# Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902

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Women have always participated in politics. Despite their eclipse in the conventional seats of political power, women in preindustrial societies frequently engaged in popular protest, particularly when the price, or availability, of basic foodstuffs was at issue. As one English historian of the working class and of popular culture has pointed out regarding eighteenth century food riots, women were "those most involved in face-to-face marketing [and hence] most sensitive to price significancies . . ." In fact, he adds, "it is probable that the women most frequently precipitated the spontaneous actions."[1] In the popular ferment of the early days of the French Revolution, women were also conspicuous by their presence. The image of grim-faced market women on the march to Versailles to bring the royal family back to Paris has been sharply etched in the mind of every student of history or enthusiast of historical dramas.[2] Even before the emergence of modern political movements committed to the recruitment of women into the political process, the "crowd" was an important means of expression for women's economic and political interests.

Immigrant Jewish women, too, took to the streets in spontaneous food riots on several occasions.[3] Like their British and French forerunners more than a century before, they were reacting to the sharp rise in the price of food. Most noted and flamboyant of these incidents were the 1902 kosher meat riots in New York City. Erupting in mid-May, they precipitated political activity which continued for almost a month, attracting considerable attention both within the Jewish community and the larger urban society. Indeed, in a fierce and vitriolic editorial of May 24, 1902, the *New York Times* called for a speedy and determined police repression of this "dangerous class . . . especially the women [who] are

1 E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present*, 50 (Feb., 1971), 116.

2 George Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York: 1964), p. 220; idem, *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (London: 1959), pp. 73–76.

3 The 1902 incident had repercussions in Boston. There were also food riots in Patterson, New Jersey and in Philadelphia in 1907 and more extensive riots in New York City in 1917. *New York Times*, May 23, 1902; June 26, 1907, November 13, 14, 15, 1907. On the 1917 riots, see Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews, Wars, and Communism* (New York: 1972), vol. I, pp. 111–115.

very ignorant [and] . . . mostly speak a foreign language. . . . It will not do," the editorial continued, "to have a swarm of ignorant and infuriated women going about any part of this city with petroleum destroying goods and trying to set fire to the shops of those against whom they are angry."[4]

What impelled immigrant Jewish housewives to take to the streets (of Williamsburg, in this case) with bottles of kerosene in their hands? Was this simply an act of spontaneous rage, a corroboration of the Engish writer Robert Southey's comment that "women are more disposed to be mutinous [than men.]"[5] Are the kosher meat riots a late manifestation, as Herbert Gutman has suggested, of a pre-industrial sensibility that focused upon the illegitimacy of violating a fair price for food?[6] Finally, and most importantly, what can we learn of the self-perceptions, political consciousness, and sense of community of immigrant Jewish women by examining their role in this incident?

Despite their superficial similarity to earlier food riots, the kosher meat riots of 1902 give evidence of a modern and sophisticated political mentality emerging in a rapidily changing community. With this issue of the high price of food, immigrant housewives found a vehicle for political organization. They articulated a rudimentary grasp of their power as consumers and domestic managers. And, combining both traditional and modern tactics, they temporarily turned their status as housewives to good advantage, and used the neighborhood network to stage a successful three-week boycott of kosher meat shops throughout the Lower East Side, parts of upper Manhattan and the Bronx, and Brooklyn. The dynamics of the kosher meat boycott suggest that by focusing almost exclusively upon organized political activity in the labor movement and the socialist parties, historians have overlooked the role of women. Although for a great part of their life

4 *New York Times*, May 24, 1902.

5 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

6 For a discussion of the popular consensus underlying preindustrial food riots, see Thompson, *op. cit.*, pp. 77-79. Herbert Gutman interprets the kosher meat riots in this fashion, noting a demand by the women for rabbis to determine the just price for the meat. (It is worth noting that such a demand appears in none of the Yiddish sources, though rabbinic endorsement of the kashrut of the meat was assumed by strike leaders). See Herbert Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review*, 78, 3 (June, 1973), 576-77. In reprinting the *New York Times* description of the food riots, Rosalyn Baxandall et al. also define the purpose of the rioters as "to mete out justice and punishment," in *America's Working Women: A Documentary History 1600 to the Present* (New York: 1976), p. 184.

absent from the wage-earning market, immigrant Jewish women were not apolitical. They simply expressed their political concerns in a different, less historically accessible arena – the neighborhood – where they pioneered in local community organizing.[7]

In early May, 1902, the retail price of kosher meat had soared from twelve cents to eighteen cents a pound. Small retail butchers, concerned that their customers would not be able to afford their produce, refused to sell meat for a week to pressure the wholesalers (commonly referred to as the Meat Trust) to lower their prices.[8] When their May 14th settlement with the wholesalers brought no reduction in the retail price of meat, Lower East Side housewives, milling in the street, began to call for a strike against the butchers. As one activist, Mrs. Levy, the wife of a cloakmaker, shouted, "This is their strike? Look at the good it has brought! Now, if *we women* make a strike, then it will be a strike." Gathering support on the block – Monroe Street and Pike Street – Mrs. Levy and Sarah Edelson, owner of a small restaurant, called a mass meeting to spread the word of the planned boycott.[9]

