



Photo courtesy of Rough Draft Atlanta

Why would parents send their only child alone to a new country?

HENRY BIRNBREY

Henry Birnbrey was born in Dortmund, Germany, in 1923. After Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party rose to power in Germany in 1933, Henry's father, Edmund, was arrested, accused of making statements against the government. Edmund was released only after he was forced to give up his business. Fearful of the danger to come, Henry's parents desperately searched for a way to get him safely out of Germany. They applied for visas to many countries. The United States was the first to grant Henry an emergency visa the week Hitler invaded Austria in March 1938.

Alone, Henry left his family at the age of 15. He traveled by ship as an "unaccompanied minor" to the United States. He was placed in foster homes, first in Birmingham, Alabama and then in Atlanta.

Back in Germany, Edmund Birnbrey had been arrested and beaten, this time on Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass. On the night of November 9 – 10, 1938, in German-occupied Europe, thousands of Jews experienced terror and violence by the Nazis. Jewish



Photo courtesy of Stadtarchiv Dortmund

synagogues and businesses were destroyed, homes were vandalized and looted, and approximately 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and taken to concentration camps. Kristallnacht was a turning point in the Holocaust, evolving from terror and violence to the systematic murder of the Jews in Europe. Henry's father died weeks later from the wounds he sustained that night. Henry's mother died months later, of an

illness. Henry learned of his parents' deaths shortly after his arrival in Atlanta.



Photo courtesy of the Breman Museum

"American freedom was something new to me."

In 1943, five years after he arrived from Germany, Henry joined the U.S. Army. In 1944 he participated in the D-Day invasion at Omaha Beach and fought in the Battle of the Bulge. As his unit advanced through Europe, he witnessed the terrible fate of Jewish people at the hands of the Nazis and their collaborators. Henry passed corpses left in ditches from death marches. Near Magdeburg, Germany, he encountered cattle cars still full of concentration camp prisoners, both dead and alive.

In the spring of 1945, as liberation of the camps and World War II drew to a close, Henry became a counter intelligence agent, interrogating German POWs.

After the war he learned that everyone in his family, except just four cousins, had died in the Holocaust. Henry returned to Atlanta, opened an accounting firm and went to law school on the GI Bill. He married and with his wife became head of a large family, with two sons and two daughters, and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Henry Birnbrey passed away in April 2021.



Map courtesy of US Holocaust Memorial Museum