Basha Singerman is an eighty-three-year-old Russian immigrant who arrived in Petaluma, California, in 1915 and, with her husband Shimon, took up chicken farming. “Basha Singerman” is not her real name, but she is a real “Comrade of Petaluma,” one of many Petaluman Jews who have recalled their life stories and experiences to oral historians Zelda Bronstein and Kenneth Kann.

“The Comrades of Petaluma” is an ongoing oral history of a Jewish socialist chicken farming community. One hundred and fifty taped interviews, collected between 1973 and 1977, record the changing experiences of one California immigrant community through three generations and three-quarters of a century. While the history of the Petaluma Jewish community reveals experiences central to all immigrants in America—the creation of a community, the dilemma of interaction with a broader society, and the problems of community continuity and ethnic identity in the second and third generations—the story of the Petaluma Jews is exceptional because of their active and diverse cultural organizations, their unique agricultural base, and their extraordinary community cohesion.

Petaluma, a town of 30,000 people located forty miles north of San Francisco, was once a thriving western poultry center. Jewish chicken farmers co-existed with other immigrant chicken-farming communities—German, Swedish, Italian, and Japanese. Early in the century, chicken ranching had required little initial capital outlay, and Petaluma’s Eastern European Jewish pioneers were attracted to family farming as an escape from brutal urban workplaces or through an ideological commitment to Jewish agricultural life. The community’s spoken history has it that Sam Messner established Petaluma’s first Jewish chicken ranch in 1903, and by 1925 a community of more than 100 Jewish chicken-ranching families thrived in the rural Northern California locale.

Community social life centered around the Jewish Community Center, which was built in 1925. There, the tiny shul (synagogue) for the religious, a wide variety of political and literary and fraternal organizations, a library, holiday and social gatherings, and educational programs brought the community together and displayed the diversity and richness of the local Jewish culture. Political commitments ran deep, and the Petaluma Jews were alternately united and divided by a volatile political life. Tensions generated in the 1930’s by the outcome of the Russian Revolution and in the 1950’s by the Cold War strained community solidarity, and when the corporation displayed the family farm as the basic unit of the poultry business in the 1950’s, the Petaluma Jews underwent a major economic reorientation. Since that time, their town has become increasingly suburban in character. The newcomers who have swelled the Jewish community to 200 families have added yet another dimension to local Jewish culture. Interest grows in building a temple and securing a full-time rabbi.

The following interview with “Basha Singerman,” a shortened version of the full transcript to appear in a forthcoming book, records the spirit of cooperation and cultural cohesion, the shared hardships and joys that characterized the Petaluma Jewish socialist chicken-farming community in its first decades. 

Ms. Bronstein is a granddaughter of two of Petaluma’s earliest Jewish chicken ranchers. She is a graduate student in American Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Mr. Kann has completed a doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, on immigration and the working classes in the United States. He now lives in Petaluma.

The names of individuals mentioned in the interview have been changed to protect the privacy of living Petalumans.
When we came to Petaluma I couldn’t speak any English at all. Hardly any . . . When I was in Africa I learned a few words. I didn’t go to school there because in Nairobi they had no school. So when we came here I wanted to learn the English language and I started to go to school. I took up English and my teacher said to me, “Being that you were in East Africa, I would like you to write an essay on your trip to East Africa.”

And I did. This is the essay. [Begins to read the essay:]

On a picturesque night I passed the Suez Canal. Its beauty was beyond description . . .

You want to know how I got to East Africa? That is a story! I was born in Minsk, the capital of White Russia, in 1894. Minsk was one of the ghetto cities for the Jewish people. There were cities where Jews were not allowed to live . . . like in Moscow, in Kiev, in Petrograd [Leningrad]. Before I left, the population of Minsk was about 100,000—about 75,000 Jews and 25,000 non-Jews.

I was the only one in the family who craved for education. I was born with it. I went to a full-time Jewish school when I was six years old. School in Old Russia was not like in the Soviet Union, with compulsory education for all. At that time in Tsarist Russia they admitted a
Before leaving Minsk in 1913, Basha (in light skirt) posed with her sister for a charming, if somehow sad, portrait.

