

# Delano Diary

By JUDEA B. MILLER

*Rabbi Judea B. Miller is the Social Action Chairman of the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis. The following article is part of a report he submitted after a tour of the area of the grape strike in Delano, California in mid-October, 1968, as head of a rabbinical fact-finding mission sent by the New England Terminal Markets Association. On the basis of this report, the Massachusetts Board of Rabbis resolved to support the boycott of California table grapes.*

**A**T BREAKFAST on our first day in Delano, we were joined by Mrs. Eleanor Schulte, who introduced herself as the office manager for the South Central Farmers Association. This was a group that had been formed to oppose the union, the United Farm Workers Organizing Committee. In fact we later learned that none of the growers who had already signed union contracts were members of this association. She drove us to the association's office, where we met Mr. Martin Zaninovich, a grape grower and president of the South Central Farmers Association. During the Second World War he had been an officer in the Navy, and he still carried his tall frame with a sturdy, erect bearing. He was the son of a Yugoslavian immigrant who had come to California a generation ago and had built up his prosperous vineyards through hard work. Most of the seventy or so grape growers in that area are also the children of Yugoslavian immigrants, some of them cousins of Martin Zaninovich. Just as the South Central Farmers Association represents their industry, so

too is the Slovakian Hall at the edge of Delano a center for their social life.

Mr. Zaninovich presented the case for the growers whose farms were not unionized. He denied the allegations of the union. He pointed out that the grape pickers in California were the highest paid farm workers in the nation and that they did not need, nor want, a union. Conditions on the farms had improved considerably over the years and were not bad. Grapes were now being harvested. In fact, this had been one of the largest grape harvests in years and the workers were in the fields right now. The fact that they were working indicated, according to Martin Zaninovich, that there was no strike. Also most of these workers were local residents and not migrants, he said; the charge that Mexicans were coming into the area to work as scabs was just not true. At no time did he call the union and Mr. Chavez "Communists," but he did quote from the California House Un-American Committee's findings that there are Communists connected with this union. This essentially was the grower's case and we were to hear it repeated many times almost verbatim during the week.

To illustrate his contention that the workers were well paid, Mr. Zaninovich showed us a work sheet from his farm. The wages ranged for that week from \$40 to \$126. The initial low figure was not typical, he said, because that worker had not worked a full week. So the actual range of pay for a typical week was between \$102 and \$126 for five days of work during the harvest in mid-October.

We asked him whether this was

what a worker would normally make throughout the year. He conceded that these were wages during the peak harvest season, which lasted only about four months, but maintained that there was still plenty of work to do on the ranches throughout the year to keep some of the workers busy. The others migrated to other areas of the state to harvest other crops. So they can do fairly well for themselves, especially when there are other members of a family bringing in a salary too, he said. Assuming that these figures were a true picture of the situation, I suggested to Mr. Zaninovich that the workers then would be making about \$6500 a year. He did not comment.

Mr. Zaninovich insisted that the workers did not need a union. After all, in California they had at least nine of the ten possible types of welfare legislation for farm workers, including workman's compensation and social security. We reminded him that in the past the grower's association had consistently opposed this type of welfare legislation and was still resisting its extension. Even now there is no unemployment insurance for farm workers, nor is there a minimum wage for men. The recently passed minimum wage for women and minors has been strenuously opposed by the growers, even to the extent of now appealing it in the courts. For a long time he did not answer. Then he said that he personally was not opposed to welfare legislation for farm workers. But was it fair that it should be imposed only on California growers? he asked. They had to compete with fruit from other parts of the country where growers did not have the added cost of this type of welfare. California already was paying, according to him, the highest wages for farm workers. This placed them at a price disadvantage in competition with growers from other parts of the nation.

Although it might be wise to have welfare benefits imposed on a national scale, Mr. Zaninovich admitted that the California growers could not support it out of loyalty to agricultural allies from other states.

A LUNCHEON MEETING was arranged by Martin Zaninovich at the local Elks Club. Present were a pharmacist who represented the city businessmen, the Chief of Police, the City Manager, members of the Delano City Council, and several growers. Gerald Minford, the City Manager, said there were "shades of gray" on both sides in this dispute. The Chief of Police, James Ailes, said that he resented the accusations made against the police charging them with brutality to the strikers, comparing the city to Selma, Alabama. He said he was "merely doing his job." But these "outsiders and agitators just came to Delano to make trouble and to provoke incidents." He continued, "You will think I am a John Bircher, but this is not a union but part of a foreign subversion to overthrow America and make it socialist." He described a number of incidents in which the police, he thought, had been maneuvered into looking bad, when all they had done was their duty.

