

Remembering Otto Kaufman

By David Cochran

If you ride by or visit the Otto Kaufman Community Center on Skillman Road in Skillman, you may wonder just who Otto Kaufman was. There is a display of pictures and newspaper clippings about him in the community center, but there is much more to the Otto Kaufman story. This article shares the details of a man whose life went from great adversity to public service.



From Nazi Germany to America

Otto Kaufman came from humble beginnings as a young Jewish man in Germany. He grew up in Luxheim, near Bonn, as Hitler and Nazism were on the rise, and Jews were being persecuted. As a teenager, Otto learned first-hand what tyranny was like as the Nazi's took over his homeland. He was removed from his soccer team and expelled from the gymnasium (his high school) because he was Jewish.

Otto's mother died when he was young. As Hitler's atrocities increased, Otto's father felt that he was safe in Germany because he was old. He didn't feel the same way about his

children's safety, so he encouraged Otto and his brother Ernest, who was ten years older, to leave Germany for a better, safer life. Otto initially thought he might go to South America, but his cousins, the Schweitzers, had a better idea. They had already emigrated to America with their wives. They bought a small farm in Montgomery Township and wanted Otto and Ernest to join them there.

At that time, you couldn't just come to America. Immigrants needed a sponsor who would fill out an affidavit to assure that refugees would be cared for in their new land. The Schweitzers completed the affidavit, and in 1937, Otto and Ernest Kaufman, along with Ernest's wife Adele, departed the only country they had ever known, leaving their family to an unknown fate. Otto was just 17 at the time, and he arrived with just eight dollars in his pocket.

Things went from bad to worse in Germany, and Otto wanted to bring his father to America. But before that could happen, his father, his father's two brothers, and their families were executed in concentration camps. It was a devastating time for Otto in his new land. Eventually, Otto's brother Fritz, his sister Carolina, and their spouses fled Germany and settled in Philadelphia.

Learning to Farm

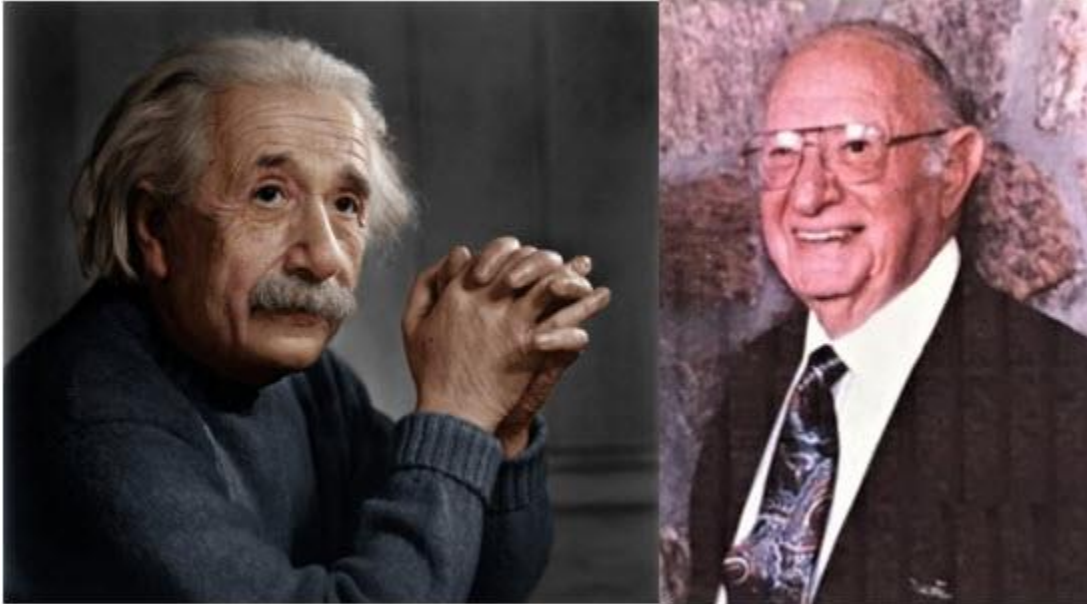
Otto and Ernest purchased a farm on Hollow Road from the Schweitzers, and neither the Schweitzers nor the Kaufman brothers knew much about farming. To make matters worse, Otto and Ernest had no money to buy the farm from the Schweitzers, but they managed to get a loan from the Jewish Agricultural Society with very little equity. They suddenly found themselves owning a dilapidated farm that they didn't know how to run. There was a 14-room farmhouse on the property, but it was not in good shape. There was no heat or plumbing, and the toilet area was a "three-seater" outhouse. The farm came with 14 cows, but seven of them had tuberculosis and had to be destroyed. Buying this farm was no easy undertaking, but these two refugees were the proud owners of Kaufman Dairy and Poultry Farm. The farm remained in joint ownership until Ernest passed away in 1977.

As if the farm was not enough of a challenge, Otto spoke only German. But how he handled this problem foreshadowed his resourcefulness. He had an Italian farmhand who spoke English, so Otto asked him to teach him English. Before long, Otto's English was improving thanks to this farmhand. The only problem was that this German-speaking immigrant spoke English with an Italian accent! No one cared, least of all, Otto.

Otto learned to be a hard-working, successful farmer, raising cattle and chickens. He was always open to new markets and discovered that Campbell's Soup needed chickens. He developed a delivery business, taking his and other farmers' chickens to the soup company. He did this while still running his growing dairy farm.

He found crops to be profitable, too. He grew corn, wheat, soybeans, and up to 20,000 bales of hay each year. At one point, his crops grew in fields extending from Great Road to Province Line Road.

