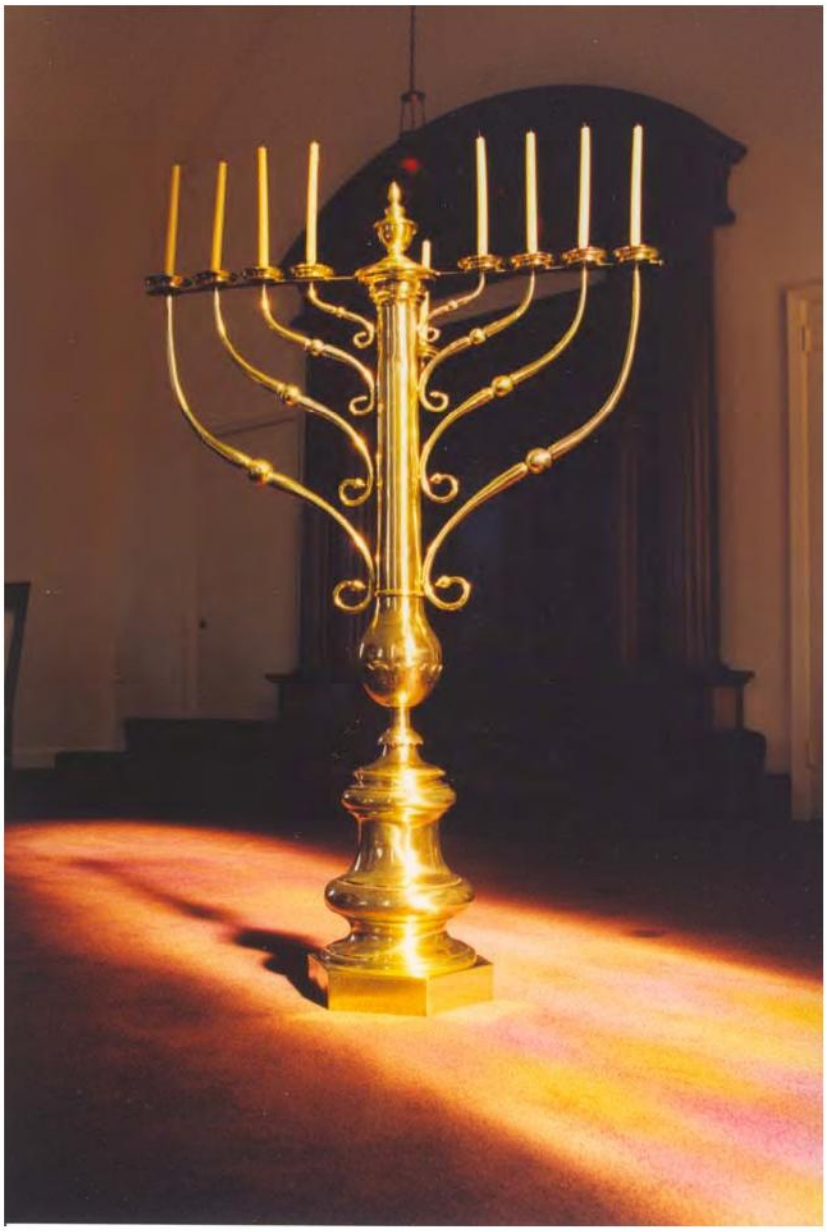
Survivors' Stories: Anniston's Temple Beth El and the Holocaust



Sherry Blanton

Walter Meyer Israel
1917 - 2002

Walter Meyer Israel was born in Hannover, Germany on June 15, 1917. The Israel family (mother Else, father Paul, sister Margie, and brother Herbert Alfred) lived in a very nice neighborhood and were an upper-class family. As his family had a large Steinway piano, he grew up in a home full of music. His father, an attorney, was fluent in five languages; his mother was well-educated with a degree in music and with training in voice. Although his mother did not sing for a living, she did perform at weddings and parties. She was an athlete, too, playing tennis in tournaments and ice skating in winter. However, after the death of Walter's father, she took a position selling insurance. Walter's family practiced Conservative Judaism, although they were more liberal than others. His family attended synagogue for the High Holy Days and small holidays; at the age of thirteen he participated in the traditional Jewish rite of passage for males, the Bar Mitzvah ceremony.

