

## Maintaining Yiddishkeit on the Prairie

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### Introduction

*Note: Unless otherwise indicated all quotes are from <http://tinyurl.com/6mv6y2> by Isadore Papermaster, a son of Rav Binyamin Papermaster. This document is available in pdf format at <http://tinyurl.com/566uyk>*

In two earlier articles we recounted how Rabbi Benyamin Papermaster (1860 – 1934), a *Musmach* of the yeshiva in Kovno under the direction of Rav Yitzchok Elchanan Spector, the world-famous Kovno Rov, ended up becoming the Rov of the Jewish community of Grand Forks, North Dakota in 1891. Rabbi Papermaster's duties included more than just being the rabbi of this small Jewish community. He served also as its chazzan, shochet, and mohel. In short, he *was* Yiddishkeit for Jews residing in North Dakota and surrounding areas.

### Jews in Far Flung Places

The **Red River** of the North is a North American river that flows northward through the Red River Valley and forms the border between the U.S. states of Minnesota and North Dakota before continuing into Manitoba, Canada. It flows through several major urban areas along its path including Fargo-Moorhead and Greater Grand Forks in the United States and Winnipeg in Canada.

By the end of the nineteenth century Jews had settled in many small towns on both sides of the Red River and were found in such towns as Hillsboro, Mayville, Larimore, Minton, Grafton, Cavalier, Hamilton, Pembina, and Neche in North Dakota as well as the towns of Crookston, St. Hillaire, Red Lake Falls, Thief River Falls, and Bemidji in Minnesota.

And as the Great Northern Railway was building its branch lines towards the Canadian border, it was not surprising to find one or two Jewish families establishing themselves at every point along those lines. Most of those had their beginning in Grand Forks and looked to the Rabbi to supply their Jewish needs. [Rabbi Papermaster provided them with] kosher meat and fowl, supplies for Passover, prayer books for the children, [and] t'fillin for the boys.

These families did not always prosper. Their beginning years were always difficult years. On many a trip my father made to such families for the special occasion of a bris, it was not alone that the family could not pay his expenses but, in addition, he had to provide bedding and other necessities for the mother and

child. This was not an uncommon occurrence. While most such families were everlastingly grateful and eventually made up for such expenses, it did occur that some did forget that part of their indebtedness. But his service had to continue nevertheless.

Whether a family paid or not, Matzos and other Passover necessities had to be sent them.

As one can imagine, travel in and around North Dakota in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century was not easy and at times hazardous. Once Rabbi Papermaster almost lost his life on his way to perform a *bris*. An old gentile recounted the following story to Isadore Papermaster, a son of the rabbi.

In a gathering snow storm on a cold winter's day, he had gone out into his field to get his cattle in before the storm broke. Off at some distance from his home he saw a man who seemed to be lost, as he was going around in a circle. He called to him but the man did not answer and was floundering in the already deepening snow. As he got closer he shouted for the man to stay where he was and reaching him he took Father to his home. My father told him that he had gotten off at the station about one half mile and finding no conveyance there to meet him, he decided to walk the distance to a near-by Jewish family where he was to perform a *bris* for a newborn son. After starting out, the storm came up and he lost his way.

This farmer then hitched a team and drove him to this Jewish family who lived about a mile up the very road. "It was a lucky thing for your father that I had to go out for my cattle that day, because by the time I got back after taking your father to that Jew's house it sure was a real Dakota blizzard."

Rabbi Papermaster was instrumental in keeping the flame of Yiddishkeit burning in the small towns where Jews resided. For example, during the early part of the twentieth century there were about 15 Jewish families in Devil's Lake, 30 to 40 in Minot, and 15 in Williston. In addition, there were individual Jewish families living in the smaller towns and villages. There was only one place for these families to turn when they needed assistance with any Jewish matter – Rabbi Papermaster of Grand Forks.

Sol Gordon and his family were probably the first Jews to reside in Minot. In a letter to Isadore Papermaster he wrote

I was fresh from the Yeshiva and I wanted Minot to have a good shochet and Rabbi. My sister-in-law Helen spoke of Rabbi Papermaster of Grand Forks as the chief [rabbi] of the state of North Dakota. I wrote to him for help. He wasted no time and came personally to Minot to tell us that there is a teacher in Grand Forks who is a good shochet and on his recommendation we engaged Mr. Diamond.

I believe that the next time we met was at a bris for the first of Mr. Diamond's children. Your father brought me a set of Talmud and told me, "You are next to my heart. Study and do not forget our Torah. Spend much time on it."

The next time was when he organized the *Chevra Kadisha* for us in January of 1918.

It is important to point out that Rabbi Papermaster did not require compensation from those whom he served. If people paid him for what he did for them, then fine; and, if not, this was also fine. Mr. Gordon wrote in his letter to I. Papermaster

Another experience I can recall with your father was in Butte, North Dakota. About 1924, I wrote him that a Jewish boy was born there and they required a Mohel, but the people were poor and could not pay. I offered to pay his expense but he wrote back by special delivery, "I serve the Jewish people and do not want pay." He felt bad about my letter. He came on his own expense and also brought roast chicken not only for himself but also for all of us and the family. It was then I found out that he always served his people [with or without compensation] in that part of the country in the horse and buggy days.

It was Rabbi Papermaster who kept the Minot Jews as Jews for many years.