4 per cent quota of Jewish children to a high school. I was one of the 4 per cent who went to high school, because I had a teacher in our house. There were teachers who taught Jewish children without money. They were students. They were idealists. They wanted Jewish people to get some education, so they gave free lessons to Jewish children.

I put in an application for a government junior high school when I was eight years old. I passed the examinations 100 per cent, and I was admitted. I took up Russian language and Russian literature and mathematics and history. They had two monks who taught religion class to the non-Jewish children; then we would go out for an hour.

I was there for four years and I was one of the best. There [pointing to the wall] is a picture of the graduation group. I was so ambitious! I wanted to go to gymnasium—gymnasium means high school—after junior high school. They didn’t admit Jewish children, but you could study at home and then go through an externichatch—an examination—to pass higher grades. A student taught me for higher education a little, I studied at home, and I graduated from high school. Then I entered a bookkeeping college.

The bookkeeping college was a two-year college. I graduated in 1907—I still have my diploma. Then I went to work in a general store, one of the biggest in Minsk. Small shopkeepers from all over Minsk and all the little towns came to buy things. There were over a hundred salesmen and twenty bookkeepers—among the twenty I was one girl. The owner was a Jewish millionaire. And he was a despot... boy was he a despot! When the Revolution broke out, everything was taken from him. He ran away to Poland and then in 1939 the Nazis killed him off.

At the time I was working, if I had five rubles a week I was a rich girl. We went through hunger, plenty of it. I was in a bookkeepers’ union and we used to have meetings. We were grownups: sixteen, seventeen-year-old boys and girls were grownups at that time.

I belonged to other organizations, people’s organizations. We were progressives. We were all revolutionaries. You see, Lenin’s party was called Iskra at that time. Iskra is “spark.” And I belonged to Iskra. It’s gone already.

Just before I left Minsk, some of my friends gave me a farewell party. The police came in—you were not allowed to gather, especially students. This was in 1913. They came in and searched us. They took away everything and they arrested two of the young men. Then they went to search each and everyone’s house. They didn’t find anything at my house. My father was sick then and I thought it was better not to keep anything there. The police were terrible. They were terrible. They were afraid of the young people—especially the people who were more or less educated—that they would become revolutionaries and want to overthrow the Tsar.

This was a terrible time for me, a terrible time. I was leaving Minsk to go to Africa. The brother of my future
husband was the head salesman in the store where I worked. I was very good friends with his family, but his brother I didn’t know. I heard about him. He was in Africa and he wanted his family to come and settle. He had land and he had built a house.

This future brother-in-law of mine, he went to Africa—Kenya! When he came, there were twenty Jewish families and no Jewish girls. So when he arrived in Nairobi he said to his brother, “I have a wonderful girl for you.” He was the one who made the shidoch [match] between my husband and me. He wrote me a letter and he proposed it to me that I should come to Africa and if I didn’t like it I’ll be able to go back.

I showed the letter from Africa to my father and I asked him. He read the letter and he said, “Go, my daughter, because I cannot do a thing for you anymore.” He felt that he was dying and two weeks later he died. He was forty-nine years old.

I had a young man in Minsk. We were in love, but he did something to me which I didn’t like and we quarreled. We parted, and I decided to go, just in spite of the one that I loved.

When I left Minsk, my sweetheart came to the railroad station to say goodbye to me. He gave me a package, a present. When I took apart my luggage in Africa, I found this package with two books. One was Writers and Poets, a book of Russian writers and poets. And in this book I found these two little cards. I still have them. He said to me: “Basha (you know, in Russian they called me Basha)—Prosti za vse—forgive me for everything. Dermiz—come back. Yeval Shchalevo boodesh islikotich—write, if you have a desire. Boris.”

I did not write to him. I was married already. I made up my mind. My husband was a wonderful man. When I came to Africa my future husband came to the boat at Mombasa to meet me. He looked so young! He was twenty years older than I. I wasn’t quite nineteen and he was close to thirty-nine. He looked like a young man of twenty-four. He was highly educated and cultured. He knew many languages and besides he was a talmudist. At the same time he was an ordinary man . . . he didn’t blow about his knowledge. So . . . at last I fell in love with him.