As a child Walter experienced anti-Semitic young people in his elementary school. Consequently, he fought several times with them because they called him bad names and he defended himself. Walter believed that, even before Hitler came to power, the Germans were already talking in the twenties of the harm they would do to the Jews, though no one in Germany (or the world) thought that Hitler would take over Germany. The few people who saw the danger of Hitler's power were overturned. If they pushed against him, they would be sent to a concentration camp. After Hitler's rise to power, the teachers in Walter's high school were told not to speak to Jewish children, or to help them--and to separate them from the other students. Since Walter could no longer study in high school, he left. When he left school, he had a difficult time finding a position because of the German attitudes toward the Jews; however, the Chamber of Commerce was able to locate a job for him as an apprentice in a firm that manufactured woolen blankets in Hameln, Germany. He remained there from 1934 until 1937 when the company told him it could not renew his contract because he was Jewish. Because he could no longer work, he knew he was going to have to leave Germany. His mother talked with some of her friends at a coffee party and one offered a possible solution -- her sister-in-law in Holland had textile plants. She offered to write her and ask her if was there is a place for Walter. She thus made this introduction for Walter; after a just a couple of weeks his mother had him write to the family, Menko, in Enschede, Holland about a job. The family asked him to come to a town near the Dutch border, Bentheim (Germany) where they met and, consequently, offered him a position in Holland as soon as he got his papers to be employed in the Netherlands. At this point it was still fairly easy to leave Germany and he was able to take his personal possessions with him in large trunks. Thus, he left Germany with ten marks in his pocket on April 17, 1937 to live in Enschede, the Netherlands, where he found work in a textile mill which produced woolen blankets. There he also attended a textile college. During the years when Walter worked in the mill he made the acquaintance of his future wife, Jantje Middendorp.

As everyone else did in Enschede, Holland they rode their bikes daily to their jobs -- he coming from one direction and she from another. He saw her every morning and every afternoon. Their courtship often consisted of evenings of ice skating on a tennis court frozen over with water. On Kristallnacht in November, 1938, his brother, Herbert Alfred, escaped to Enschede from Hannover. On a trip to Amsterdam later, while the two brothers were traveling on the streetcar, they narrowly missed capture; the Dutch police were searching the streets for Jews, but did not arrest the brothers because the two were inside the streetcar.

After the German occupation of Holland in 1940 (The Netherlands), Walter eventually lost his job in the textile plant. He became a butler and houseman at the home of a Jewish family. He had had a close call when he was still working in the Enschede plant in the beginning of the occupation of Holland. The Gestapo came to the plant to speak to Walter and took him to his apartment, looked at his papers, and then detained Walter from 10 AM to 4 PM at the police station. Out of the forty arrested at that time, twenty persons were let go and twenty sent to a concentration camp. The Gestapo released him and he returned to his job. In September of 1941 Walter was "lucky" again; the Nazis were looking for refugees who had come from Germany as well as Jewish families living in Enschede. The Nazis arrested 109 families and sent them to a concentration camp in Austria, these prisoners perishing before three months had passed. At that time another narrow escape for Walter occurred as the Nazis searched houses for Jews. He was renting a room in a house where there was also a Jewish teacher who happened to be out of town. They were fortunately missed. Freedom was short-lived, however, as Walter received a letter from the German-Dutch authorities that he had been chosen for a "voluntary" incarceration at a camp had established for Jews. He was told to report to the railroad station to be shipped to Westerbork in Holland, a holding camp for Jews before they were sent to concentration camps. He decided he would not go as he had information about a man who could help him; Walter gave him money and he gave Walter information about how to proceed. On the day of his "voluntary arrest," in August, 1942 he left the country. During the years Walter lived in Holland he was well aware of the changes spreading throughout his native country: "Hate had been ignited in my homeland of Germany; people were taken to camps -- some came back and some did not. Sometimes the story was told that people wandered out in the fog and were lost."

