The Great Kosher Meat War *of* 1902

IMMIGRANT HOUSEWIVES AND THE RIOTS THAT SHOOK NEW YORK CITY

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PREFACE

Food riots have occurred throughout history when supply has been short or prices too high, most commonly in developing countries. Often they are caused when a staple like bread, rice, or meat is suddenly out of reach; at other times anger stems from poor economic conditions overall, when everything is suddenly too expensive or bellies are not full. At such times, consumers don't consider the costs of inputs or the logistics of getting their food to market. They care only about whether it is for sale at an affordable price.

But the Lower East Side of Manhattan was not starving in 1902 when thousands of Jewish women took to the streets in a quest for affordable kosher meat, nor was America a poor country. Although many immigrant Jews lived hand-to-mouth existences, their boycott was never really about hunger. Nonkosher meat was always available and more affordable. But to families that felt duty bound by history, culture, and religion to honor the commandments in Exodus, Deuteronomy, and Leviticus and the rulings in the Talmud that specified in exacting detail which foods were permitted and how and by whom they had to be slaughtered and processed, it was simply not an option.

This book tells the inspiring story of immigrant Jewish women in early twentieth-century New York who, certain of the righteousness of their cause, discovered their collective power and found their political voice. It is an early case study in consumer activism, all the more impressive because

it involved mostly uneducated women, some barely conversant in English, with few resources at their disposal. That they managed to organize themselves overnight to challenge powerful, vested corporate interests in their new homeland is remarkable.

For most, it was their first foray into the political and economic arena, and they were treading new ground. Though they could look to the nascent labor movement for inspiration, community organizing was a broader and more complex task than unionizing, requiring educating vast numbers of their compatriots about supply and demand economics and persuading them of the value of short-term sacrifice. And despite the attendant violence, in the main they approached the task in a disciplined and strategic manner, never losing sight of their goal.

Whatever relevant experience these women might have brought with them when they crossed the Atlantic, resistance in America called for breaking out of traditional roles and employing unfamiliar tactics. And it was an America that was itself in the throes of rapid social change.

Here you will also find the very much related story of the Beef Trust, a cartel of greedy, Chicago-based packers colluding to corner the national market for meat. Behind closed doors, they cooperated to depress the prices they paid for cattle, pressure the railroads for kickbacks in shipping fees, manipulate the nation's supply of beef and other commodities, and, ultimately, gouge consumers.

At precisely the same time as the Lower East Side boycott, President Theodore Roosevelt set out to expose and break up their syndicate. His administration's prosecution of the beef barons provided the backdrop against which New York's Jews struggled to achieve their goal of affordable kosher meat.

Although the true villains in the drama were mostly gentile businessmen located hundreds of miles away, the local scene pitted Jew against Jew: housewives against butchers, butchers against wholesalers, the secular against the Orthodox, East-

ern Europeans against Germans, honest rabbis against corrupt ones. It also exacerbated other frictions, such as those between the Jewish community and the police.

The women's need to build a coalition to help carry their water dictated reaching out to congregations, unions, mutual aid societies, philanthropic and political groups, all of which were male-dominated, and eventually—and probably inevitably—men assumed some control over leadership of the effort. But it was, at its outset at least, conceived, organized, and executed *entirely* by female homemakers.

Issues of authenticity and quality of the meat supply were also front and center during the boycott, and herein you will meet Jacob Joseph, brought to America at great expense and with great fanfare as the chief rabbi of New York. Charged with bringing order to a chaotic and corrupt system of kosher slaughter, he was ultimately no match for the forces marshaled against him.

But most importantly, you'll meet several extraordinary women who, facing a common, existential threat, rose to the occasion and pulled off an impressive feat of grassroots organization. Their pioneering efforts inspired later generations of activists who, in their own times, would heed the call to fight back when rents rose too high, staple foods became out of reach, women sought voting rights, or employers underpaid or mistreated workers.

This book nearly didn't get written. Not because I wasn't strongly drawn to the subject. Immigrant Jewish women not unlike my own female forebears, their backs to the wall, waging a battle for their way of life in an era in which it wasn't thought proper for women to demonstrate in the streets certainly seemed like a topic that merited further exploration. An excellent, seminal article written about their struggle in 1980 by the late Dr. Paula E. Hyman, a professor of Jewish history at Yale, had intrigued me. Later writers had also taken note of their strike, but no one since Professor Hyman had dug more deeply into it than she had.