My husband came to East Africa in 1906, about eight years before I came. In 1904 or 1905 England offered East Africa—the Kenya Colony—to the Jewish people as a homeland. The Zionist leaders refused to accept this because they wanted Palestine. But for a couple of years there was a great big sign as soon as you entered Nairobi: “Jewish Reserve.” If the Zionist leaders had accepted this as a Jewish homeland, the Jewish people would have been a thousand times worse off than they are in Israel with the Arabs. In Israel they had a claim and in Africa they had no claim. The natives of Kenya would have killed every last Jew.

My husband was in one of the first groups who came to Kenya after the British offered it to the Jewish people. He was with a group of students. He wanted the Jewish people to settle on the land and become productive citizens and productive farmers. By profession my husband was a building engineer, but he was born with a desire to work on the land. The ground was his heart and soul.

The British government took the best land away from the natives and drove them deeper and deeper into the woods. Very rich people from England and Germany got thousands and thousands of acres of land. It’s an immense country, Kenya. The British government gave my husband’s group of young men thousands of acres of land. Free! You had to show when you came in that you had 200 English pounds. A pound was $5.00 . . . who had 200 pounds? But one young man in the group did. He stood first at the window and showed the 200 pounds. Then he handed it to the next one, and each to another. That’s how they were granted land.

As soon as a white man came the natives looked at you and named you in their language. I learned a little of the Kikuyu language. My father-in-law, he was a very religious man. He used to dovin [pray] every morning. They called him Vongoy. Vongoy has to do with God.
My husband they named Margoo. Margoo is a judge. They had quarrels between their families, with all their wives, so with all their troubles they would come to him. He spoke the Kikuyu language fluently. They would tell him all about their troubles and he would solve their problems in a nice and human way. There were rickshaws in Nairobi but not once did he ride in a rickshaw. He considered it below human dignity that a human being should carry him. My husband was heart and soul for the natives. He not only sympathized with them, but he felt it was unjust on the part of England to colonize.

My husband had a cattle ranch there. He had a dairy, with over 200 milking cows. The natives worked for him, but he paid them and they just loved him. The Negroes would get up at three o’clock in the morning to milk the cows. My husband would go with them. He was always milking.

When I came to Africa I was tall and I was thin. I was a pretty good-looking girl. I was nineteen years old. So they named me Matasia. Matasia is a young, straight tree, a beautiful tree that grows tall and straight.

After I was there for a few months we got married. A white woman there was superior . . . a godsend. There the white women don’t do a thing. If you go out to buy a loaf of bread, then you have to have a little boy with you . . . a Negro boy. He is to carry your bundle or else you’ll be looked upon like a wild one. The white women have nothing to do there. In the beginning I thought, I’ll go insane, but then I adapted myself.

I was happy with my new husband there, but I was lonely, I was so lonely! Kenya was a new country; it was a wilderness actually. We lived seven miles from town on a farm, just my husband and I. I was lonely for my friends and family. Over 200 people came to the railroad station when I left Minsk. Minsk was a big city . . . at home I had a cultural life.

There were twenty Jewish families when I came but none of them—none of them—were progressives. There were a few homes built and a little town already. They were friendly, but they were playing cards all the time, and we don’t. My husband never played cards and neither do I. They play cards here too . . . even the progressive friends play cards here. But I don’t know how to and I’m not interested in it. I would rather sit down and read something good and know what is going on.

I was in Africa for eleven months. Terrible diseases broke out among the cattle and my husband was losing twenty and thirty a day. He knew I was very unhappy there. One day my husband says to me, “I am going to sell all the cows that we have and let’s go.” He wanted to go to Canada, to Montreal. He was getting a Jewish newspaper from New York, and in this newspaper they described the life of the Jewish farmer not far from Montreal. It was ideal. They had their own cultural events and they were not far from the city. They were cultured people.

We sailed to Paris, where my husband had an uncle, and then we went to Montreal. My husband told the people at the British Embassy that he is looking for a cattle ranch and they gave him the name of a real estate man. When he took my husband out to show him the Jewish farms, it was actually boardinghouses. The poor Jewish people of Montreal—every summer they would go away to a boardinghouse to be in the country for a couple of months. Instead of Jewish farms near Montreal, there were boardinghouses for Jewish people!