Hitler's terror had taken its toll on other members of Walter's family. His father, depressed over what he saw happening to his country and realizing that bad times were only beginning, died from a heart attack in 1932. In 1940 the Nazis told Walter's mother that she must leave her spacious home in Hannover by four o'clock in the afternoon, taking with her only a couple of possessions. The Nazis placed her in a Jewish home for orphans and older people where she lived along with ten other people in one room. Margie, Walter's sister, had been a secretary in the German agricultural school for Jewish people. In November, 1941 his mother and his sister were sent to Riga-Stutthof, a labor camp. From there his mother, Else Israel, was sent to Auschwitz where she perished in 1944 at the age of 56. Margie Israel survived; she remained in Riga-Stutthof for five years until she was liberated by the Russians. Herbert Alfred Israel, after escaping Paris in the same way as his brother (in the tool box of a train), was arrested on the streets in Toulouse in the south of France and was sent to Auschwitz, never to return.

In August, 1942, aware of his imminent transport to a concentration camp, Walter, with the help of a friend, planned his escape from Holland. During the evening hours Walter climbed over a fence at the train station and hid in the tool chest (international trains carried large tool chests in the event a train needed repair en route) under a train bound for Paris. There he waited for the 8 AM departure the next morning. Although Walter had a train ticket, he did not use it. The same helpful friend who assisted him to board the train gave him an address in Paris, the Swedish consul, where he might change his Dutch money for French francs. Danger surrounded him in Paris of 1942; France was occupied, and Paris was on the German side. The underground in Paris, located with his Dutch friend's help, assisted Walter. He had to trust these members of the underground; they also had to trust him. He was on his own in Paris; speaking only a little French, he went to a small hotel where he saw a sign: "German military not permitted here," and he knew he was in a safe place. Speaking his best French, he got a room for the night. In lieu of money he gave his watch for a room with a promise to bring money back in the morning.

Walter then purchased a train ticket to Tours. There he boarded a bus to Loches, the demarcation line, separating the German occupied country and the other which remained French. When he stepped off the bus, there was a civilian with a dog watching the people get off the bus; Walter went a different way as he thought he might be picked up. From Loches he walked to Chateauroux; as he walked the country roads all night the sounds of barking dogs greeted him as he passed from one farm to another but it did not frighten him. In Chateauroux he took the train to Toulouse in southern France. On his journey Walter survived on rations of hard candy, chocolate, and sausage which he carried with him; bread was added when he had money. Other than a little food he carried only toiletries as his belongings had been left in Holland where they remained until his return in 1946. As he traveled about, Walter wore the shirt of the ever-present laborers so as not to be noticed. In Toulouse he took a room in a hotel and finally felt some sense of relief, although he remained tense because he was on the run. In Toulouse for a day or two, he got some papers, tickets for food, clothing and an identification card from the Dutch Consul as well as a train ticket to go to Rion and a bus ticket to Chateauneuf les Bains, to a forced residence for immigrants established by the Vichy government. He remained there from August until December of 1942. In the meantime the Germans had taken over France and the demarcation line disappeared. Since he had heard the Spanish government would not send him back to France, he decided to travel again -- this time to Spain. Walter later said that the hardest part of his journey was that he did not know what had become of his family.

On Christmas Eve he and a friend took a train and a bus back to Toulouse with the assistance of a Belgian affairs man as the Dutch no longer could help. After a night in Toulouse the two, now receiving help from the Dutch Consul in Lyon, boarded the train to Perpignan in the south of France. On Christmas night they walked over the mountain, Ceret, in the Pyrenees to Spain. He was stopped in Zaragossa, Spain because he had no papers and sent to Provincial Prison, a prison run by the French in Spain. His head was shaved; he was imprisoned for four months but he was not treated badly. He was what one might call today an "illegal alien" and the prison was a place to house these immigrants with no papers. From January through May 1943 he was jailed; upon his release he traveled to Madrid, Spain. The Dutch and English helped him get out of jail, paid him weekly money after his release, and provided him a ticket to Madrid. In Madrid the Dutch