We pointed out that since members of the Delano City Council, a representative of the businessmen, the City Manager and the Chief of Police had come to the luncheon arranged by the growers, and since they were no doubt neutral, they should not object to participating in a similar meeting with the union people. We said we would arrange such a meeting at the convenience of everyone. After discussing several possibilities, we all agreed to meet with the Union representatives at breakfast the next morning. Chief Ailes wagered that the union people would not attend.

The next morning we attended the breakfast meeting with the Union representatives that we had arranged during the growers' luncheon the previous day. The Chief of Police lost his bet. The Union representatives did show up as scheduled. But no one showed up from the Delano City Council. Nor did anyone show up from the local businessmen. We spotted the Chief of Police as he was leaving the restaurant and reminded him of our meeting. He had already eaten breakfast. Chief Ailes expressed surprise that the Union representatives were present and said he would join us later, which he did. Only Gerald Minford, the Delano City Manager, came prepared to participate as scheduled.

Anthony Orendain, the Union's Secretary-Treasurer, said that the city establishment was biased against the Union. The City Council had passed numerous resolutions against the strike and last May unanimously passed a resolution condemning the boycott. They did not even call in farm workers to hear their side before passing the resolution. Minford argued that this action was not against the Union, but against the boycott as a technique, which, he said, would hurt the economy of the whole area. He insisted that the boycott verged on being illegal. Jerome Cohen, the union's counsel, insisted that this should be a matter for the courts to determine. Both agreed that there had been no dialogue between the city and the Union. Orendain turned to Minford and said, "You say we shouldn't use the boycott. What else would you do if the employer doesn't even want to speak to us?" Minford acknowledged that, "If I were in your position I might have accepted the boycott, I don't know. But there are other techniques too, such as legislation." Orendain assured him that the Union was exploring these other reme-

dies also. "But if you close one door you must leave another open. The growers didn't leave any other door open for us."

Chief of Police Ailes, who had arrived by this time, interrupted to comment that, "There are those who believe that there is no strike. Workers are working, aren't they?" Larry Itliong, the Assistant Director of the union, answered that people were working, many of them because they cannot afford to strike. "But let there be a free election," he said, "and we would see whether the workers really wanted a union. There are plenty of ranches here where the U.S. Department of Labor asserts there are labor disputes, and yet they still are producing because if we don't harvest the grapes, 'green carders' from Mexico will, despite the law."

THERE were further exchanges of allegations of illegal arrests and police brutality, and denials by the Chief of Police who told how his men had been abused, cursed, and spat upon. Cohen denied this and said that not one incident was proved. If any of the strikers got out of line, they were to be reported to the picket captains at once, because the Union did not want violence either. Cohen said that he had specifically told his own people, "If you use violence, I won't defend you. You deserve to be in jail!" He insisted that he knew of no instances when people from the Union harassed the police. They discussed the recent arrest of Orendain for distributing literature at an anti-Union meeting in a public park. He had been kept in jail over two hours without being able to see his attorney, who was outside asking to see his client. The Chief of Police insisted that this was because he had been short-handed and just did not have a spare policeman to bring Oren-

dain from his cell. They spoke of Mexican-Americans who were arrested and beaten in jail. This the Chief stoutly denied.

Larry Itliong recalled the initial strike in 1965. The Union had struck nine camps. At first they told their people to stay in the camps. "But soon the water and electricity were turned off, and our people began to come into the city. We tried to rent places for them. The Police were all over the place taking pictures and harassing us. We were constantly followed. Yet we were doing nothing illegal. We hoped the city would be neutral. But we are still followed by the police. Our people are constantly being stopped and questioned, or given tickets for minor infractions. It has become part of the police routine. When we make a complaint, the police always say that first they will have to investigate it. But let there be a complaint against us and the police react right away and pick our people up." There were further accusations against individual policemen.

Minford complained that the Union people had a chip on their shoulder and were always looking for the worst. "The city," he said, "often bends over backwards to avoid an incident, such as our overlooking your having an illegally placed cooperative gasoline station. We feel the Union has taken us on. But we are trying to remain neutral in this dispute involving the growers and the Union. Our police are being used as a club by both sides."