He was ready to go back to Africa, but he met a landsman [countryman] who told him to go to California. I didn’t know about that. I was very unhappy because I was lonesome for my friends and family I left in Minsk. I was lonely. But whatever he said, it was so.

We decided to go to California. Being that my older sister lived in St. Louis, I said that we must go see her. So we went by train to St. Louis. My sister had a little grocery store and in the back of the store she had two little rooms. My husband put a white apron on and he became the chief salesman in the store. Everyone liked him, but
he wanted to become a farmer, a cattle rancher. We left for California, for San Francisco.

His landsman gave him an address of a Jewish family in San Francisco. So when we came we went straight to these people. From San Francisco, real estate agents began to take him out—to Ukiah, to Eureka, up north. Once the agent brought us up to Willits, about a hundred miles north from Petaluma. At that time Willits was such a dirty town. It wasn’t paved. It was raining and it was just miserable. It was the most horrible town I ever saw.

The cattle ranch was seven or eight miles away from town. The agent took us out to show us the ranch. What do I know about a cattle ranch? But it was seven miles away from town... if you were looking for a house you couldn’t see it for miles.

I didn’t say a word, but the deal didn’t materialize. Not because of me. They could not agree on the price of two horses the farmer wanted to sell with the ranch. Finally my husband said, “In that case, let’s leave.”

When we returned from Willits toward San Francisco the train stopped in Petaluma for an hour or so. The agent had showed my husband the chicken houses in Petaluma and he wanted me to see. We went out of the train and it was so beautiful! It was in November. It was such a sunny day and everything was so white. A great big hen was sitting in a great big basket of eggs on a sign, and it said “The Egg Basket of the World.”

In comparison with Willits, oh my God, it was paradise. So I said to my husband, “Shimon, right here we are going to remain!”
This was in 1915. We remained. We rented an apartment and we went to look for chicken ranches. My husband wanted to have a cattle ranch. He didn’t like the chickens. He said, “Oh, you have to bend to every chicken and keep on bending.” But I wanted to stay in Petaluma and to buy a chicken ranch right here. I was determined. Before I didn’t say anything, but here I was determined. I liked the chicken ranch much better because we were close to a community.

There were three Jewish families in Petaluma when we came. One of them—Horowitz—he was a crook. He was terrible. He wanted to make a few dollars commission from us. He was helping us to find a ranch, and he said he didn’t care which one we would buy. Horowitz began to talk to my husband that he should buy a five-acre ranch that a neighbor of his wanted to sell. My husband didn’t like this place. He saw other ranches that he liked. That crook Horowitz made nothing of the other ranches. He said, “I want you as a neighbor.”

So we bought that ranch. When we came to the lawyer’s to make out the papers, Horowitz was there too. My husband said, “What are you doing here?”

He didn’t answer. Then it came out that the seller offered him 2½ per cent commission for the sale. Well, my husband didn’t say anything. When everything was through he came over to my husband and wanted to shake hands. So my husband says, “A thief and a crook! I will not give you my hand and I do not want to look at you anymore!”

Horowitz made 2½ per cent commission and that’s why he wanted us to buy that rotten place. It was only a fence between our ranch and his ranch, but we had nothing to do with him while we were there. We just hated that ranch. We stayed on it for a couple of years and then we sold it.

Within a period of six years, a Jewish population settled in Petaluma of about 100 families. My husband brought Jewish families here. He wanted to take Jewish people who worked in the sweatshops of big cities and bring them here. Shimon possessed vision and ideals. He saw in Petaluma a place where Jews could settle on the land and begin to lead a healthy, dignified life. He realized that here is where Jewish people could do productive work and make a nice respectable living.

My husband had a landsman of his in San Francisco, his name was Abe Mizner. They both came from a city in White Russia—Borosov was the name of the city—it was in the Minsk area. So they knew each other from home. My husband told Abe Mizner that he wants to bring Jewish people here that they should settle. Abe Mizner gave him names and addresses of landsmen in the East. My husband wrote direct to these people that they should come to Petaluma and he would help them go into business. And they came, a few families came.

They didn’t come all at one time. They came gradually. When one or two people came and they had only a few dollars, my Shimon and I welcomed them all. Even people we didn’t know came. They went to the bank and they asked for help. So the bank manager would send them to us and they would stay with us for weeks. We didn’t even know them. We would take them out to look for a ranch. If they would buy a place, my husband would go with them to the bank and to a feed store. He had very good credit in Petaluma. He would sign a note for them for about $1000 or $2000.

One group of young men came to Petaluma from Berkeley before the war. They were from Palestine originally. They came to Petaluma to work on the chicken ranches. So, to work on a chicken ranch who did they come to? They came to the Singermans, naturally! And we became very dear friends with one of them. His name was Meneuchen—Louis Meneuchen.

At the time of the First World War, in 1917, he wanted to go fight against Germany. He said, any human being that has any dignity and consideration for mankind should go and fight against Germany. Because if Germany should win then it will be an end to the world. So he wanted to be a soldier in the American army, but he
Working with live chickens was new and hard. Still, it was better than life in the big city sweatshops.

was flat-footed and he wasn’t accepted. So what did he do? He went to Palestine and he joined the Jabotinsky Batallion [a Jewish Zionist brigade which fought in Palestine under the British during World War I].

He was a man, I am telling you! Well, he met a young girl and they got married and they came to Petaluma after the war. So, who should they come to? To the Singermans, naturally! They lived with us for awhile and then they bought a ranch. My husband helped them out.

Louis Meneuchen is Yehudi Menuhin’s uncle. We were friends with Yehudi’s parents. They used to come up. Yehudi was four years old—with his little violin.

In the early days the whole Jewish community became like a family, like one big family. We used to go every Sunday, all of us, to the Russian River. We got up earlier in the morning to feed the chickens, and if we fed them an hour later in the afternoon it didn’t matter. Whoever had a car or a truck filled it up with people. We would bring our lunches and spread long tables there. They had room at Rio Nido and Monte Rio. We would go swimming—that’s where I learned how to swim.

We used to come to one another’s in the evenings. Every Friday we would have a cultural gathering, mostly at our house, but occasionally at someone else’s house. We would discuss current events and books. I used to bake cakes and cookies—did I have spreads! They used to call our house “Singerman’s Hotel.”

My husband, being that he was a building engineer, built a gorgeous house for us in 1922. He made the specifications and planned everything. Other people built it, but we helped. We had a gorgeous 20 x 20’ dining room. The living room was 16 x 18’—it was open on both sides. We had two bedrooms, a big kitchen, and a pantry. It was an immense house. At that time it was the most beautiful house in Petaluma. It was open to everybody from the day it was built.

We lived just like one family then. Regardless of ideological differences—and there were plenty of ide-
logical differences—each and every one had his own ideology. In 1925 we built a Community Center. There was no money for building a Center, so Mrs. Ziff and Mrs. Rubin and a few others got a loan. Mrs. Haas in San Francisco gave the money for the first mortgage. Every one of us wanted to have a Jewish Center.

Working with live chickens was new and hard. Still it was better than life in the big city sweatshops. These people became chicken farmers and paid off their debts. Then they brought friends of theirs who came without money. Their credit was good already and they helped the new people who came here without money.

When we came to Petaluma most of the chicken ranchers had layers. The chickens were called white leg-horns. When we bought our chicken ranch there were about 1,500 layers on the ranch. There was a man who used to raise pullets and at the age of three months he would sell them to us. They started to lay at about six months. Then we would keep these layers until two-and-a-half or three years. Every year we would sell the older birds and take in new pullets, because the old hens stopped laying. This was from 1915 to 1949.

We first learned from the neighbors. They used to come over and show us what to do. When we first came to Petaluma a neighbor of ours went to the newspaper, the Argus, and she wrote a long article called “The Invasion of the Jews in Petaluma.” And I’m telling you, this article, it was terrible. But many of our neighbors, non-Jews, came after she wrote this anti-Semitic article. They showed us how to feed the chickens and how to plow and how to plant.

