



*Photo courtesy Gainesville Times*

*What would you do if your father was taken away in the middle of the night?*

## HERBERT KOHN

Herbert Kohn was six years old in 1933, the year that Adolf Hitler came to power. At school one day, his teacher asked if any of the students were Jewish. When Herbert raised his hand he was told to leave school and go home. Herbert, a young child, was confused and frightened. He didn't understand that in Germany, Jews were no longer permitted to attend public school. Friends and neighbors turned against the family. Herbert did not understand the changes that so cruelly changed his and his family's life.

Soon, discrimination turned into segregation. Persecution followed. Just a few years later, Jews in Europe would face imprisonment, forced labor and death. By 1935, Leo Kohn, Herbert's father, recognized that to protect his family, they needed to leave Germany. He started the process to come to the United States. Strict immigration laws and quotas made that difficult.

On Kristallnacht - November 9 and 10, 1938 - government sponsored riots against Germany's Jews led to the vandalism and destruction of over a thousand synagogues. Jewish stores were looted and their windows shattered, littering the streets with broken glass.



*Photo courtesy of William Breman  
Jewish Heritage Museum*

Leo Kohn was one of almost 30,000 Jewish men who were arrested and sent to concentration camps. Leo was taken to Buchenwald. Released three weeks later, he was malnourished and his hair had turned white from the mistreatment he suffered. He explained that he was set free because he could prove that he had served honorably as a German soldier in World War I.

Fearing re-arrest, Leo Kohn left for England. Herbert, his brother Ernest and his mother Irene escaped to England over the next months, right before the beginning of World War II. By 1940, the family was able to leave England for the United States.

Arriving in America in 1940, Herbert's father decided to move to Demopolis, Alabama to learn farming. There, Herbert thought that discrimination against Black people was like the

discrimination he endured in Germany. Herbert, there and then, dedicated his life to equality and justice for all.

*“Germany had taken away my citizenship.... My relatives had been murdered. ...I wanted to come back and fight Germany for the new country which had accepted me and given me the opportunity to reach my potential.”*



Photo courtesy of KSU Museum of History and Holocaust Education

In 1945, at the age of 18, Herbert volunteered for the United States Army, arriving in Germany two days before the war ended.

Some of the Kohn family remaining in Germany became victims of the Holocaust. His grandfather, Friedrich Simon, died during his deportation in a Nazi cattle car. Others were murdered during the Holocaust.

Returning to America, Herbert stayed in the Army Reserve, rising to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He earned a degree in agriculture from Auburn University and became a certified public accountant. Herbert worked in the home building business, providing affordable housing to low-income families.

Herbert had five children and many grandchildren. He spoke often about his experiences. He told his audiences, “I am committed now to sharing my story and experiences so I can do my part in building a better world for the present and for the future.” Herbert Kohn passed away in July 2020.



Map courtesy of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum