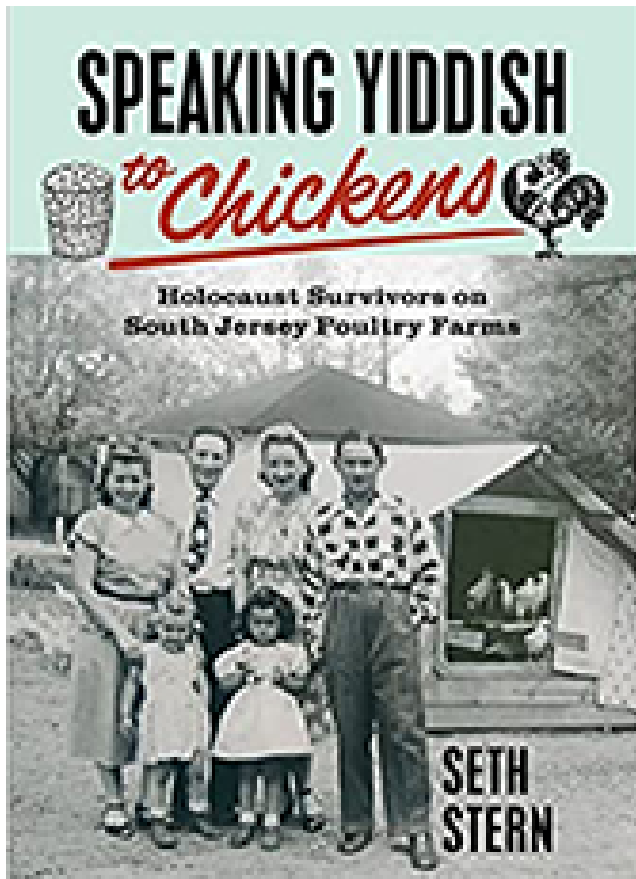


ABOUT

Speaking Yiddish To Chicken

by Seth Stern



By Mark Welch – April 10, 2023

Seth Stern has a deeply personal connection to the story he tells about the Jewish refugees, Holocaust survivors, and immigrants who settled in and around Vineland, New Jersey — once called the “Egg Basket of America” because it was there that poultry farming began. His grandmother was one of those immigrants, and Vineland was where his mother grew up.

Stern manages with deft prose and a light touch to link the refugee experience, the (re)creation of community, the transplantation of traditions into a new context (some of which take root and some of which don’t), loss, and unexpected blessings. He uses individual stories and personal interviews to highlight the rich diversity of experience of what he calls “accidental farmers.”

He mines oral histories, his own in-person interviews, and impressive research to paint a portrait that is by turns touching and funny, mournful and solemn; it is almost like a Sholem Aleichem story, not least when it involves egg-laying champion Meggi O’Day, a four-pound, single-comb leghorn who once laid 354 eggs in 357 days (as a point of interest, her owner, Gus Stern, had her stuffed when she died and put her on a pedestal above his TV). She is now at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, PA.

But the grine—greenhorns fresh off the boat — were not the first Jews in Vineland.

There was already an established Jewish farming community, formed as early as the 1880s, when they arrived. Vineland had all that a small town needed: three synagogues, a kosher delicatessen run by Isadore Goldstein, kosher butchers (Wolder & Sons and Rosen's), Kotok Hardware, and Silverman the Tailor. Most of these early arrivals were Russian Jews who had fled the pogroms and dreamed of building a new society. Few, however, welcomed the newcomers, who did not seem to be prepared or have the skills for an agricultural lifestyle. As a result, the grine began to develop their own organizations, including smaller synagogues and, importantly, a *lansmanshaft*, which combined the functions of a mutual aid society, a social club, and a cultural center. They first called it the Vineland Areaoultry Farmers Farband (Yiddish for "association"), and it later became the Jewish Poultry Farmers Association. Despite its unpromising beginning, the farband grew in strength and influence. It ran social events, such as dances and concerts, almost exclusively in Yiddish. And unlike most other rural Jewish communities, which shrank as their populations migrated to cities, Vineland flourished.

However, by the early 1960s, poultry farming was not so profitable, and the farmers began to drift away. It cannot be known for certain just how many chickens were waved overhead at High Holy Days — there would have been enough to go around — but it is clear that for a period of about fifteen years, the poultry farmers of Vineland created a vibrant Yiddish community, almost by accident. Now there is nearly nothing left.

Seth Stern has created a nuanced, sensitive, and even affectionate account of an important, albeit neglected, outgrowth of the Jewish diaspora in North America. It will be of great interest to anyone who has a personal, social, or academic interest in the postwar period, oral history, and/or post-Holocaust immigration.