We worked very hard. At that time we had to plant kale, thousands and thousands of plants, because in the feed from the feed store there was no green stuff. Every three months we planted another patch of three thousand green seeds. This was kale.

At six o’clock in the morning my husband would get up, hitch the horse to the wagon, and pick a full wagon of kale. He would cut it on the electric kale-cutter, and then he would mix it with grain in an electric mixer. He would make a full mixer with mash and we would fill up five-gallon cans. About seven o’clock in the morning we would feed the chickens with it.

My husband built troughs so that a whole row opened
Yitzhak Meyer had a brother who lived in Petaluma for many years. They used to deal with chickens—and we used to sell the old chickens to them. I don’t think the Meyers were that bad. Maybe with others they were, but not with us. And besides, Meyer’s brother was a more or less cultured man, an educated man. He would come, to my husband, and they would talk about the Bible and the talmud and about many things.

We would all come together in the homes, especially our home, once a week at least in the 1930’s. Naturally, it was progressive people. We would talk about books and current events and things. Everybody was well-read here—Hochman, Sol Levin, many of our friends. We would spend wonderful times.

What does it mean to be a progressive? Well, progressive means that we should have a good life for all mankind, a good life for everybody regardless of politics. There should be no discrimination. There should be no hatred among people. That’s our main point—a better life for all the people.

We were all progressives. It was no use inviting the others—it would be a quarrel. The Community Center was for the whole community. We all made financial contributions to the Community Center. The progressive family and the non-progressive family—I don’t want to call them reactionary! [chuckling]—the conservatives—we were all there together. Our progressive groups were meeting at the Center because we were a part of the Jewish community and had a right to meet there. We felt that the Community Center is our own.

Ben and Sara Hochman lived near us too. Do you know their sons, Sam and Nathan? Both of them were in the Spanish Civil War. In 1935 or 1936 the fascists here in Petaluma beat up Hochman because he is a progressive man. It was during a strike of apple-pickers... Hochman was very active. They came to his house and
dragged him out. They beat him up and they took out the flag. They took out the flag and they said, "Bow to the flag on your knees."

So he said, "If this flag represents what you are doing to me now, then I have no use for it and I will not bow to it."

That's right! He told the fascists. And they were fascists! They beat him up. They nearly killed him. Oh, we were all heartbroken. It was something awful. It was something terrible—what they went through! They had to move out. They had to leave Petaluma. They went to New York, but they came back.

There were Nazis in Petaluma—there still are! I know of one especially. He was one of the big machers [big-shots] in town. Anderson was his name. He was a terrible man, a terrible person. They used to have demonstrations in town in '36 and '37, and he would lead on horseback.

I met his wife quite often in town now. Bridget is her name—a German name. Her parents were our neighbors—her mother was a Nazi. She was a little girl when we came and she married Anderson. She also became a Nazi.

They lived . . . not far from our place. Anderson had a cow and he didn't have much land. I had 3 1/4 acres of land. I didn't raise any greens then so I had plenty of pasture. So he used to bring his cow to my pasture. So he would come by and he would begin to talk to me.

I was afraid of him! He talked right in my face. He talked so quickly. He talked about Nazis. In my house he talked about Nazis! He wanted to show me that he is a great friend of mine. I never see him anymore. I don't know whether he is alive. He was mentally ill. That's right!

In the 1920's we did well, but in the Depression they were going to take everything away from everybody. Chicken ranch after chicken ranch—they kept on foreclosing and taking every cent away from everybody.

We almost lost everything we had. Before Roosevelt became president they were going to take away our chicken ranch. We had 12 1/2 acres and we sold 4 1/2 acres, being that in the time of the Depression we lost every cent that we had. We couldn't pay the mortgage on the place and they were going to foreclose. However, another bank advanced us some money and we paid. We sold more of our land and finally we were left with 3 1/2 acres. We held on until 1937 and then another bank advanced us money. They didn't foreclose us, but we had to work very hard. That's why my husband died—from a heart attack from aggravation. He died in 1942, but he became sick right away during the Depression.

