

## Forty-Three Years Serving as a Rov in North Dakota - I

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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>*

Rabbi Binyamin (Benjamin) Papermaster (1860 - 1934) served as an Orthodox rabbi in North Dakota for 43 years. On more than one occasion, when traveling to a rural Jewish home to assist a Jewish family with a religious matter, he had occasion to spend the night in the home of a non-Jew. On one such occasion he came down from his bedroom and was shocked to see the farmer's wife wearing *tephillin*!

“Where did you get these?” he almost shouted at her. “I bought them from a Jewish peddler.” He offered to buy them back. “Oh no,” she said, “I paid twenty-five dollars for them and I’ll never sell them. I saw the Jewish peddler wear them one day and when I asked him what he was wearing them for he said he wears them for his rheumatism. I was troubled with rheumatism myself so I bought them from him, and when I wear them my rheumatism does not bother me.”

Despite all of Rabbi Papermaster's efforts to buy the *tephillin*, this woman refused to part with them.

Such was just one of the unusual experiences that Rav Papermaster had while serving the Jews of North Dakota. The reader may wonder how and why a *Talmud Chocham* like Rabbi Papermaster, who had studied under the famous Kovner Rov, Yitzchok Elchanan Spector (1817 -1896), ended up settling in a place not known for its Yiddishkeit.

### His Life in Europe

Binyomin Papermeister was born in the fall of 1860 in the village of Anolova in the vicinity of Kovno, Lithuania, then part of the Russian Empire. He was the seventh child of a family of nine children, four sons of which he was the youngest, and five daughters of Nissen and Etel Papiermeister, as the family name was then pronounced. Nissen Papiermeister was a concessionaire of the creamery interests of the Polish nobleman, landowner of both the village and surrounding lands. The children received their first training in the rudiments of Judaism from their parents particularly their father, who had himself been a student at the famous Slobodker Yashiva in Kovno. [The reader should not confuse what

Isadore Papermaster refers to as the “Slobodker Yeshiva” with the famed yeshiva *Knesses Yisroel* founded in 1884 by Rav Nosson Tzvi Finkel (the Alter). It is this yeshiva that most people are referring to when they use the terminology “the Slobodka Yeshiva.”]

At age seven or eight Binyamin was enrolled in yeshiva in Kovno. He came home twice a year, for Pesach and the Yomim Noraim and Sukkos.

At this time the Russian government required that certain hours of the yeshiva day be set aside for the study of the Russian language. As a result, Rabbi Papermaster learned to read and write Russian fluently. In addition, besides being fluent in Yiddish, he also spoke German, Lithuanian and Polish.

At the time of my father's boyhood, the Haskallah movement had already commenced to penetrate the walls of the ultra-Orthodox Yeshiva where even the study of the Prophets were [sic] prohibited. My father often related how he and other students would keep the Tanach hidden within the Talmud volume from prying eyes of their teachers in order to study this literature clandestinely. To read Isaiah or Jeremiah with the Malbim commentary was blasphemy. But my father loved it.

At the young age of 18 Binyamin received semicha! He was now required to report for military service in the Russian army. Through a variety of stratagems he was able to avoid being arrested and inducted into the army until the period he was to serve expired.

In 1880 Rabbi Papermaster married Ethel Sudarsky, and was hired by his father-in-law as a *Malamud* to teach his nephews. However, the income he received was not sufficient for him to support his wife and growing family. (Four sons were born to Ethel and Benjamin during their first 10 years of marriage.)

He was advised by his older brother to study to become a shochet and a mohel, and at age 24 he received his kabbalah in shechita from the Kovno Rabbinate. In addition, Rabbi Papermaster was blessed with a beautiful voice and talent for public speaking. He was thus an accomplished teacher, shochet, mohel, *Darshon*, and Hazzan.

Yet despite these accomplishments and talents the matter of providing a livelihood for his growing family was still a serious problem. The thoughts about America, however, did not particularly enter his mind in that regard. It was only when he reminded himself about his experiences during his few years of evading military service in Czarist Russia [that he thought about immigrating to America]. He vowed that his sons would never serve the Czar. He realized that his only answer to the problem was America.

### **Sent to America by the Kovno Rov**

It was in the late summer of 1890, just before the High Holidays, during the month of Ellul of that year that a messenger arrived at our home in Alexote, in the province of Kovno, that my father was to report without delay to the office of the Chief Rabbinate in Kovno. The messenger bringing no details of the reason for that summons quite naturally created a good deal of excitement. All he [the messenger] could say was that the call came directly from the Chief Rabbi himself and that my father was to return with him. Fears of one sort or another were ever present among Jewish families in Czarist Russia, even in the case of a call from so eminent and honorable a place as the Chief Rabbinate, which in itself was also a government recognized institution.

