

Aftershocks Follow Immigration Raid; More Scrutiny for Slaughterhouse

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Body

Two decades ago, the Rubashkin family of Brooklyn opened up a kosher **slaughterhouse** amid the cornfields of Iowa.

The bearded, fedora-wearing strangers quickly transformed Postville, Iowa, into its own small-town melting pot. Immigrants from Guatemala and Mexico began arriving in great numbers to work at the **slaughterhouse**. The town was soon home to churches and temples, and grocery store shelves were stocked with tortillas and bagels.

Lately, though, the Rubashkins' grand cultural experiment seems to have lost any chance at a feel-good ending.

The family's Iowa business, Agriprocessors -- the nation's biggest supplier of kosher meat -- was **raided** by **immigration** agents in May. Nearly 400 workers, mostly Guatemalans, were swept up and jailed, and they will probably be deported as illegal immigrants.

Labor organizers and workers have accused the company of exploiting employees and tolerating managers' abusive behavior.

On Tuesday, the Iowa Labor Commissioner's Office accused Agriprocessors of 57 cases of violating child-labor laws. The alleged violations included having minors working in prohibited occupations and with prohibited tools, and exceeding allowable working hours.

A few Jewish groups have questioned whether the plant, given its problems, should keep its kosher certification.

It all adds up to a mess for a family that has never sought attention, and now feels it is being attacked unfairly, especially by the media.

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"The press? Terrible!" the family's patriarch, Aaron Rubashkin, told a reporter with the Jewish news service JTA during a rare interview in June. He disputed allegations that the company knowingly hired illegal immigrants and children and also tolerated abusive conditions, calling them all lies.

"I wish everybody would be treated like we treat people," he said.

Aaron Rubashkin and his wife, Rivka, fled the Soviet Union after World War II and settled in Brooklyn, a world center of Hasidic Judaism. Rivka's uncles, the family has said, had been imprisoned in Siberia because of their religious beliefs.

In the 1950s, Aaron founded a kosher meat market in the city's Borough Park section. The family prospered in America.

Then, in 1987, the Rubashkins made an unusual leap: Looking for a way to bolster an unreliable supply of kosher beef, the family bought an abandoned nonkosher meatpacking plant in tiny Postville.

Two of Aaron's sons moved to Postville to oversee the plant, and a steady stream of Hasidic families followed. Soon, Postville, then a town of around 1,500 people, was drawing immigrant laborers, too.

Suddenly, the town was infused with rabbis and other Jews, Guatemalans and Mexicans, expatriates from former Soviet republics -- and a host of new ethnic tensions.

The town became a regular stop for out-of-town reporters looking for a story about America's diversity. A documentary crew visited. National Geographic did a pictorial. Journalism professor Stephen Bloom wrote a book, "Postville: A Clash of Cultures in Heartland America."

Amid it all, the company was a huge success, with popular brands such as Aaron's Best and Rubashkin's. By 2006, Agriprocessors had a second plant in Nebraska, run in partnership with the Oglala Sioux Tribe, and annual revenue of \$250 million.

In 2004, however, the animal rights group PETA recorded a gruesome video of the company's operation that showed cattle staggering about in apparent pain after their throats had been slit and their tracheas partly removed. Agriprocessors, while defending its techniques as a religious ritual, agreed to change some practices.

Agriprocessors also faced a lawsuit filed by a bankruptcy trustee overseeing the remnants of a New York health and beauty supply company.

The trustee said the company, Allou Distributors, had a host of suspicious transactions on its books, including \$2.9 million in unexplained payments to Agriprocessors. The lawsuit demanded Agriprocessors return the payments, which it asserted were part of the scheme to hide Allou's assets.

Agriprocessors insisted it did nothing wrong and had been supplying Allou with surplus meat, but it agreed last summer to pay \$1.4 million to settle the case.

Aaron's son, Moshe Rubashkin, pleaded guilty this year to storing hazardous waste without a permit at a defunct, family-owned textile plant in Allentown, Pa. His son pleaded guilty to lying to federal agents during the investigation. They have yet to be sentenced.

Aaron Rubashkin, 80, could not be reached for an interview. Supporters say he and his family are just unsophisticated businessmen who made some mistakes as their company grew.

"These are simple people. They are a family of butchers," said Dovid Eliezrie, a California rabbi who has been assisting the family with the media.

Scott Frotman, a spokesman for the Food and Commercial Workers union, has a different take. He called the company's treatment of its immigrant work force "morally reprehensible."

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"They blame the media. They blame us. They refuse to accept responsibility for anything that is going on in that plant," he said.

State and federal investigators are looking into alleged violations at the company, such as not paying workers, improperly using hazardous chemicals and not having alarms that employees could hear. The Rubashkins have not been charged.

"We are God-fearing people, and we believe in the American system and we believe it will ultimately turn out okay," Getzel Rubashkin, 24, a grandson of the family's patriarch and an employee at Agriprocessors, said in a recent interview.

He also said the family has not given up on Postville, which he has called home since age 10.

"There are people who would like to see us leave, but on the whole we have very warm relations," he said.

Graphic

IMAGE; By Charlie Neibergall -- Associated Press; Hundreds of people in Postville, Iowa, marched for immigrants' rights in late July. An **immigration raid** in May resulted in nearly 400 arrests.

IMAGE; By Spencer S. Hsu -- The Washington Post; Agriprocessors Inc., the nation's largest kosher meat producer, has struggled to resume operations after the **raid**.

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