In 1942 we decided to sell the layers and take in chicks. Why did we start raising chicks? One of the Adler sons decided to take in 1500 chicks—in high school they gave you credit for certain things—and he made $1500. Profit! Since then, everybody began to take in chicks. For chicks you needed brooder houses, so my husband, with a neighbor, they rebuilt some of the chicken houses to brooder houses. We were supposed to take in chicks on the fifth of September, 1942. My husband died on the first of September, 1942.

When my husband died, in his will he wanted to be cremated. At that time it was $200. I had to pay $200 to the funeral chapel and I didn't have the money. Sol Levin was the only one who knew my financial position when my husband died. He went to the funeral chapel and he said to the owner to wait three months. The chicks you sold at three months. They had to have a certain weight and it didn't pay to sell them when they were very young. The funeral chapel waited three months until after I sold my chicks and I paid them the $200.

Sol did a lot for me then and I'll never forget it. He was the only one that spoke at my husband's funeral in the name of my husband. I remember a few words of his that he said: "The tradition of Shimon Singerman I hope will continue in Petaluma—to help each other like Shimon Singerman." Sol Levin talked at his funeral.
It's not like it was before. It's the atmosphere. It's the whole life here—not only in Petaluma—all over the United States. They want everyone to be conservative.

He is a wonderful person, an outstanding personality.

It wasn't easy after my husband died. I had a big mortgage—$7,500. We owed $3,000 for rebuilding the chicken houses. And it happened that a few months before, I fell and broke my kneecap. I owed the doctor $1,000. So I owed about $10,000 or $11,000, and I was penniless. When my husband died they were going to take our place away. I had to sell more of my land and I had to raise chicks to pay off my debts. And I did.

A man by the name of Bill Freedman worked for us when he was seventeen years old. Bill was to my husband like a son. When my husband died, Bill finished rebuilding my chicken houses into brooder houses. He used to work for me two days a week. He would come and fill up all the hoppers with mash and he would clean the chicken houses. He did a lot of things. Without Bill, I wouldn't have survived.

So I paid the first mortgage, I paid the $1,000 for the accident, and I paid the $3,000 for rebuilding the chicken houses. I came out all right. I was at that time young [50 years old] and strong like a horse. I loved work. I like to work.

I kept the ranch until 1966. It was in my heart—not only the house, the whole place. We built everything ourselves. I never thought that I would sell my place.

We always belonged to the Poultry Producers [a large cooperative which also served as a savings bank]. My husband was one of those who helped to organize it in 1916. He had so much confidence in the Poultry Producers and so did I. We used to buy feed there and we used to deliver eggs there. Every year they would pay a dividend.

After my husband passed away my whole savings were in the Poultry Producers. I paid for the ranch and I lived very modestly. However, in 1964 the Poultry Producers declared themselves bankrupt. They took away millions of dollars from the members and they took away every cent of my $7,500. The whole management—they were corrupt—they did not go bankrupt. They were crooks and they took the money for themselves.

In the beginning they wanted to see that the members should be quiet. So they wrote every member will get back dollar for dollar. They didn't—they took everything. They sent another letter that they will pay 2 per cent, or whatever it was. In my letter they said they would pay $300 for my $7,500. On the letter they told you to take it or leave it. Some people left it—they didn't want to take it.

Some people lost tens of thousands of dollars. Cousins of my husband—Jake and Freda Singerman—they had $30,000. There was a membership of thousands and many people lost their ranches.

I was left penniless and I had to go on welfare. I couldn't pay for anything. A whole year I was on the welfare and it nearly killed me. Because I was so independent. It was begging actually. It was so humiliating!

One day I couldn't pay the taxes on my ranch. I thought I would go to my social worker. In the city hall I used to go. Ooooh, I just shiver when I think about it!!! I didn't like the welfare business—to go to a social worker. He was a very nice person, but what could he do? It wasn't up to him.

However, I came over and I said I have no money to pay my taxes this year. He said if you have no money to pay your taxes, the state will come and take your place away.

I nearly fainted when he said it. I never thought I would sell my place. I would have never sold the ranch if not for that. But then it occurred to me that I must sell my place! I don't want them to take my place away.

So I went to a stationery store and I bought a "for sale" sign. A good friend of mine, Max Blumberg, he had a
I am eighty already. Well, time flies for everybody. The only difference is that one gets born earlier and another later.