I realized that, if told in depth, the story of the strike needed to address a number of questions, not all of which had been within the scope of Hyman's groundbreaking research. *Why* did the price of meat rise so suddenly and substantially? Who was behind it? Why were Orthodox Jews affected more than others? What went into getting kosher meat to the tables of the immigrants on Manhattan's East Side, and how is it that the women came to blame fellow Jews for the price rise? Why did they point fingers at their own retail butchers, and not the slaughterhouses, packers, or cattlemen?

I also resolved to dig into some issues Dr. Hyman did address. How did these women, unsophisticated and foreign, decide on a boycott as the means to solve their problem? Who were they, and what influenced them? Where did they get the organizational skills to execute such a massive undertaking with so little preparation and so few resources? And finally, why is their story important? Were their efforts merely a flash in the pan, or did they yield lasting effects?

It seemed that the story would best be told from these women's point of view and in the context of what was going on in their lives, but I was foiled by the fact that a century had passed and materials about them as individuals were scarce. Nor did any of them leave memoirs or go on to greater achievements. On the contrary; to a woman they sank right back into the obscurity from whence they had come when it was all over.

In the face of these obstacles to creating accurate, three-dimensional portraits of the women and their inner lives, others might have turned to fictionalization. But because I'm a historian and not a novelist, the idea of fabricating *anything* about them was anathema to me. I enjoy creating narrative nonfiction, but I've always been averse to inventing dialogue that was never spoken or projecting thoughts or feelings onto people who may never have thought or felt them. I don't judge other writers who choose this route; it's just not for me.

So reluctantly, I let them go and moved on to another project.

Two years later, unable to put them entirely out of mind, I decided to revisit the topic. This time, I turned to the tools of genealogical research. I consulted city directories, ship passenger manifests, and court and census records in addition to books and newspaper reports. I also traced and contacted descendants of several of the movement's leaders.

With help, I obtained access to a rich vein of sources that had previously eluded me. The contemporary Yiddish press provided more detail and nuance than the English-language papers, and many insights into how the Jewish community itself viewed the events. Papers representing both socialist and Orthodox Jewish points of view survive for that period, and their coverage offered up much compelling material. The Yiddish newspapers provided another window into the personalities of the women who led the boycott, and helped depict the novelty, creativity, and power of their common efforts.

My American-born maternal grandmother, Celia Sternrich Abrams, only ten years old at the time of the strike, was living with her family on Orchard Street. I'd like to think that her mother, Austrian-born Mollie Zimmerman Sternrich, joined the boycott and stopped buying kosher meat, as most Jewish women of the neighborhood did. My paternal grandmother, Belarus-born Gussie Rudbart Seligman, would not arrive in America until 1907, but she was in nearby Newark in time for some of the later, copycat strikes.

I would like to dedicate this book to my female immigrant ancestors and, more broadly, to the immigrant Jewish women who, when it looked as if they could not feed their families and remain true to their religious beliefs, took matters into their own hands in 1902, brazenly forcing their way into the public sphere and launching a brave and successful effort to shape their own future in their new homeland.

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and Yehoshua Racz; and to two aunts, Frieda Friedenberg and the late Silvia Seligman, all of whom were generous with their time and assistance. Another cousin, Mara Sokolsky, graciously corrected the Yiddish spellings in the book.

I am indebted to descendants and relatives of several of the women profiled in this book. They include Addie Edelson, Stanley Edelson, Rosalyn Edelson, Walter Rybeck, Carole Haber, Peter Snyderman, Matthew Snyderman, Joyce Braunhut, Ted Astor and Eric Lurio.

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CHRONOLOGY

1872 The refrigerated boxcar is invented, revolutionizing meatpacking by enabling slaughter in one city and sales in a distant one.

1879 A first, unsuccessful effort to recruit a chief rabbi for New York is launched.

1888 Rabbi Jacob Joseph, hired by Orthodox congregations as chief rabbi of New York, arrives from Vilna.

A secret agreement among the large midwestern meatpackers establishes what comes to be known as the "Beef Trust."

1890 The Sherman Antitrust Act is enacted.

1893 The New York–based managers of the Beef Trust's constituent companies begin weekly meetings to set local retail prices.

