

“Holy Moses”

BERYL BEARMAN GORDON

My grandfather, Moses Menahem Zieve, came to this country in the early 1880's from Lithuania where he had been a shochet, a ritual slaughterer. He left behind, to follow him some six years later, his wife and four children: three boys and one girl, my Mother.

After living in America for six years, he decided against pursuing his profession of shechitah. His visits to slaughtering establishments in New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles led him to the conclusion that his American coreligionists — he considered them “goyim,” non-Jews, by comparison with what he had known in Europe — would not or could not appreciate his meticulousness nor accept his high standards. He settled in Minneapolis and, for a livelihood, turned to peddling.

Grandfather's “territory” was the area out of Northfield, Minnesota, forty miles south of Minneapolis. When he set out on his trips he carried with him on his wagon, in addition to his goods for sale, his own utensils for preparing meals in accordance with the requirements of Kashruth, ritual purity. Many week-ends he could not return to Minneapolis and spent the Sabbath in the home of a friendly farmer in Northfield. He would arrive at the farmer's house on Friday — or possibly Thursday night — in time to slaughter a chicken, do his Sabbath cooking, and make his personal preparations for the Sabbath. In the farmer's home, from sundown on Friday until dark on Saturday evening, he observed the Sabbath in the traditional manner. At twilight on Saturday a child in the family would go outside to watch for three stars and then come in to advise him: “You can smoke now, Moses.”

The German immigrants who settled the area around Northfield worshipped together in a community church. For lack of funds, they had no regular preacher. On Sunday mornings, then, in this community church, my grandfather occupied the pulpit and preached to this German-speaking congregation. His language? A carefully selected non-Hebraic Yiddish. His subjects? The Torah portion of the week. And in serving this Christian community over many months, he won their gratitude — and an affectionate but reverent title. They called him “Holy Moses.”

The author — Mrs. Theodore H. Gordon — makes her home in Merion Station, Pa.