Otto and Albert



World War II promoted uncommon friendships. There was another Jewish immigrant in Princeton named Albert Einstein that Otto met through the United Jewish Appeal, an organization that raised money to bring Germans to America. Albert befriended Otto, and they struck up a friendship. Albert Einstein was forty years older than Otto, and Otto thought of him as a father figure.

The acclaimed physicist came to Princeton as a Professor of Theoretical Physics in 1940, three years after Otto arrived in America. Albert loved to come to Otto's farm where he would meet with Otto and other Jewish immigrants. He and Otto had a common mission – to free as many German Jews as possible from the tyranny of the Nazis. Using Albert's notoriety, the two were able to bring many Jewish refugees to America. They found sponsors for the Germans and brought them to Otto's farm, which became a staging area for the integration of these refugees into American life. It is believed that over a three-year period 100 Jewish people lived at the farm until they could find housing and jobs elsewhere.

Albert loved to visit the Kaufman farm. Since he had no transportation, he walked the seven miles from his home on Mercer Street each time he visited. When he came to the farm, Albert liked to walk around, husk corn, and tell anecdotes from his past. He didn't always think about the theoretical physics for which he won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1921. He loved to tell the refugees about the "olden days" in Germany. Although he was

quiet and shy, he enjoyed speaking to them in German. When the rules for baseball were explained to him, Albert said that he thought the theory of relativity was easier to understand. He had a sense of humor!

An introspective man, Albert was concerned about the ethics of his work. Otto was present when Albert signed a letter to President Franklin Roosevelt indicating that he could create an atomic bomb. Later when he talked about the bomb, Albert said that he hoped that he didn't create a monster.

Albert would come to the farm for food when his food stamps ran out. He could always count on good food and fellowship. He didn't talk much about his work when he came to the farm. He would always ask what was going on in the world since he was so immersed in his world of math and science that he seldom listened to the news on the radio.

Otto's daughter, Peggy Kaufman Fass, remembered Otto and Albert's relationship when she spoke at the opening of the community center named for her father. "Otto supplied Einstein with milk, butter, apple cake, and a ride home to Princeton," she said. "They were not a farmer and scientist, but two fervent humanitarians."

Becoming a Citizen

Otto felt that his greatest accomplishment was becoming an American citizen. In 1942, he reached this goal after months of study. He viewed his new citizenship as symbolic of the second chance at life he was given by escaping Nazism and starting life over in a free country.

Otto knew from the day he arrived in America that he had come to a great country. When he rode over the Pulaski Skyway on this initial trip from New York to Montgomery Township, Otto commented that any country that could build a highway in the sky was a great place to live.

Otto raised several people who went on to successful careers. Otto's nephew, Ernie Kaufman, survived the concentration camp and went on to earn a PhD in Chemistry; Arnold Weiss became a successful businessman; and Edgar May received a Pulitzer Prize as a writer and served in the Kennedy Whitehouse.

In 1945, as the war was winding down, Albert was intensifying his physics research, and Otto's farm was taking more and more of his time. Otto and Albert spent less time together. Otto met and married Ruth Markus, and they had two children, Charles and Peggy.

In 1955, Albert died in Princeton Hospital, ending a special relationship with Otto that defied words. They both knew of the pain and suffering in their homeland and bonded together to help as many people as possible deal with their plight.



Ruth and Otto Kaufman

Giving Back

Otto Kaufman believed in giving back to his community and his adopted country, and he did so in a big way. He became involved in politics in Montgomery Township when 3M wanted to begin a mining operation along the Blawenburg-Belle Mead Road (now Route 601). This was very controversial in this farming community. Otto viewed himself as a fusion candidate, bringing together both sides of the issue and working toward a resolution. This whetted his appetite for politics, and it wasn't long before Otto was running for office.

He was elected for three terms on the Montgomery Township Committee, serving as Mayor for two terms. He also served as Police Commissioner and Road Commissioner. Perhaps his greatest interest was on the local and county planning boards, where he served for 22 years. He helped develop the first master plan in Montgomery Township. A believer in farmland preservation and open space, Otto had a great impact on the development of Montgomery Township and Somerset County.

Otto was involved in other community businesses and organizations, too. He was one of the founders of the now defunct Montgomery National Bank. (Amboy Bank and 1st Constitution Bank have each been at the MNB location at Routes 206 and 518.)

He also recognized the need for Jewish houses of worship, so he helped found the Princeton Jewish Center (now Jewish Center of Princeton) and the Jewish Community Center of Belle Mead (now Congregation Kehilat Shalom).

Recognition

Otto received many acknowledgements of his selfless service. Among these, two stand out as very special. The New Jersey Assembly recognized Otto for his many accomplishments in Montgomery Township and Somerset County.

The second award of note will last a long time. The Montgomery Township community center on Skillman Road was renamed the Otto Kaufman Community Center in his memory.



Otto also received a Citation of Merit from the New Jersey Conference of Mayors.

Otto Kaufman died in 2002, leaving behind a legacy of accomplishment. He was driven to overcome adversity within himself and others and to turn life's negativity into positive accomplishments. His friendship with Albert Einstein helped him realize ways to help others, and turn adversity into service. We are all better off for Otto Kaufman's accomplishments.

This story originally appeared in the Tales of Blawenburg blog (<http://www.blawenburgtales.com>) and is published here with the author's permission.

Sources

Peggy Kaufman Fass and Bob Fass provided newspaper articles and answered many questions to help construct this blog. I thank them for their cooperation and information.

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Photo Credits

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Otto and Albert – Internet and Otto Kaufman Community Center

Ruth and Otto Kaufman – Peggy and Bob Fass

Otto award – Otto Kaufman Community Center