1902 SUNDAY, MAY 4 More than four hundred members of the East Side Hebrew Retail Butchers' Kosher Guarantee and Benevolent Association convene to discuss how to respond to a rise in wholesale prices that has driven many out of business.

MONDAY, MAY 5 Lower East Side retail butchers vote to close the following Saturday night to pressure wholesalers into lowering prices.

SATURDAY, MAY 10 Most butchers refuse delivery of meat and do not open for business. Those who do are harassed by their cohorts.

U.S. Attorney Solomon H. Bethea files a complaint in the U.S. Court of Appeals in Chicago against the Beef Trust companies, accusing them of colluding to control the nation's beef trade.

SUNDAY, MAY 11 Fifteen hundred Lower East Side kosher butchers vote to stay closed at least until the following Tuesday.

MONDAY, MAY 12 Pledges of solidarity are received from kosher butchers in Brooklyn and Newark. Consumers, too, are generally supportive. A delegation of 350 butchers meets with representatives of the wholesalers, who insist they are powerless to lower prices.

TUESDAY, MAY 13 Wholesalers offer modest concessions to placate retail butchers who, having earned no income for several days, decide to pocket the concessions and reopen.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14 Retail butchers reopen, but raise meat prices as high as twenty-five cents a pound. Infuriated Jewish housewives attend an impromptu mass meeting organized by Sarah Edelson. Feeling betrayed by their local butchers, they resolve to boycott them until prices fall.

THURSDAY, MAY 15 Women picket kosher butcher shops in the Jewish quarter. Those who cross picket lines are assaulted and their meat confiscated. Butchers are attacked and shops are damaged. Many are arrested and brought before a magistrate, who issues stiff fines.

An ex-justice appointed by the New York State Supreme Court hears testimony to determine whether prosecution of meatpackers is warranted.

Sarah Edelson calls a meeting that attracts five thousand people. Zionist activist Rabbi Joseph Zeff and labor leader Joseph Barondess deliver fiery speeches, as violence is directed outside against butchers who refuse to close. More arrests are made.

FRIDAY, MAY 16 A local magistrate fines ninety people; twenty-five are jailed.

Paulina Finkel, Clara Korn, and Caroline Schatzberg call on Mayor Seth Low to seek a demonstration permit and ask that police not molest protestors. They are referred to police headquarters.

An envoy sent by New York Attorney General John C. Davies in Albany is unable to serve Manhattan managers of Beef Trust companies with subpoenas because all have fled the jurisdiction.

SATURDAY, MAY 17 Women set out in pairs to exhort congregants at synagogues and prayer halls to support the boycott. Things go smoothly in most places, save the People's Synagogue of the Educational Alliance, where they are insulted and treated rudely.

Police Commissioner John N. Partridge denies the women a demonstration permit and orders a local hall to bar their entry, forcing droves of protestors onto the streets. There is violence against butchers in Lower Manhattan, Brooklyn, Harlem, and the Bronx.

SUNDAY, MAY 18 The *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Herald* publish purloined documents that confirm collusion among the Beef Trust companies. This revelation forces them to admit the allegations against them, but they insist they have not violated the Sherman Antitrust Act.

Members of the East Side Hebrew Retail Butchers' Kosher Guarantee and Benevolent Association vote not to reopen.

Five hundred people vote to establish the Ladies' Anti–Beef Trust Association and elect officers; Caroline Schatzberg is chosen to head the group. Some men are also selected for leadership positions.

The new association establishes committees to recruit supporters, reach out to adjacent communities, seek support from labor unions, and explore the establishment of cooperative shops.

MONDAY, MAY 19 Unrest continues, but most butcher shops have closed. The real drama takes place at a meeting of the new Ladies' Association, when Sarah Edelson contests the election of Caroline Schatzberg and storms out, vowing to set up a rival group.

TUESDAY, MAY 20 U.S. Attorney Solomon H. Bethea presents evidence against the Beef Trust to federal judge Peter S. Grosscup, who enjoins the companies from further collusion.

A rally in Rutgers Park gives rise to a false rumor that the Ladies' Association is a socialist group.

A mob of one hundred Boston kosher butchers attacks butcher shops aligned with the city's principal kosher wholesaler. Much property is destroyed and shots are fired.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 21 Representatives of the East Side Butchers' Association negotiate with the wholesalers, but no agreement is reached.