Rabbi Papermaster immediately set out for the offices of Rav Spector, the Chief Rabbi of Kovno. When he got there he was introduced to a Mr. Zurakov and his family, who were from the Ukraine and were on their way to Fargo, North Dakota. They had stopped in Kovno to seek a recommendation for someone to accompany them to America and serve as their teacher, shochet, mohel, and chazzan. The Kovno Rov thought that Rabbi Papermaster was the ideal candidate and suggested that he accompany this family to America.

Rabbi Papermaster naturally was somewhat taken aback by this suggestion and replied that he would have to discuss it with his wife before making any decision. He found the possibility of going to America exciting. By going to America he would be getting away from the hated Russian Czarist government, insuring that his four sons would never have to serve in the Russian army. This in the end was the deciding factor in the family's decision to immigrate to America.

The fact that Fargo, North Dakota, was this family's [the Zurakov's] destination and that it was two thousand miles west of New York [City] where several members of my mother's family had already emigrated, or that North Dakota was then a very sparsely settled country generally, did not even enter his mind. All that mattered was that it was America, the land of the free.

When he received a personal consultation with Rabbi Isaac Elchanan, he was rather plainly told that not only must he consider this opportunity for himself, but rather that it was his Jewish duty to go with these people who urgently required the services he had been trained to render, particularly to the scattered Jewish community of America. This I believe had much to do not only with his decision to go with these people but also to remain in North Dakota for the balance of his lifetime. He often repeated this statement, which was used by community leaders later when he had opportunities to go to larger Jewish communities. He had awe-inspiring regard for the Chief Rabbi of Kovno.

### **North Dakota**

Rabbi Papermaster indeed made the decision to go to North Dakota. However, it was decided that his wife and four sons would stay behind until he got settled and then follow

later. Sadly, Ethel Papermaster never joined her husband in America, since she passed away a few months after her husband arrived in America.

Arriving in New York City on January 2, 1891,

he was met there by a married brother and a married sister, who objected to his continuing the trip to North Dakota. They used every available argument, the distance from New York, pleading with him that the country was wild, chiefly inhabited by Indians and even questioned the possibility of any Jews living there. They offered to compensate [him] for the expenses of his voyage, but it was all to no avail. He had promised the Kovno Rabbi that he would go with these people to their destination and go he must. After visiting with family and relatives, he proceeded on his way to Fargo, North Dakota, arriving there about the end of January, 1891.

Fargo turned out to be the Jewish wasteland that his New York relatives had predicted. While there were a few Jewish families there, there was not even the semblance of a Jewish community. There was no synagogue, and the possibility of having a minyan on Shabbos was unthinkable. Furthermore, there was no way that such a small number of Jews could support a rabbi. Apparently the relatives of the Zurakovs who resided in Fargo had exaggerated the state of the Jewish community for selfish reasons. Indeed, things were so bad, that the Zurakovs themselves did not remain long in Fargo.

Rabbi Papermaster knew that he could not stay in Fargo.

But one thing he was certain of and that was that his future was bound up with this country to which he had just come, and he began to look about for the possibility of making a change. Before taking any new step he resolved to become a citizen of the United States, and he filed for a Declaration of Intention in Cass County, North Dakota, on March 23rd, 1891.

Added to his problems was the sad news that his wife had passed away on March 28. It is an understatement to say that he was now quite despondent. Nonetheless, when told that there was a thriving Jewish community in Grand Forks, about 75 miles north of Fargo, that was seeking a rabbi, he decided, despite more than a bit of skepticism, that he would go and have a look for himself.

Arriving in Grand Forks not long before Pesach, he was encouraged to find that there were about 60 Jewish families residing there who were interested in having a rabbi help them establish a viable Jewish community. Therefore, he decided that he spend Pesach in Grand Forks and see if staying was indeed a viable option.

He was not too certain about the possibility of being successfully accepted there. He found that most of the families were originally from the Ukraine section of Russia, a few Roumanian families and Galician (now Polish) families. There were only five or six families of German origin. As is well known, Jews coming from

southern Russia, Poland and Romania were strongly influenced by their Chasidic background.

Their Yiddish dialect was different; they pronounced the Hebrew differently than in the Lithuanian pronunciation. The Rabbi felt that his pronunciation of the Hebrew in the prayers and the reading of the Torah would sound as strange to them as theirs sounded to him. He even had some difficulty in understanding their ordinary daily conversation, but he decided that if he were going to remain there he would have to adjust himself to their dialect and customs, although he drew the line on certain superstitions of which I may write later, that some of the families brought with them from the old country. He was the only Lithuanian in a community of “Russians” who prided themselves with the fact that they used the Nusach S’fard.

It was with these uncertainties that Rabbi Papermaster began assisting the Jewish community of Grand Forks for the upcoming Pesach holiday that was less than two weeks away. Would this Lithuanian trained Talmud Chocham be able to win over these Russian Jews and serve as their Rov? Only time would tell.

To be continued.