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'There's something bad in this town'

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POSTVILLE, IOWA

There is a small-town stillness here, neat houses and kids riding bicycles down quiet, leafy streets. But in the Guatemalan bakery, in church pews, at the meatpacking plant and the kosher deli, the strained voices almost always dwell on the raid that changed everything.

The stillness is not serenity. It's shock.

Scores of heavily armed federal agents last month stormed into Agriprocessors, which produces up to 70 percent of all kosher meat in America. The feds seized almost 400 of the plant's 900 workers in the largest single roundup of illegal immigrants to date, charging about 300 of them with identity theft and using stolen Social Security cards.

Some of those workers have since sued the company, alleging abuse, fraud and sexual coercion. Postville, which once sold T-shirts boasting of the peaceful coexistence of its many cultures, has been left "absolutely shattered," said the Rev. Paul Ouderkirk of the town's St. Bridget's Catholic Church.

The impact of the raid is spreading from northern Iowa to the Twin Cities, New York and beyond, provoking debate among American Jews about whether it's time to reassess how kosher food is produced.

"Our reputation is at stake," said Rabbi Morris Allen of Beth Jacob Congregation in Mendota Heights. "It was embarrassing for us to hear what was being done in order to process kosher food."

To grasp the wide impact of the raids, consider these snapshots:

- Mexican and Guatemalan women whose husbands are scattered in jails across the country, lined up for hymns and hot dish at St. Bridget's, the hems of their frilly native dresses sometimes swaying to reveal the ankle bracelets they must wear to monitor their movements.
- A group of Jewish leaders meeting recently in St. Louis Park to raise money for the Agriprocessors' workers, and vowing to change the way the people who produce kosher foods are treated.
- Rabbi Shalom Gurkov, a Hasidic Jew like the owners of Agriprocessors, standing on the main street in Postville in his long beard and solemn dress, vigorously disputing the accusations of crimes, inhumane treatment and sexual harassment that have been made by former workers.
- New replacement worker Josephina Ortiz, near tears, telling strangers that she came

from California based on promises by Agriprocessors of free rent, food and a good job. Instead, she claims, she found a filthy, expensive apartment and mandatory 14-hour days.

"Please God, somebody help us," said Ortiz, who is in the United States legally. "There's something bad in this town. I don't know how this can happen in the United States of America."

A foundering town

When Aaron Rubashkin opened Agriprocessors in 1987, Postville was foundering.

The Rubashkin family, widely credited with inventing the modern kosher processing plant, decided to cut costs by "bringing the butcher to the livestock," and moved from New York to Iowa. Agriprocessors became one of northern Iowa's largest employers.

Abe Bistritzky, a friend of the Rubashkin family, agreed to talk to the Star Tribune on behalf of the company, which has declined to comment since the raids. He said the illegal workers used fake documents and the company followed the law in verifying paperwork. Most of the workers were happy to have the jobs and were paid and treated fairly, he added.

The Rubashkins "took a town that had balls of hay rolling in it and they built up a community of approximately 120 Jewish families," Bistritzky said. "They built a yeshiva, a Jewish school for kids," gave money to the city, to charity and recently sent food to flood victims.

"The Rubashkin family is charitable. They're not prejudiced; they'll hire any kind of person, anyone who will walk through the door," Bistritzky said. "What happened was when [Jews] came to town, they looked at us like we're Martians. ... They didn't understand the black coats, the white shirts, the beards, the black hats, and they needed to learn about us."

The sight of Hasidic Jews wandering the streets of a small town Iowa initially seemed quaint. But the insular nature of their Lubavitch sect created distrust in the community, exacerbated when the Rubashkins started importing workers of many nationalities, especially Hispanics, as their plant expanded.

In 2000, Stephen Bloom wrote a book, "Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America," detailing the community's conflicts and compromises since the arrival of Agriprocessors. He clearly indicated many of its workers were illegal. Ouderkirk now calls the book "prophetic."

In recent years, there were problems with Agriprocessors in Iowa and elsewhere: pollution violations, fights with labor unions trying to organize, OSHA violations and charges of animal abuse by PETA. This year, the Iowa Division of Labor Services fined the company \$182,000 for 39 health violations.

The federal raid this spring came about based on information from an informant inside the plant who reported witnessing plant managers hire and help workers with fake identity papers. Up to 76 percent of workers did not have correct Social Security numbers, according to the search warrant. The informant also reported seeing managers abuse

workers, including hitting one with a meat hook. One manager also ran a scam in which illegal workers were coerced into buying cars from him, the warrant said.

Some female employees also have alleged they were sexually coerced by managers, according to St. Bridget's Sister Mary McCauley.

Federal officials have declined to comment on the case beyond the details disclosed in their warrant.