Delegates from Jewish congregations, unions, lodges, benevolent associations, and newspapers establish a coalition to spearhead the boycott. The new Allied Conference for Cheap Kosher Meat is led by men and women.

THURSDAY, MAY 22 Despite nascent efforts at mediation, violence continues unabated, especially in Williamsburg. In Boston, women attack butcher shops.

SATURDAY, MAY 24 Boston butchers resume business following a meeting with local rabbis.

The Allied Conference votes to permit independent butchers who agree to sell meat at a reduced price to reopen. The controversial plan cedes control to Orthodox rabbis, many of whom had hesitated to join the boycott.

MONDAY, MAY 26 About 150 kosher butchers sign an agreement to sell meat at thirteen cents a pound; fifty others reopen without agreements and sell little meat.

TUESDAY, MAY 27 Upstate New York witnesses testify against the Beef Trust in Albany.

THURSDAY, MAY 29 Six hundred members of the East Side Butchers' Association agree to close and work with the Allied Conference.

TUESDAY, JUNE 3 Wholesalers agree to drop their price to nine cents a pound, enabling retailers to sell kosher beef at a small profit for fourteen cents per pound.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 4 New York State Supreme Court justice Alden Chester enjoins Beef Trust companies from colluding on prices.

The Allied Conference seeks pledges from all butchers to sell meat at fourteen cents a pound for a sustained period. Although there is no formal announcement, the boycott seems no longer to be in effect. Caroline Schatzberg, unhappy that so many shops have reopened without signing pledges, pleads for its continuation.

TUESDAY, JUNE 10 Two cooperative meat shops open, undercutting most butchers. One, run by Sarah Cohn, is under the auspices of the Ladies' Anti–Beef Trust Association; the other is managed independently by Sarah Edelson. Business is brisk.

THURSDAY, JUNE 12 The Ladies' Association discusses plans for more cooperative shops.

MONDAY, JUNE 16 Rabbi Jacob Joseph dies.

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18 Workers in a printing press factory attack thousands of mourners as Rabbi Joseph's funeral cortege passes in the worst outbreak of antisemitic violence the city has ever seen. Police set upon the mourners rather than their attackers and cause many injuries. The Jewish community is incensed and demands an investigation. The mourners are ultimately exonerated, but the officers involved are merely reprimanded or fined a few days' pay.

1903 Several Beef Trust members form the National Packing Company for the purpose of aggregating their assets to permit continued collusion.

The U.S. Circuit Court for the Northern District of Illinois issues a final order barring the Beef Trust from anticompetitive practices.

Beef Trust companies appeal their case to the U.S. Supreme Court.

1904 The New York Rent Protective Association is established to fight rising rents. It initiates a rent strike in the Lower East Side, borrowing many tactics from the 1902 meat boycott.

1905 The U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments in the Beef Trust case and rules that the Trust is an illegal combination in restraint of trade.

Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, an indictment of the meat industry, is published in serial form. It is deeply damaging to meatpackers.

1906 Women lead a second kosher meat strike on the Lower East Side that spreads to Harlem and Brooklyn.

1907 A second rent strike occurs on the East Side and spreads to Brooklyn, Harlem, and Newark.

1909 The New York shirtwaist strike, the largest strike of female workers to date, breaks out. At issue are wages, working conditions, and working hours. The strike is not settled until the following February.

1910 A meat riot breaks out in Harlem. It is notable for the leadership of forty-eight-year-old Anna Pastor, mother of well-known columnist and socialist Rose Pastor Stokes.

1912 Another price rise causes meat riots in Brooklyn, which spread to the East Side and then to Chicago, Philadelphia, and Boston before enthusiasm ebbs over the summer.

The National Packing Company is dissolved under the direction of the Justice Department.

1916 Butchers take on wholesalers again after a rapid rise in the retail prices of all foodstuffs in the run-up to World War I. Many close shops or sell only poultry. Socialists organize cost-of-living protests.

Protest meetings are held with the mayor and the governor but the boycott loses steam after the Passover holiday.

1919 Anna Pastor presides at a meeting in the Bronx at which yet another boycott is announced. It soon spreads to Harlem but never gets much traction.

