

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



Sherry Blanton

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Emmerich, Germany 1909

Erna Frederike Kempenich Einstein ***1902 - 1990***

Erna, born in Emmerich, Germany, was the daughter of Max and Margarete Kempenich. She was the oldest of four children; her brothers were Erich, Heinz (Henrique) and Rudolph (Rudy). Max owned the largest department store in town, Nathan and Gompertz. The Jewish population of Emmerich was predominantly composed of merchants, traveling salesman, and butchers and cattle dealers. When Margarete died in 1916, the family hired a Jewish housekeeper/governess to take care of the children. After Erna graduated from high school she attended a finishing school in Dusseldorf where she studied German literature, English, and grammar. She joined a Zionist organization and had her first opportunity to meet peers as there were very few Jewish children her age in Emmerich.

On December 24, 1925, Erna married Dr. Alfred Leopold Einstein, and they moved to Mannheim in southern Germany. There was a large Jewish community in Mannheim and an active Zionist council. Alfred was a journalist and co-editor of the largest commercial newspaper in town. Alfred and Erna had one child, Klaus Max Einstein, who was born in Mannheim. (Klaus changed his name to Claude when the family moved to France.) When the boycott against the Jews was announced on April 1, 1933, Alfred attempted to enlist the support of Jews in other countries to help the Jewish professionals, who were the first victims of the Nazis. On one of these trips he found out about an opportunity to purchase part of a newspaper in Strasbourg, France. In early June, 1933, the family left Germany and moved to Strasbourg, France, in the Alsace region on the French-German border. When the Germans invaded Poland, the French government moved the entire civilian population of Strasbourg; the Einsteins went to Geradmer, a small town about 70 miles to the southwest of Strasbourg.

In September, 1939, Alfred enlisted in the French Foreign Legion and was stationed in Algeria. The following Spring Claude had his Bar Mitzvah but Erna was the only family member to attend. In early May Erna and Claude fled south as the Germans invaded northern France. They joined thousands of other refugees who came from Holland, Belgium and northern France, all going south. Erna and Claude traveled for four days and three nights, sometimes on their bicycles, other times by military trucks, or on flatbeds with military equipment. The further south the military got, the more things were dumped along the roadside and the more people were on the roads. When Claude and Erna arrived in the small town of St. Ambroix a family took them in. The residents in the town, close to Nimes and Avignon, had not met Jews before and were curious why the Einsteins did not attend a church. Because Erna and Claude spoke French so well they were not suspected of being German. German refugees were sometimes sent to French internment camps; being sent to one of these camps might have meant deportment back to Germany and possibly to the gas chambers. The mayor of their previous home town of Geradmer had given

Erna a paper that she was exempt from internment because her husband was serving in the French Foreign Legion. Alfred was discharged from the French Foreign Legion in November, 1940 and rejoined his family in St. Ambroix. For Alfred to live in St. Ambroix certain requirements had to be filled: Erna had to provide a certificate of residence as well as proof that the family had a certain amount of money, and obtain a work permit for him. The mayor provided Erna with a certificate of residence for Alfred to come back. She deposited money in the bank to prove that they had money. The mayor provided a work permit, a mitzvah because foreigners could not obtain work permits. Although the Mayor gave Erna the work permit, she had to promise him that her husband would not use it as it might have angered the citizens of the town.

In the middle of May, 1941 the Einstein family secured visas for the United States and booked passage on a ship from Marseilles to Martinique. American relatives sent a financial affidavit; the family in the states secured the moral affidavit through connections to influential people. The moral affidavit stated that the person providing it knew the family not to be subversive and that the family had not been in jail. The Einsteins traveled on a freighter that had been converted into a passenger ship. Normally the ship held 150 first class passengers; it now held 1500 in the hold of the ship. The hold was partitioned off by $\frac{3}{4}$ high walls; the men and the women were separated. Erna's cabin had eight people with only bunk beds. The Einsteins spent three weeks on the "high seas" with bathroom facilities completely inadequate for the large number of people traveling. Right before the ship docked, a warship (either British or Dutch, under British orders) stopped and captured the ship taking the passengers to the British West Indies, to Trinidad. Officials thought that the passengers were German soldiers in civilian clothes who intended to occupy the Island of Martinique. The passengers were interred in a British camp and questioned. Some passengers were released after ten days and allowed to continue their journey if they had money to purchase passage off the island. Some passengers were stranded on the island until Jewish relief organizations such as Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS) could rescue them.

The Einsteins arranged passage on another boat and sailed directly to New York, arriving on June 13, 1941. Since Alfred's family was settled in Cleveland, Ohio, the family moved there. Erna's brother, Rudy Kemp, wanted them to settle in Anniston, Alabama; however, Erna and Alfred believed that African-Americans were very much oppressed in the South. Since they had come to this country to escape oppression, they decided the South was not the right place for them.

In Cleveland Erna's first job was sorting dirty laundry at a dry cleaners and Alfred (who had been the editor of a newspaper) got the job of a clean-up man in the warehouse of Gray Drug. Eventually, Alfred passed the exam to become an insurance agent, his job for the next 25 years. Erna worked in a variety of jobs from "salesgirl" in department stores to medical secretary. They joined a congregation founded by German immigrants six months prior to the Einstein's arrival in Cleveland. They also became active in an organization they helped found, Cleveland Council on Human Relations.

Alfred died in 1968 and in the 1970s Erna began to spend part of each winter in Anniston. By the late 1980s, Anniston became Erna's year round home. In her last years, it was of great comfort

that she could be so close to her brother and his family. In the 1970s she volunteered at the Donoho Day School where her great nieces and nephew attended and where her storytelling (especially her original "Pumpnickel and Pimpernel" epics) was greatly loved by the children. She was also active in educational programs at Temple Beth El, sharing her Holocaust experiences with others. Although she missed the company of her extended family and the "big city" opportunities that Cleveland offered, she was very fond of her adopted Anniston; the people were kind and the love they extended to her was full and **genuine**. She died in Anniston but is buried in Cleveland at Zion Memorial Cemetery, next to Alfred.

Erna's grandson Danny Einstein wrote that "Her Holocaust experience did not define her life, though it certainly altered it. Though she had every reason to be embittered and despondent over the loss of so many family members, I never sensed that she wanted retribution.

She did want people to know the story of the Holocaust -- not just as a history lesson, but as a means to teach tolerance and compassion for all who suffer. It was her wish as she wrote in an autobiographical essay that the 'heart and soul' of her family's experience would be passed along -- so that their memory would not be lost at 'the end of the line.' "

Correspondence with Danny Einstein, in the writer's file, December 2009.

Danny Einstein, *Erna Frederike Kempenich, Einstein Chronology*, December 27, 2009.

Erna Einstein, Survival - My Family Chronicle, November, 1982, courtesy of Danny Einstein.

Photographs courtesy of Danny Einstein



Erna, Claus, Pauline (Alfred's mother) and Alfred, Strasbourg, France 1934



Anniston, Alabama 1981

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