Cotati real estate agency. He went by and he saw the sign. So he comes in and he says, "Basha, do you want to sell your place?"

I said, "Fine!"

He said, "I have a customer for you." He brought these young people, with two children, and they bought my place. They bought my place, so I had to move out.

When I sold my place, Dvora Kamen, she said, "What will we do without Basha's house?" Because all the meetings and all the affairs—whatever you can think of—was in my house. It was open from the very first day it was possible for people to come in. So she says, "What will we do without Basha's house?"

So? OK! We are getting along without Basha's house. That's all. That's the end of it—the whole story about it. Versteh [understand]? This is our wonderful system. Half of my place I had to sell in the 1930's and then they come and take everything away from you. But who cares?

I can't do anything anymore—I feel that my strength is failing me—but I always was very active in our organizations. In 1947 a group of Jewish women—naturally, cultural women who like to read books—a group of us got together and we decided we must organize a Jewish Women's Reading Circle here in Petaluma. They had Jewish reading circles, men and women, all over the United States in nearly every city and town, but the men didn't want to join us! They said they were busy in the Cultural Club and they had no time. That's right! It was beneath their dignity to join with women in a cultural circle.

We had as many as forty women from Cotati, Petaluma, and Penngrove. We used to have two groups, because forty was too big a group for discussion, and one Executive Committee. We read and carried on discussions. First we would discuss current events, because this was of great importance. For the current events the one who was to report read whatever she wished. But for the cultural part there was a Cultural Committee and we picked out what to read. It was all Yiddish, nothing else but Yiddish. Sometimes one woman prepared a book review of an interesting book. The discussions were outstanding. Each and every one of us is cultured. We read a lot and we know what's going on.

Some people that think Jewish culture is dying out in the United States. I don't feel that it will disappear here. In each nationality the young people want to know where they stem from—their culture, their literature, their expression. The Jewish young people want to know it too. Now. You know, there are Yiddish courses in forty universities in America. Now is the time for that. You'll have to learn Yiddish. Really.

But here in Petaluma they have nothing for the progressive children... It's not like it was before. It's the atmosphere. It's the sentiment. It's the whole combination of life here—not only in Petaluma—all over the United States. They want everybody to be conservative.

When we built the Center in 1925 we built a shul in it. You know what shul means? Synagogue! We built a big hall, a smaller hall, the kitchen and the synagogue. I was never in the shul, to tell you the truth. I don't know how it looks. I wasn't interested. It didn't occur to me to go in there.

Now, you open the Center bulletin, it is full with religion. Nothing else. Well, they tell you many things—contributions to the congregation, coming events—but most of it is religion. They have the rabbi's talk, and the rabbi's talk is a very long one. Most of this little bulletin is filled with religion. OK. This is their pleasure. Fine!

Many of the leaders of the Center are strange to me now. They are strange to me and their activities are strange to me... to many of our people. We continue with our work in our organizations. Now we have a very small group in the Jewish Women's Reading
Circle. We are at the most five or six women at the meetings. We meet in the private homes of members every two weeks. Now we have a couple of women who read Yiddish, but not too well, and they would rather read English. So they read an article from the Jewish Currents or the People's World or the New York Times.

We want to hold on. We don't want to give it up. But Eva Sarbin was a member of the Reading Circle and now she can't come—she's broken up by her husband's death. And now Haber. I think this is an end to our Jewish Reading Circle... We don't give up yet, we don't give up. We have our Jewish Cultural Club and we are doing wonderful work. We used to have a high membership, over a hundred people, but it's getting lesser and lesser. At the last meeting we had twelve or thirteen people. Before, we could never meet in a house—we rented a hall. But we still have interesting meetings.

I am over eighty already. Well, time flies for everybody. The only thing different is that one gets born earlier and another later. Literally speaking I am alone, but I manage. Several years ago they raised my rent on Western Avenue from $140 to $200. I moved to Maple Street and a lot of my close friends live in the building now. There is the Salzes and the Hochmans and the Habers and the Braunsteins. Here we are close. We go to one another. Sometimes in the night we come together in one house.

The photographs in this article are on loan to Kenneth Kann.