1935 Led by radical activist Clara Lemlich, who rose to prominence during the 1909 shirtwaist strike, New York Jewish women urge kosher butchers to close in response to rising prices. Against the backdrop of the Great Depression their boycott extends to non-kosher meat dealers in Harlem and to half a dozen other cities.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Joseph Barondess (1867–1928) Jewish activist who helped form many labor unions and who played a leading role in the kosher meat boycott.

David Blaustein (1866–1912) Superintendent of the Hebrew Educational Alliance who helped organize the Allied Conference for Cheap Kosher Meat.

Isaac Blumenthal (1846–1906) President of the United Dressed Beef Company.

Abraham Cahan (1860–1951) Editor of the socialist *Forward* who wrote frequently in support of the boycott.

Sarah Zucker Cohn (1871–1955) Activist in the meat boycott and proprietress of New York's first kosher cooperative retail butcher establishment.

John C. Davies (1857–1925) New York State attorney general from 1899–1902 who investigated the Beef Trust for violations of state antitrust law.

Sarah Zimmerman Edelson (1852–1931) Initiator of the meat strike whose efforts led to the establishment of the Ladies' Anti–Beef Trust Association.

Paulina Wachs Finkel (1868–1960) Early organizer of the meat boycott and treasurer of the Ladies' Anti–Beef Trust Association.

Joseph Goldman (1848–1927) President of the East Side Hebrew Retail Butchers' Kosher Guarantee and Benevolent Association.

Peter Stenger Grosscup (1852–1921) U.S. Court of Appeals judge who presided over *United States v. Swift & Co. et al.*

William Travers Jerome (1859–1934) New York County district attorney, 1902–9.

Frederick Joseph (1851–1931) Vice president of Schwarzschild & Sulzberger, a New York–based meat wholesaler, and son-in-law of its founder.

Jacob Joseph (1840–1902) Chief rabbi of New York City, 1888–95.

Philander C. Knox (1853–1921) Attorney general of the United States, 1901–4.

Fanny Levy (1867–?) One of the early organizers of the meat boycott.

John Nelson Partridge (1838–1920) Police commissioner of the City of New York, 1902–3.

Adolph Moses Radin (1848–1909) Rabbi employed by the Hebrew Educational Alliance who was unsupportive of the boycott and insulting to its female organizers.

Caroline Zeisler Schatzberg (1851–1928) Early activist in the meat boycott and president of the Ladies' Anti–Beef Trust Association.

Adolph Spiegel (1869–1957) Rabbi of Congregation Shaare Zedek, who helped negotiate an end to the meat boycott.

Joseph L. Stern (1833–?) President of Joseph Stern & Sons, a New York–based meat wholesaler.

Ferdinand Sulzberger (1854–1933) President of Schwarzschild & Sulzberger, a New York–based meat wholesaler.

A NOTE ON LANGUAGE

The Yiddish, Hebrew, and Russian terms included in this work, with minor exceptions, are romanized according to the pronunciation favored by Litvak Jews—those originating in present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Latvia, and northeastern Poland—who made up the majority of the Lower East Side Jewish community at the turn of the twentieth century. In some cases, these spellings deviate from common, modern spellings.

PROLOGUE

A Modern Jewish Boston Tea Party

In the wee hours of Thursday, May 15, 1902, female pickets took up positions on all the blocks of the Lower East Side of Manhattan on which kosher butcher shops were located. Some three thousand souls, Jewish women recruited by their peers the previous night, had assembled in the pitch black and formed squads of five by the time the stores opened at 7:00 a.m. Although they had trusted their butchers and bought meat from them for years, that faith had all but evaporated.

Rather than buy from these men, they were now intent on shutting them down.

The proximate cause of the conflict was a sudden spike in the retail price of kosher meat, on which these women, mostly immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe, depended to feed their families. The price of a cheap cut of beef, twelve cents a pound a few months earlier, had abruptly risen 50 percent. At eighteen cents a pound—$5.25 in today's dollars—kosher beef was now beyond the reach of families that had to pinch pennies to make ends meet. And for most, buying the nonkosher variety was unthinkable.

The kosher butchers had seen the problem coming. When the local slaughterhouses from which they bought meat raised wholesale prices, the owners of many retail shops, envisioning passing the increase on to customers who could ill afford it, had shut down for several days to pressure their suppliers into lowering them. And the wives and mothers of the Lower