consul paid for his clothes, entertainment, and food until he was able to board a freighter in August either to Jamaica, or to the British West Indies. He finally obtained passage with many other Jews on a Spanish freighter, the Marquis de Comiallas, bound for Jamaica; the trip was organized by Dutch government and a Jewish organization, JOINT. He sailed to Trinidad and then to Kingston, Jamaica where he remained one year. The Dutch and English governments supported him completely in Jamaica so that he would not take a job away from a Jamaican. When he first arrived, the government was unsure whether he might be a German spy; thus, he stayed in an English prison camp until the authorities verified he was not. Housing was built for these new Jewish immigrants. Meanwhile an aunt, a teacher in the United States, had hired an attorney to plead for Walter to be able to immigrate to the United States. Walter had changed his name to Wim Immen when he left Holland because he believed Immen might seem less Jewish and he kept this assumed name until he reached Surinam. Since he had changed his name, his request was refused. From Jamaica Walter traveled to Surinam (Dutch New Guinea) where he lived in Paramaribo, the capital of Surinam, from 1944 to 1946. He still did not work: "I had a good time, went dancing, had girlfriends, listened to the radio and read." He could not easily move about there because of the hot climate, his inability to navigate the country, and the daily two o'clock afternoon rain.

Walter returned to Enschede, Holland, in 1946. After the liberation he learned Margie Israel had survived (although her daughter, Rachel, had not); a letter she had written to family had been forwarded to him. On a trip to Auschwitz Margie had learned from people who lived in the same town as Israel in Holland that he was had not been on the transport to Auschwitz -- that he had survived. After the war Walter wrote to his old boss in Enschede that he was alive and received the reply that his job was open. The Dutch government paid for him to return to Holland. He still had friends living there and he met Jantje at a restaurant; she thought him dead and he thought her married.

Margie Israel came to the United States in 1946, living in an apartment in the Garden District in New Orleans, Louisiana. At her urging Walter decided to come to United States. In December 1948 Jantje accompanied him to a boat in Den Haag, Holland where he took a train to Antwerp and then a Dutch freighter where he traveled for three weeks to Havana, Cuba, Veracruz, and Tampico, Mexico before arriving in Houston, Texas. He departed the boat two weeks before it docked in New Orleans, leaving his belongings on the boat, and flew to New Orleans. When the boat arrived in that city two weeks later he claimed his belongings. It was mid-January and Mardi Gras was approaching. A parade crew, Mystic, invited him to a formal party where he donned a tuxedo for the first time and danced (probably with joy). He continued to correspond with Jantje, exchanging 257 letters. In New Orleans Israel found work in a denim textile mill; however, the type of work and the hot climate were very difficult for him. Also, he spoke little English; he attended classes to improve his language skills. Through a trade textile magazine he located a more suitable job for himself at Classe Ribbon in Anniston, Alabama; he got the job, immediately moving to Anniston in 1951. After a courtship that had begun before World War II, on July 5, 1951Walter and Jantje Middendorp married in the old New Orleans Court House. Walter remained at Classe Ribbon for nineteen years and then took a job as a dyer at Tape Craft, a job offered by Rudy Kemp (another Holocaust survivor), remaining there for nine years. Walter and

Jantje moved into a house on Abbott Drive in the fifties where they lived the rest of his life. Walter joined Temple Beth El, Anniston's Reform Jewish congregation. He was a religious school teacher and also the superintendent of the religious school. He and Jantje had a son Paul, a daughter Else, and three grandchildren. Walter's entire life was influenced by his fierce determination to survive. He died in Anniston and is buried (next to his wife) in the Temple Beth El portion of Hillside Cemetery.

Interview with Walter Israel conducted by Sherry Blanton, June 10, 1997.

Photographs courtesy of Else Israel Goodman and Walter Israel

Outside the Prado Museum
Madrid, Spain July 1943

Walter and wife, Jantje

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, ghettoes, 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