

A Night of Tar, Feathers and Terror

By Jack Withington

"Hang the Jew!" an agitated member of the vigilantes bellowed. His quarry, Sol Nitzberg, Sonoma County poultry farmer, labor organizer, Communist and Jew, along with four comrades, awaited judgment in the yard of a west Santa Rosa feed mill.

Sonoma County had a history of vigilante justice. In 1920, after sheriff James Petray and two San Francisco detectives were killed in a gunfight by three desperados in a Santa Rosa hotel, outraged citizens stormed the jail and took the three lawbreakers to a local cemetery and hanged them.

The conflict between vigilantes and "troublemakers" extended into the North Bay's farm labor problems during the Depression years of the 1930s. Fears were intensified by continuing strife in San Francisco, including the general strike of 1934.

An apple industry dispute pitted workers supported by labor and Communist activists against an alliance of orchard owners, cannery operators, business and community leaders, along with the local law enforcement establishment.

The climactic event came the evening of Aug. 21, 1935, with the tar and feathering of two Sonoma County radicals. That night, a labor meeting was interrupted by angry vigilantes. In the course of the evening, a large and well-armed group of vigilantes rounded up five local union organizers accused of being Communists. One was Silva (Jack) Green, snatched from



Sol Nitzberg Was a Target of Vigilantes

--Nitzberg Family photo

his place of business in Santa Rosa late in the evening. Green was driven to the west Petaluma poultry farm of Sol Nitzberg, where he was instructed to go to the farmhouse and lure Nitzberg outside. Witnesses say he rapped on the front door and when it opened he scurried inside to warn the residents that a mob had surrounded their home. A defiant Nitzberg yelled out to the vigilantes, warned them that he was armed, and fired off several rounds from his weapon as a warning. The vigilantes, who included local law

enforcement officers, answered by throwing a tear gas canister through the windows, showering the home's interior with shards of broken glass and noxious fumes. The occupants stumbled outside, gasping for air. The mob took the victims and proceeded to round up three other men--Edward Burton Wolff, Charles Meyers and George Ford. All were taken to a feed mill warehouse in Santa Rosa where the captives were abused, beaten and ordered to kiss the American flag. When Green and Nitzberg, a veteran



Sheriff Patteson Created Peace Army

--Sonoma County Library Photo

of the U.S. Army in World War I, balked, they were covered in a smelly concoction of oily tar and chicken feathers, and paraded through Santa Rosa streets. As some vigilantes talked of a lynching, they were finally marched to the city limits and ordered to leave the county.

The message was clear--Sonoma County was willing to deal stringently, and perhaps illegally, with labor agitators. The story of the kidnapping and tar and feathering spread worldwide in newspapers and in magazines such as Time and The Nation.

Many leading citizens were identified as members of the vigilante force. These included the secretary of the Healdsburg Chamber of Commerce, a member of the State Legislature, the mayor and city attorney of Santa Rosa, a member of the City Council, as well as bankers, doctors, a California Highway patrolman, and newsmen.

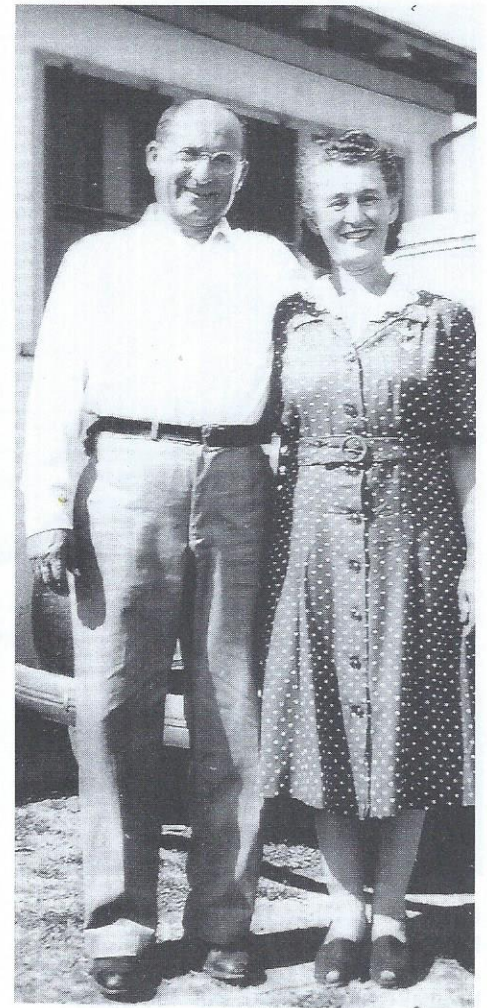
At first, officials refused to apprehend or prosecute the major suspects.

