

Raid on Kosher Slaughterhouse Sparks Fears of Meat Shortage Immigration Bust Leaves Plant With Skeleton Staff

By Marissa Brostoff

THE FORWARD Thu. May 15, 2008 <http://www.forward.com/articles/13394/>

In a development with potential repercussions for consumers of kosher meat worldwide, the country's largest kosher slaughterhouse greatly curtailed production this past week after a raid by federal agents led to the arrest of hundreds of undocumented workers.

On May 12, The United States Immigration and Customs Enforcement stormed the AgriProcessors meatpacking plant in Postville, Iowa, detaining nearly 400 of the slaughterhouse's 968 employees and prompting others to go into hiding. According to The Des Moines Register, 154 of those arrested in the raid have been charged with criminal offenses relating to identity theft. Most of those taken into custody come from Guatemala or Mexico; a few are from Eastern Europe or Israel.

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Because of increases in the prices of corn, which is used to feed cattle, the price of meat in general is already high. Kosher meat prices, which always skew higher than nonkosher prices, are likely to climb even higher if production at AgriProcessors continues at diminished levels.

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Mass arrests of suspected undocumented workers at slaughterhouses have been common in recent years and have temporarily shut down or drastically slowed production at major nonkosher plants. But the raid on AgriProcessors may have an unusually severe ripple effect for consumers, as the company produces an enormous share of the kosher meat on the market.

Rabbi Seth Mandel, the Orthodox Union's head of kosher slaughter, estimated that AgriProcessors produces around 55% of glatt kosher beef sold in the United States and that the plant in Postville produces 85% of AgriProcessors beef. The company also produces the greatest share of glatt kosher poultry on the market.

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"There is no channel to provide legal labor for these kinds of operations," said Lourdes Gouveia, a professor of sociology at the University of Nebraska who studies immigrant labor in the meatpacking industry.

Because wages are generally so low and conditions in the plants so difficult, meatpacking companies that have been raided by immigration enforcement agencies often hire undocumented workers all over again. In other cases, slaughterhouses have recruited workers from inner-city slums, or refugees who are in the United States legally but lack work permits.

That AgriProcessors likely employs undocumented workers is no secret, both because the practice is so common among slaughterhouses nationwide and because the company has been the target of frequent media attention due to accusations of labor and animal-rights abuses. Indeed, lawyers for the company tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade a federal appeals court last year that workers in its Brooklyn distribution center did not have the right to unionize, because many of them were illegal aliens.

"The big issue wasn't whether this would happen, but when it would happen," said Stephen Bloom, a professor of journalism at the University of Iowa who in 2001 published a book about the impact that AgriProcessors had on the once homogenously white and Christian town of Postville. "It was the worst-kept secret in Iowa."

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For Jewish activists who advocate tying ethics standards to the requirements of kashrut, the latest incident at AgriProcessors is more fuel for the fire.

"For too long, we've ignored that production of kosher food has taken place in a world where we're concerned about the ritual aspects of food preparation and not the ethical considerations," said Rabbi Morris Allen, director of the Hechsher Tzedek Commission, which is affiliated with the Conservative movement. Other kosher consumers simply wish for less controversy mixed in with their meat.

"I think the general sense is that they wish Rubashkin would do what it has to so that it does not wind up in the news all the time," Mandel said.

In Heated Meeting, Orthodox Activists Spar With Kosher Meat Company

By Marissa Brostoff

THE FORWARD Thu. Jun 19, 2008

<http://www.forward.com/articles/13619/>

When two progressively minded Orthodox rabbinical students sat down last week at a Manhattan kosher dairy restaurant with four Lubavitch businessmen, radically different segments of the Orthodox world collided, and sparks flew.

The rabbinical students and a young rabbi who accompanied them were from Uri L'Tzedek, a liberal Orthodox activist group organizing a boycott of Agriprocessors, the country's largest kosher meatpacking company. The businessmen were tied to that company, which has come under fire for alleged labor violations.

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Late last month, Uri L'Tzedek leaders released an open letter to Agriprocessors owner Aaron Rubashkin asking that the company obey all applicable labor laws and that it empower a third party to monitor its progress. It cited allegations that the plant has hired child labor, paid its workers below minimum wage and employed supervisors who mistreated employees.

The letter, whose 1,300 signatories included prominent Jewish leaders from a variety of different denominations and organizations, called for a boycott on Agriprocessors products, and on restaurants that sell those products, until demands for reform were met.

Uri L'Tzedek's willingness to organize a boycott seems to have succeeded in persuading the often unreachable Agriprocessors leadership to sit down and talk. The meeting marked the first time since the raid that Agriprocessors has agreed to talk with any of the Jewish groups calling for reform at the plant.

