

Congressional Hearing on Postville

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The July 24 hearing of the House Subcommittee on Immigration regarding “the arrest, prosecution, and conviction of 297 undocumented workers” consisted of three panels, followed by a press conference. The first panel had four members of Congress: three spoke about negative effects of the raids in their states; one spoke about positive effects. The second panel had only two members, spokespersons for ICE and the DOJ. The last one was a panel of experts: I was there as a court-certified linguist contracted for the May 12-22 hearings in Waterloo, followed by two law professors, and a victim of a vicious crime of identity theft perpetrated some time ago on her family by a criminal alien.

The press conference featured Father Ouderkirk and an agribusiness spokesman. The Father, who was recalled to St. Bridget’s Catholic Church in Postville after the raid, described how 15 years of pastoral work were destroyed in one day by a raid whose pain will last a generation. The spokesman highlighted the damage of the raids on American workers and employers, and warned that if the raids continue, there will come a point of collapse for the industry, with severe impact on consumers.

Of those summoned, only Father Ouderkirk and I were eye witnesses: the Father, of the aftermath in Postville; and I of the judicial process in Waterloo. ICE and DOJ representatives had only indirect knowledge of these events.

Congresswoman Jackson Lee elicited testimony that the only relationship, between the panel’s victim of ID theft and the Postville case, is that in the first instance ICE repeatedly declined to prosecute a vicious criminal alien, as part of a tendency not to bother with few individuals, whereas in Postville they vigorously sought 700 warrants against victimless workers.

Ranking Member King elicited an opinion from the ICE spokesperson, that my referring to the National Cattle Congress in Waterloo, where some 300 illegal workers were detained, as a “concentration camp” was offensive to the Jewish people. I was not given an opportunity to reply to that statement, taken out of context by the media and sensationalized by government representatives.

I stated in my essay “The NCC is a 60-acre cattle fairground that had been transformed into a sort of concentration camp or detention center.” I added in a Univision interview (“Aquí y Ahora,” Tuesday, July 22, 10pm EST) that the NCC could not be called a “detention center” because it was not certified by the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Prisons, like all federal detention centers are.

The federal court asked the DOJ, at the start of proceedings, to send an inspector from Washington to certify the NCC, but the DOJ refused. Since they were not supposed to keep the detainees in uncertified premises, they quickly charged them and bused them out to different certified jails across the state.

But the court needed them there, accessible to legal counsel. Instead, they were sent hours away, while each lawyer tracked down an average 17 clients through sometimes inaccurate jail lists, and lined up for visiting hours over the weekend, only to be ill-prepared for Monday court. This was one in a series of irregularities imposed on the federal court, and which the court had to accept because it was already committed on this fast-tracking operation, albeit based on very different implied warranties.

Never did I make any comparison to any other prison camp, much less from WWII. But since the government brought it up, let me point out that it is their actions, not my words, which are offensive to the Jewish people and others. This is what righteous Jews, who condemn both Agriprocessors and the raid, have written in letters on file with the Subcommittee:

“I worked for the longest 18 months in a meatpacking plant. I have never fully recovered the use and sensation in my hands as a result of having to make 8,000 to 13,000 cuts a day on a break saw. To bring federal felony charges against these workers for sacrificing in the hell of meatpacking plants to feed their families (and us) is in fact a crime itself.”

“It is particularly disturbing, having visited the Anne Frank House, to think that we now have people designing laws that might at some point be used against whatever group Homeland Security might consider worthy to harass. History shows that by the time the German judges realized what had been codified into law in Germany, it was too late. They had no alternative but to go by the law.”

“My mom was an immigrant, and a lucky one at that. She survived Auschwitz, only to be sent to a German displaced persons camp right after the war. Were it not for my dad--a US army captain who brought her to the US, who knows what might have happened to her. She too had a forceful advocate...”

Now several Jewish organizations have mounted a massive relief effort for Postville workers and families. The Lutheran Church has spearheaded the community outreach initiative; while St. Bridget's Catholic Church has provided sanctuary. Today an interfaith coalition rallies in Postville.