However, at the urging of the Ameri-

can Civil Liberties Union, felony charges were brought in Sonoma County Superior Court against 12 alleged vigilantes by the state Attorney General, acting in place of the county's District Attorney William Cowen. The group was charged with conspiracy to commit kidnapping, in that "on or about the 21st day of 1935, Frederick Cairns, Edward W. Jenkins, William Castleberry, William Maher, Frank Silano, Ernest Demostene, Arthur Meese, John Barries, D.H. Madison, Thomas J. Champion, George Maher and Sidney Elphick...conspired to act illegally against the five union men."

It took more than a year, but at the insistence of Green, the trial finally started. Charges against 4 of the 12 were quickly dropped by a visiting judge, after which there was a four-day trial. There were eight ranchers and/or ranchers' wives on the jury, and it took them only 16 minutes to deliver a not guilty verdict for all involved. Still, the victims had gotten their day in court. After the trial, Jack Green moved out of Sonoma County. In memory of his heroic effort to force a trial in the face of strong community antagonism, Green has been honored with an annual award given by the Sonoma County Chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union. Less is known of the life of Sol Nitzberg, the other tar and feather victim, who spent most of his adult life as a poultry rancher in Sonoma County.

Sol Nitzberg, born in Pruzany, Poland, in 1897, came from a long line of rabbis. As a young man he studied at a Yeshiva, a rabbinical school. Reflecting a lifelong commitment to social justice, he joined the Russian Social Revolution Party. During that period, he was deeply influenced by the writings and philosophy of Karl Marx. His political activities early in the 20th century placed him at odds with the ruling Romanov Dynasty. His

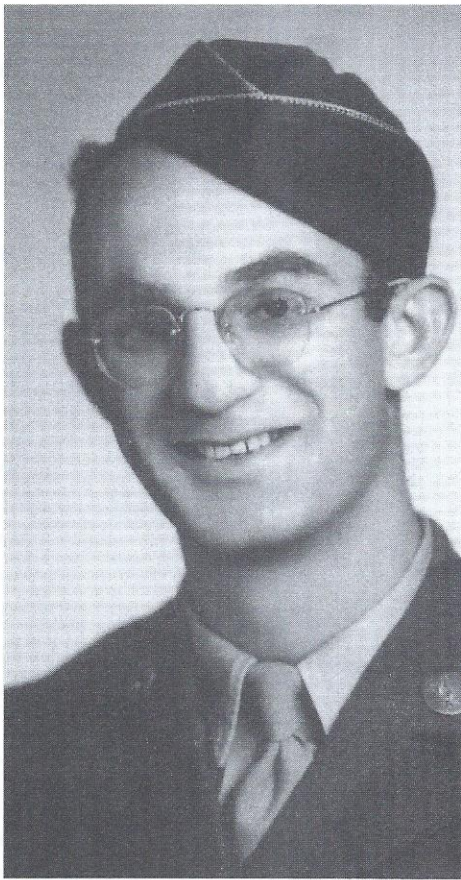


Nitzbergs Stayed On

After the tar and feather episode, Nitzberg tried to return to Russia but was denied permission to enter. In spite of the obvious antagonism, he returned to the Petaluma area and worked in the poultry business the rest of his life. He was given solid support from his wife, Millie. The Nitzberg family continued to live in Petaluma and the San Francisco Bay Area for many years. Nitzberg family collection photo

revolutionary activities resulted in an arrest and three-year sentence in a cold and isolated Siberian labor camp. Getting there required a 300-mile trip by dogsled. Surprisingly, once he was there, he engaged in grueling agricultural work that he felt prepared him for his future as a chicken rancher in Petaluma.

When he was freed, Nitzberg found Russia in a state of turmoil, and since the government blamed many of its



Leo Nitzberg (above) served in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and with the U.S. Army in World War II. Brother George, shown with wife Gladys, was taken prisoner by the Germans after his plane was shot down in World War II.

--Nitzberg Family Photos

problems on Jewish people, he gathered his few possessions, boarded the ship "Amerika" in Hamburg, Germany, and came through Ellis Island in New York City July 12, 1913. He came into the country as Schlozme Nitzberg but soon he anglicized it to Sol or Solomon.

In New York, he attended the liberal Cooper Union College and then served in the U.S. Army in World War I. Feeling a sense of wanderlust, he walked across the country to California, where he found work in San Francisco in the electrical engineering field. Bored by the confining nature of his labor, he was drawn to the small but growing Jewish community of poultry ranchers located 40 miles north in Petaluma, a town which claimed the title of the "World's Egg Basket."