Mrs. Schulte drove us out to the Lukas ranch to visit the vineyards and to speak with the workers. The Lukas ranch markets its fine grapes under the label "Silver King." Young Louis Lukas met us and showed us around the vineyards. At first he seemed hostile, explaining that others had come and gone back to present unfair,

biased reports. He objected when I took pictures of young children in the fields, saying that these would be unfair pictures. They would make it appear as though the growers were exploiting children. This, he insisted, was not true. These children were merely accompanying their mothers to work, where they could be watched. The workers were in the fields together as families. He explained that he wasn't worried about the union at all. He was more worried about the terrible rain they had had a week before which threatened to ruin the crop. As it was, too many of the grapes were coming up with "slipped skins."

Louis Lukas has a business administration degree from Notre Dame University. He had also attended law school for a year. He complained about the difficult situation of the small rancher, who was being squeezed out of business. They were all mortgaged to banks (particularly the Bank of America in California) and the cost of equipment was constantly going up. A union now would just ruin them, he said.

**M**RS. SCHULTE and Mr. Lukas drove each of us in a different car. We were told we could speak to the workers if we wanted. Usually Mrs. Schulte or Mr. Lukas stood near us as we questioned the workers.

Occasionally my colleague was able to engage Mr. Lukas and Mrs. Schulte in conversation so that I could walk off by myself to question the workers alone. I asked each person three questions: Are you satisfied with your pay? Do you want a union? Do you think that Cesar Chavez is an honest man? There were three types of answers, depending on whether the rancher was close by, and on something else which we did not understand until a day later. It was this last factor that was

the most significant. If the rancher was nearby, the pickers generally agreed that they were satisfied with their pay and working conditions, that they did not want a union, and that Cesar Chavez was a troublemaker. When we were out of earshot of the rancher, the usual response was non-committal about whether they were satisfied with the wages or wanted a union. When I asked them whether Cesar Chavez was an honest man, they often said they did not know. Others paused and then nodded yes.

Another type of response altogether came from four workers. We remembered these four well because they were very articulate, and spoke English much better than the other workers around them. They also seemed the most vociferous in the expression of their opinions. They said that they detested the union, that Cesar Chavez was a troublemaker and a Communist, and that the union persecuted the workers. One of them, a woman, angrily described how Cesar Chavez drove around in a black Thunderbird car with a red flag. She told how the union had persecuted a woman who had to work in the vineyards because her husband was a cripple. We noticed another thing that was remarkable about these four workers. It was only of them that Lukas asked about the condition of the grapes, whether there were "slipped skins." Why did he not ask this question of other workers?

Later, when Mrs. Schulte drove us back to town, we passed the home of the woman who was the most vociferous in her resentment. Mrs. Schulte pointed out that this woman owned her own home and had two Volkswagen buses. We agreed that this was a worker who apparently earned a good wage and seemed prosperous.

LATER THAT NIGHT we visited the home of Cesar Chavez. It was a small wooden house not far from the offices of the South Central Farmers Association. In the driveway of the house was parked Chavez' car, an old Volvo. Two workers stood guard outside the house. They let us enter after we introduced ourselves. Cesar Chavez was in bed, where he had been confined for a bone condition exacerbated by a fast he had undertaken for twenty-five days last spring. Over his bed was a handbar from which hung both a rosary and a *mezuzah*. His dark skin contrasted sharply with the starched whiteness of the pillow case and quilt. Occasionally a cockroach scampered across the pillow. Chavez would either ignore it or gently push it aside. He is forty-one and the father of eight children, but he seemed younger than we had expected. We asked him about the *mezuzah* hanging from his bed bar. Chavez explained that this was a gift from his physician. "I wear this with my crucifix. I tell people that Christ didn't wear a crucifix. If Christ wore anything, it was a *mezuzah* like this."

He said that the growers called him an outside agitator. But since 1939 he had lived around the Delano area much of the time. His family was Mexican-American. He was born in Yuma, Arizona in 1927. Then hard times came and his father lost his farm in 1932. They were forced to become migrant farm workers, following the harvests from southern Arizona to northern California. They remained in the Delano area harvesting cotton and grapes from 1939 until 1944. From 1944 through 1946 he had been in the service. In 1948 he was living in Delano again. His wife is from Delano.

In 1950 he was recruited to work for the Community Service Organization, which was assisting Mexican-