### **Building the Jewish Community of Grand Forks**

When Rabbi Papermaster came to Grand Forks in 1891, about 60 Jewish families resided there, but there was no organized Jewish community per se. Shortly after his appointment as Rov, the community began building a synagogue.

There were some former yeshiva students among the early pioneering Jews of Grand Forks. For them Rabbi Papermaster organized and taught a daily Gemara shiur for them. In the summer months Shachris began at an early hour and the shiur followed. In the winter Shachris began later, so the shiur was given in the evening.

He also gave a shiur in Chaiyei Adom one evening a week for those who did not have enough knowledge to benefit from a Gemara shiur. This shiur was very well attended.

The education of the youth of the community was always my father's chief concern. From the very beginning of his service in Grand Forks, the community was never without a Hebrew teacher. As near as I can recall at least 12 men served in that capacity during my father's lifetime. In the beginning, it was natural that the European Cheder type of teacher was engaged, but as the community progressed a more modernized method of teaching was adopted, for a time even the *Ivrith B'Ivrith* method was tried but had to give way later to an English translated form of teaching the language. My father always went along with those changes, only that he wanted to make certain that the children could read their Hebrew well and understood what they were reading.

Not long after his arrival in Grand Forks Rabbi Papermaster was instrumental in organizing a Chevra Kadisha along the lines of similar organizations existing in Europe with a Gabbai Rishon and a Gabbai Sheni. Rabbi Papermaster served as the secretary of the Chevra Kadisha during his lifetime.

There was also an annual Chevra Kadisha Se'udah which, as is known, depicts the passing of Jacob of Israel. The first such dinners was held at our home. There was a feast fit for a king, followed by a learned discourse by my father, then followed by others, too, who were learned in the Talmud, such as Mr. Ziskin. Chasidic songs and dances were always part of the entertainment that followed. This was an annual affair.

The early Jewish pioneers who were members of the Chevra Kadisha were a hardy race. Despite all sorts of inclement weather - rain, snow or sleet, unbearable heat or freezing cold - none shirked his duty, even if he had to plow through three or four feet of snow to reach his destination!

### **An Independent Rabbi**

Initially Rabbi Papermaster received a salary from his congregation. However, this changed after the following incident.

A member of one of the German Jewish families who resided in Grand Forks passed away. The family wanted this person buried in "regular clothing," rather than in *Tachrichim*, the traditional simple white burial shrouds. While Rabbi Papermaster would have preferred that the deceased be buried in *Tachrichim*, he felt that there was no halachic basis to deny the family's wishes. However, his congregation and the Chevra Kadisha insisted that they would not allow the man to be buried in the shul cemetery if he was not buried in traditional garments. Furthermore, Rabbi Papermaster was told that he was not allowed to officiate at the man's funeral. The end result was that the man was indeed buried in "regular clothing" in a plot adjoining the synagogue's cemetery. Rabbi Papermaster attended the funeral but did not officiate.

That experience taught my father that he must not allow himself to be dictated to by a narrow-minded officialdom. He decided then that he would prefer to earn his livelihood through the medium of fees for services rendered by individual, and, when he served the congregation, it would also be on a fee basis. He refused to accept a salary as compensation. He argued that if he accepted a salary the congregation would have the right to dictate his service to some, and also to deny his service to such as would displease the officers without regard to Jewish law and reason. He decided to reserve that right for himself. And so it remained for the rest of his life.

## **In the Forefront of Everything Jewish in Grand Forks**

The home of Rabbi and Mrs. Papermaster served as the focal point of virtually all of the Jewish activities that took place in Grand Forks.

Saturday evenings were always evenings of pleasure at our home in the early days. The men would gather after their evening meal to sing the Chasidic songs and dance their Chasidic dances, each one would vie with one another in performing their special Rabbi's favorite song and dance. Songs would vary from the Friday night Zmiroths to High Holiday tunes. Boiled and dried peas and peanuts were served; also, someone managed to see that there was a small keg of beer on hand for the refreshments.

Succoths [sic], another occasion for public enjoyment that required preparations at our home, was another outstanding holiday. I believe that my father had the first portable Succah. He had a carpenter make up three walls that could be joined together with large hooks and screw eyes which were in turn attached to our house. This was topped by a latticed roof over which a thatching cover of corn stalks or willow branches was placed. These branches were brought in from nearby farms.

Inside the Succah the entire congregation would gather, particularly on the first two days. The Kiddush was said, and a few neighbors would come over with their dinners, so that the men folk could eat their meals in the Succah.

In my later years as I look back to the Grand Forks Jewish community as it lived its Jewish life, it reminded me of the description of Jewish life in East European communities as pictured by such Yiddish writers as Sholom Aleichem, Peretz, Mendele the Book Seller, and so forth. Second Avenue was known as the Jewish street. The odor of fresh baked loaves of bread permeated the street on Fridays. On summer days with the windows open, one could hear the voices of the children singing in the Cheder, the Shir Hashirim, the Maftir or the portion of the week.

Rabbi Papermaster passed away quietly while taking a nap on the first day of Succos in 1934 at the age of 75. In 1946 the Rebbetzin passed away at age 78. So it was that Rabbi Benyamin and Rebbetzin Chaya Papermaster did their utmost to maintain and foster Jewish observance amongst the Jews of North Dakota.