Empty-handed and exasperated

St. Bridget's is command central for the battle with Agriprocessors. Guatemalan children scramble on the porch as their mothers line up to get advice, or money, from Ouderkirk and McCauley.

One recent morning, Ouderkirk slipped on his St. Paul medal "for protection" and drove to the plant to get money he said is still owed to arrested workers. He waited for 40 minutes, then left, empty-handed and exasperated.

"Workers openly say they were advised by the plant on how to get false documents," he said. "Now if the government does not take action on that and charge the owners, then this was strictly a raid to threaten and terrorize people."

The situation at Agriprocessors reveals "a lack of respect of human dignity of people other than you," Ouderkirk said. "Politicians who should have been leading the way did nothing."

Bistritzky dismisses most of the worst accusations as fabrications.

"I can't vouch for what happened over 18 years," Bistritzky said. "But maybe [the Rubashkins] should have put a little bit more emphasis to reacting maybe to the town. Maybe they had a lack of communication with people."

A delegation of rabbis

Rabbi Allen of Beth Jacob Congregation knew about Agriprocessors' problems a long time before the raid. He knew the most recent CEO, Sholom Rubashkin, who for a time lived in St. Paul's Highland Park before moving to Postville. After reading an article critical of the company, Allen led a delegation of Twin Cities rabbis to Postville in 2006.

Workers told story after story of long hours, unsafe conditions and wages as low as \$5 an hour. They told him many of the same things now in court documents.

"They appeared to me to do everything possible to maximize the bottom line at the expense of human dignity," Allen said of the plant owners.

The Minnesota rabbis tried to work with the Rubashkins. "I think if they had followed our advice, this may never have happened," he said.

Allen is now leading a national movement to create a certification program called Hekhsher Tzedek, much like fair trade agreements, which would ensure not only that kosher meat is prepared properly, but also that workers are treated fairly.

Some Jewish groups have called for a boycott on Agriprocessors, and many more nationally are debating it. While the raid has caused shortages of kosher meat in some places, the Twin Cities have not yet been affected.

Meanwhile, members of the Twin Cities Jewish community, through synagogues and Jewish Community Action, have raised money for families in Postville affected by the raid, and some families have gone to Iowa to offer their direct help. Many plan to attend a march in Iowa in late July.

"We want the people there to know we care, and that we as Jews have not left them," Allen said.

Empty playgrounds

Postville's playgrounds and parks are empty since the raid, and there are fears that as many as 18 teachers may be dismissed because so many of the students have gone back to Mexico or Guatemala.

Sabor Latina, once the town's most popular restaurant, is only open part-time. The busiest address in town is often the food shelf, where demand has tripled in the past month. Those lined up for beans and bread include Hispanic mothers, many awaiting deportation, and their children, most of whom are American citizens.

Four of them, Guatemalan women, live in one house with their nine children. A 16-year-old named William, who said he worked 10-hour overnight shifts at the plant, is the only one left in a house a few blocks away. He shrugged when asked what he would do next.

Then there are Agriprocessors' new hires, whites and African-Americans, who arrived on the bus. They said they'd been promised a \$100 advance, but few of them got it. So their first stop was the food shelf.

Diane Morris, who was living in a Texas homeless shelter, said the company promised a free furnished apartment for a month. Instead, she was put in a four-bedroom house with 10 men, she said. "Everywhere I've been I've been sexually approached," she said.

She claims she was fired after two days when she went to the company clinic for medications for a mental illness.

Bistritzky said it's possible recruiters in Texas made false promises, but that has stopped.

Some new hires have already caused enough trouble at bars that city officials and police have met with the company to demand better screening.

Bistritzky said the company also has hired an employment agency to do background checks on prospective employees, hired a former U.S. Attorney as compliance officer, and is searching for a new leadership team.

What would he tell Minnesota Jews concerned about the plant?

"I would say to them it's all totally unfounded, for me as an outsider talking on my own behalf," Bistritzky said. "I've been here for a month; I haven't seen any abuse, or any of

the accusations that have been made."

Company officials held a phone conference last week to give their side of the story to an invited group in New York.

Meanwhile, rabbis in the Twin Cities are soliciting donations to help the Rubashkins' employees.

"We're really trying to form a grassroots effort to cause change," said Vic Rosenthal, executive director of JCA. "There is a huge need in Postville."

Jeff Abbas, who runs the local radio station, says he has seen some positive changes since the raids.

"I'd say the relationship between Hispanics and people who grew up around here has gotten stronger because of this," he said. "The people who have grown up around here suddenly realized [the workers] were real people, too."

The town even put up red ribbons on lampposts in support of plant workers.

While he abhors the tactics of immigration officials, Ouderkirk says some good may come of their raid.

"They brought out the cracks in the dam and the folly of our immigration policy," he said.

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