

Petaluma Jews Oral History Transcript

Kenneth Kann, author of, *Comrades and Chicken Ranchers – The Story of a California Jewish Community*, tells of the aspirations of Eastern European Jews to own their own land that started a great movement of Jewish agricultural settlement in Palestine and the United States. Part of this trend and perhaps one of the best-known examples was the settlement in Petaluma in the first couple of decades of the twentieth-century. This is a compelling story of the socially and politically lively Jewish chicken ranchers and egg farmers in Petaluma.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

There was a German Jewish community in the nineteenth-century in Petaluma; it was a small, largely merchant community. In the twentieth-century, immigrants from Jewish settlements from Eastern Europe (the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania) started settling in Petaluma. This was part of the great Jewish migration in the twentieth-century, not only to the United States, but also to Palestine and parts of South America. Typically, Jewish immigrants of that generation settled in large cities in the Eastern seaboard and, in some cases, people made their way out to places like Los Angeles and San Francisco and lived in workshops with pushcarts and small businesses. But, there was a small tradition of Jewish agriculture settlement that went back to the old country, which was part of the Zionist impulse to settle in Palestine. Jews were prohibited from owning land in Czarist Russia. There were aspirations to live on the land and so there was a movement of Jewish agricultural settlement that really manifested itself in early agricultural settlements in Palestine that became the Kibbutz later on and Jewish agrarian settlements in the United States.

Part of this trend and perhaps one of the best-known examples was the settlement of Eastern European Jews in Petaluma in the first couple of decades of the twentieth-century. They didn't work in shops or do crafts, they had small chicken ranches in Petaluma and the more prosperous ones had egg farms. By the time of World War I., there were maybe fifty Jewish families, by 1920 maybe a hundred Jewish families--large enough to establish a Jewish Community Center on Western Avenue in Petaluma and that building still exists in the form of a Congregation now.

The community had a lot of political vitality and was very lively culturally. This was Yiddish speaking people they had come from very religious Orthodox Jewish backgrounds in the old country and had really rebelled against it as part of their immigration to the United States. So, there was a small minority in that early immigrant community that were religious but the majority of them were secular, highly political, and they

held mainly different forms of socialist views ranging from members of the Arbiter Ring (the Workman's Circle) who were akin to American Socialist of the stripe of Eugene Debs, there were Labor Zionists who believed that Jews should establish a Socialist Society in Palestine, and then there were members of the Communist Party, there were Anarchists, there were all kinds of types of Communists within the Jewish community. So, it was very lively both socially and politically. When someone like Golda Meir came through California in the 1930s trying to raise money for the Labor Zionists movement in Palestine, the three big stops on the West coast were Los Angeles, San Francisco and the Jewish chicken ranching community in Petaluma.

Amongst the groups in the community was a very active left wing group, which was largely active inside the Jewish community. But, in the 1930s and during the Great Depression when there was so much suffering in agricultural pursuits in the West, of the kind John Steinbeck wrote about in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Petaluma and Sonoma County had its own version of it. That was in 1934 when there was a strike of apple pickers in Sebastopol. Migrant workers had arrived to pick apples and they struck for very moderately higher wages. There had been a very active left wing movement in Sonoma County, small but vociferous, and while the Petaluma Jewish community was members, they were not the only part of that radical. One of the members of the Jewish community, Sal Nitzberg was one of the more outspoken left-wingers in the county and a Jewish chicken rancher out in Petaluma. He was the person who was tarred and feathered in 1934 in the context of that apple pickers strike.

Sol Nitzberg came from a remarkable background. He came from Eastern Europe from a family of nine or ten generations of rabbis and expected to be a rabbi himself and instead became a modern man. He became a socialist in Russia and joined up and fought in the 1905 revolution in Russia, but was then caught by the Czarist police and exiled to Siberia where he spent a number of years. He was released from captivity in Siberia and went back home and with the police on his heels escaped out of Russia and made his way to New York where he had a brother. In New York, he went to Cooper Union and got an engineering degree. He fought in World War I., got his citizenship, then after the war he and a friend decided to walk across the United States to see America and meet Americans. He walked to Los Angeles and made his way eventually to Petaluma where he had heard of this Jewish agricultural community. He had a desire to work on the land from his years in Siberia, so he became a member of this Jewish chicken ranching community, met his wife Millie, and they had several children. In the 1930s, Sal, along with others, Jewish and non-Jewish, comprised a very active left-wing group running candidates for office in Sonoma County. When the apple picker's strike broke out these left-wingers organized support, including getting donations from the Longshoreman's Union in

San Francisco. That's the background of the people and the community that was the setting of that apple picker's strike in 1934.