Petaluma offered a mix of politics, culture and Zionism, together with hard work and the easy availability of seed money to get farms started. Although these settlers came from different countries, their one commonality was their political diversity and fervent belief in creating a better world. Social gatherings often revolved around loud, sometimes raucous political arguments. Sol Nitzberg had found his home.

It was at a political meeting in west Petaluma that Nitzberg met Millie

Rosenthal, an attractive, recently-widowed woman from Canada who had moved to Petaluma with her two sons, George and Leo. When the couple married, Sol adopted Millie's sons. Sol raised poultry while at the same time working to help laborers gain a foothold in the Sonoma County economy.

On Aug. 21, 1935, Nitzberg and Green were bound with rope and tossed into the back seat of a vigilante's sedan as the vehicle sped off into the night. Nitzberg's wife

made several phone calls that night and the next day to law enforcement officials. For whatever reason, her calls were in vain. When he was freed early Aug. 22, Nitzberg, with the help of a passing motorist, made his way to the home of a friend in Penngrove. He notified his family of his whereabouts, and then went about the business of cleaning the sticky, gooey mess off his body. Instead of leaving the county as the vigilantes had ordered, he went back to his farm to care for his family. The other victims of mob action took temporary refuge in San Francisco.



The Nitzberg family faced many hardships as a result of their notoriety. The mill where Nitzberg had purchased poultry feed for more than ten years suddenly cut off his credit. Doors previously opened to the family were now closed. After enduring over two years of living with a loaded gun by his side, Nitzberg and his family decided to leave Sonoma County. They journeyed to the east coast with plans to continue to the Soviet Union, but the Soviet government refused their immigration request. It was back to Petaluma and the poultry business.

Nitzberg continued working in the chicken and egg business at several locations in Sonoma County. He died at the Jewish Home in San Francisco in 1984.

Nitzberg is credited with passing on his idealism to his adopted sons Leo and George.

Leo fought in and survived the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s and World War II. George served against Hitler's Germany in World War II, ending up in a Nazi prisoner of war camp.

Early in 1937, as General Franco led the effort to overthrow the democratically-elected government in Spain, Leo Nitzberg, his cousin Bob Rapaport and friend Jack Taub joined the conflict on the side of the Soviet-backed Republicans. The so-called

Kriegsgefangenen-Stammlager:		Kriegsgefangenenlager:		
Name:	Nitzberg	Staatsangehörigkeit:	U.S.A.	
Vorname:	George, P.	Dienstgrad:	Sgt.	
Geburtsort:	Calgary Alberta	Truppenteil:	Komp. usw.:	
Geburtsdatum:	11.4.23	Sivilberuf:	Hühnerfarmer	
Religion:	keine	Matr.Nr. (Stammrolle des Heimatstaates):	39 120 086	
Vorname des Vaters:	Sol	Gefangennahme (Ort und Datum):	28.5.44 Magdel	
Familienname der Mutter:	Raport	Ob gesund, krank, verwundet eingeliefert:	Ges	
Des Kriegsgefangenen	Lichtbild		Nähere Personalbeschreibung	
			Größe	Schaufarbe
			5,7	blond
	Fingerabdruck des rechten Zeigefingers		Besondere Kennzeichen:	
		Name und Anschrift der zu benachrichtigenden Person in der Heimat des Kriegsgefangenen		
		Ehefrau: Gladys Nitzberg		
		Route 1, Box 255		
		Petaluma, Calif.		
		86th St. 6/11/44 Nitzberg		

George Nitzberg was captured and spent time as a German Prisoner of War

Abraham Lincoln Brigade was long on ideals but short on military training, weapons and logistical support. Nitzberg, 17 when he signed up, was one of the youngest members of the group. He was pressed into service as an ambulance driver. Young Nitzberg survived but his two cohorts were killed in Spain.

Leo Nitzberg and brother George both served in World War II. George, after graduating from Petaluma High School in 1942, joined the Army Air Corps. Assigned to a B-17 bomber flying out of England, he was listed as missing in action over Germany when his plane was shot down in May, 1944. A second telegram in June announced that Nitzberg had survived the plane crash by parachuting behind German lines. Unfortunately, he was captured by the Germans and was held in two prison camps but avoided more serious repercussions because his military identification and dog tags made no mention of his Jewish religion.

Leo Nitzberg returned to Sonoma County chicken ranching for a few years and then moved to San Francisco to work as a longshoreman. George and his family lived for many years on the family ranch in Penngrove.

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