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According to both parties, the conversation was frequently acrimonious.

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"There's no reason to believe that substantive change is about to happen," said Morris Allen, head of the Conservative movement's Heksher Tzedek initiative, which spearheaded the efforts within the Jewish religious community to reform conditions at Agriprocessors but has not called for a boycott of the plant.

"We met with Agriprocessors extensively throughout fall and winter in 2006, and are still awaiting their response from the recommendations we made," Allen added.

The Uri L'Tzedek representatives have been in touch with Jim Martin, a compliance officer the company hired earlier this month to monitor its workplace conditions. Martin is authorized to speak to the government about violations he finds in the plant, and Uri L'Tzedek hopes he will be authorized to report to the public, as well.

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Op-Ed Contributor

Dark Meat

By SHMUEL HERZFELD

THE NEW YORK TIMES August 5, 2008

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/06/opinion/06herzfeld.html?em=&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1219759228-keEvCplbpA+d0cj6MKH/8g>

ACCORDING to the Jewish calendar we are now in the month of Av, a period of increasingly intense mourning that culminates with a total fast on the Ninth of Av, which this year coincides with Sunday, Aug. 10.

One of the customary practices in these nine days is the avoidance of meat: it's the way we commemorate the destruction of the Temple, where daily animal sacrifices were once brought.

Refraining from food is symbolic, of course. The idea is not just to avoid meat but to limit ourselves so that we can better focus on the spiritual.

Unfortunately, this year kosher meat has become a different type of symbol, one not of mourning and spiritual devotion but of ridicule, embarrassment and hypocrisy. In May in Postville, Iowa, immigration officials raided Agriprocessors Inc., the largest kosher meat packing plant in the country.

What began as an immigration sting, however, quickly took on larger dimensions. News reports and government documents have described abusive practices at Agriprocessors against workers, including minors. Children as young as 13 were said to be wielding knives on the killing floor; some teenagers were working 17-hour shifts, six days a week.

This poses a grave problem and calls into question whether the food processed in the plant qualifies as kosher.

You see, there is precedent for declaring something nonkosher on the basis of how employees are treated. Yisroel Salanter, the great 19th-century rabbi, is famously believed to have refused to certify a matzo factory as kosher on the grounds that the workers were being treated unfairly. In addition to the hypocrisy of calling something kosher when it is being sold and produced in an unethical manner, we have to take into account disturbing information about the plant that has come to light.

The affidavit filed in the United States District Court of Northern Iowa, for instance, alleges that an employee was physically abused by a rabbi on the floor of the plant. If true, this calls into question the reliability and judgment of the rabbi in charge of making sure the food was kosher.

What's more, two workers who oversaw the poultry and beef division were recently arrested for helping illegal immigrants falsify documents. If they were willing to break national immigration laws, one could reasonably ask whether they would be likely to show the same lack of concern for Jewish dietary laws.

Hebrew National used to run a commercial that said: "We answer to a Higher Authority." Well, we do. We need to express shame and embarrassment about the reports coming out of Iowa, and we need to actively work to change these matters. Then we should ask ourselves if our behavior and our values need improvement. Only if we truly think about these issues will we truly be keeping kosher.

Shmuel Herzfeld, rabbi of Ohev Sholom-The National Synagogue, is a member of the Rabbinical Council of America.

Animal-rights Expert Endorses Kosher Plant

THE FORWARD Fri. Jul 07, 2006

<http://www.forward.com/articles/animal-rights-expert-endorses-kosher-plant-2/>

"They have to learn to keep their process good," she added.

Grandin's positive remarks came as a welcome piece of good news for AgriProcessors, which has come under fire on a number of fronts since the slaughtering controversy. In May, the Forward published an article about the working conditions of the largely immigrant work force at the Iowa plant. The main union of Conservative rabbis has since formed a task force to investigate the situation.

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Company officials said they were pleased by Grandin's findings.

"Given her commitment to animals, her pleasure is high praise and validates AgriProcessors' humane treatment of its animals," said Mike Thomas, a spokesman for AgriProcessors.

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She has visited more than 30 kosher beef plants during her career, and has designed equipment to aid in humane slaughter. Moreover, Grandin, who is autistic, is renowned for her sensitivity to animals.

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During her tour of the plant last week, Grandin went through the entire slaughter process, from the barns to the kill floor.

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In the clearest sign that things were operating smoothly, Grandin said that the cows were not making any noises.

"I didn't hear any cows mooing," Grandin said. "When they do things wrong, cows moo."

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