

A Shtetl in Petaluma

Comrades & Chicken Ranchers: The Story of a California Jewish Community

by Kenneth Kann

Cornell University Press; 1993
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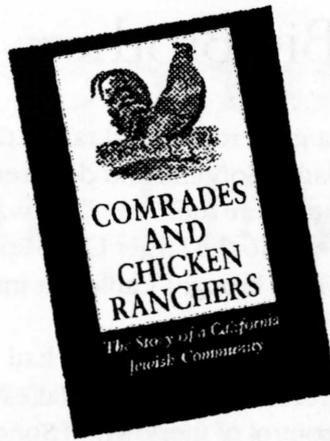
Reviewed by A.C. Praetzellis

It's an unlikely-sounding story: Eastern European Jews, socialists for the most part, escape the poverty and the pogroms of turn-of-the-century Russia and Poland and find a new home — in Petaluma!

Hollywood will never buy the film rights, but that doesn't worry oral historian Kenneth Kann, whose new book has captured the essence not only of the place and time but the process of cultural change among three generations of this vigorous Jewish community.

Drawing upon material from over 200 interviews, the book is structured as a series of conversations which "push against the boundaries of historical scholarship... by combining multiple accounts of a single event into the voice of a single representative character."

The Jewish traditions of charity and social justice (*tzdakah*) and the necessity of honorable work (*parnasah*) led many of these early 20th-century pioneers to embrace varying degrees of Marxism. Many of



the more left leaning, or *linke* in Yiddish, were ardent communists (see, for example, K. Kann's *Joe Rapoport: The Life of a Jewish Radical*, 1981). And even those on the conservative wing, dubbed the *rebkte*, ranged from socialists to social democrats.

The heroes of *Comrades and Chicken Ranchers* are ordinary people who lived through extraordinary times. Telling their stories of beatings, rape, and murder in turn-of-the-century Russia and Ukraine brought tears to the eyes of Kann's elderly informants, while the ejection of the *linke* faction from the Petaluma Jewish Community Center still elicits strong feelings even 40 years after the event.

Petaluma was a safe haven for many first generation immigrants who dreamed of independence and self-sufficiency, and built a strong Yiddish culture. But their lives were not without grim reminders of the past: In 1935 three anti-fascist unionists were attacked by "patriots" from

the American Legion and the Chamber of Commerce. This familiar story is retold by one of the victims, a Petaluma *linke*. After holding the mob at bay for two hours — both the Sonoma County Sheriff and the Petaluma Police refused to respond to his phone calls for help — the man was taken to a Santa Rosa warehouse, beaten, and tarred and feathered.

The failure of the Poultry Producers, a cooperative venture that sold bulk feed and bought eggs, was the beginning of the end for the Petaluma chicken farmers, both Jew and gentile alike. Most investors were local farmers who got back only four cents on the dollar; by the early 1960's, many of Kann's interviewees were ruined.

But this was not the end of this community. One of *Comrades and Chicken Ranchers*' strongest points is its attention to the continuity of the Jewish presence in Petaluma. Although Yiddish culture is now almost gone, many of the grandchildren of the immigrant generation still live in the area, and even as Petaluma evolves into a bedroom suburb for San Francisco and Marin, the Jewish presence is expanding again.

The immediacy of first person narrative makes *Comrades and Chicken Ranchers* a compelling book. The author has skillfully adapted oral accounts, that are often disjointed and inelegant in their raw form, to create a portrait that is grim, funny, and ultimately as optimistic as the people whom he has studied.

This is one of the most important and readable case studies in California ethnic history published to date. As one of his informants might say "Mr. Kann, you've performed a *mitzvah!*" 🐔