The next day, after a neighborhood canvas staged by the organizing committee, thousands of women streamed through the streets of the Lower East Side, breaking into butcher shops, flinging meat into the streets, and declaring a boycott. "Women were the ringleaders at all hours,"[10] noted the *New York Herald.* Customers who tried to carry their purchased meat from the butcher shops were forced to drop it. One woman emerging from a butcher store with meat for her sick husband was vociferously chided by an elderly woman wearing the traditional sheitel that "a sick man can eat tref meat."[11] Within half an hour, the *Forward* reported, the strike had spread from one block through the entire area. Twenty thousand people were reported to have massed in front of the New Irving Hall. "Women were pushed and hustled about [by the police], thrown to the pavement . . . and trampled upon," wrote the *Herald.* One policeman, trying to rescue those buying meat, had "an unpleasant moist piece of liver slapped in his

7 For a similar critique, see Daphne Kis, "The Political Role of Women in Community: New York's Lower East Side, 1900–1910" (Division Three paper, Hampshire College, 1976).

8 Harold P. Gastwirt, *Fraud, Corruption, and Holiness: The Controversy over the Supervision of the Jewish Dietary Practice in New York* (Port Washington: 1974), p. 39.

9 *Jewish Daily Forward*, May 14, 1902, p. 1.

10 *New York Herald*, May 16, 1902, p. 4.

11 *Forward*, May 15, 1902.

face."[12] Patrol wagons filled the streets, hauling women, some bleeding from their encounters with the police, into court. About seventy women and fifteen men were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct.[13]

After the first day of street rioting, a mass meeting to rally support and map strategy was held at the initiative of the women activists, who had formed a committee. Two of their number addressed the crowd, as did the popular figure Joseph Barondess and the Zionist leader Rabbi Zeft. The next day, May 16, Lower East Side women again went from house to house to strengthen the boycott. Individuals were urged not to enter butcher shops or purchase meat. Pickets were appointed to stand in front of each butcher shop. On each block funds were collected to pay the fines of those arrested and to reimburse those customers whose meat had been confiscated in the first day of rioting. The *Tribune* reported that "an excitable and aroused crowd roamed the streets . . . As was the case on the previous day, the main disturbance was caused by the women. Armed with sticks, vocabularies and well sharpened nails, they made life miserable for the policemen." On the second day of rioting another hundred people were arrested.[14] The boycott also spread, under local leadership, to the Bronx and to Harlem, where a mass meeting was held at Central Hall.[15]

On Saturday, May 17th, the women leaders of the boycott continued their efforts, going from synagogue to synagogue to agitate on behalf of the boycott. Using the traditional communal tactic of interrupting the Torah reading when a matter of justice was at stake, they called on the men in each congregation to encourage their wives not to buy meat and sought rabbinic endorsement of their efforts. For once, urged a boycott leader, citing a Biblical passage, let the men use the power of "And he shall rule over her" to the good—by seeing to it that their wives refrain from purchasing meat.[16]

By Sunday, May 18th, most butcher shops on the Lower East Side bowed to reality and closed their doors. And the boycott had spread to Brooklyn, where the store windows of open butcher shops had been broken and meat burned. That night, the women

12 *New York Herald*, May 16, 1902; *Forward*, May 15, 1902; *New York Daily Tribune*, May 16, 1902, p. 1.

13 *Forward*, May 15, 1902.

14 *New York Daily Tribune*, May 17, 1902, p. 1; *Forward*, May 16, 1902.

15 *Forward*, May 16, 1902, May 17, 1902; *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 16, 1902. On the boycott in Harlem, see Jeffrey Gurock, *When Harlem was Jewish* (New York: 1979), pp. 69-70.

16 *Forward*, May 18, 1902.

held another meeting, attended by more than five hundred persons, to consolidate their organization, now named the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association. Under the presidency of Mrs. Caroline Schatzburg, it proposed to continue house-to-house patrols, keep watch over butcher stores, and begin agitating for similar action among Christian women. Circulars bearing a skull and crossbones and the slogan "Eat no meat while the Trust is taking meat from the bones of your women and children" were distributed throughout the Jewish quarters of the city. The Association established six similar committees to consolidate the boycott in Brownsville, East New York, and the Bronx. Other committees were set up to visit the labor and benevolent societies, labor union meetings, and lodges and to plan the establishment of cooperative stores.[17] The Association also sent a delegation to the mayor's office to seek permission for an open air rally. Local groups of women continued to enforce the boycott in their neighborhoods. In Brooklyn four hundred women signed up to patrol neighborhood butcher stores. Buyers of meat continued to be assaulted and butcher shop windows smashed. In Harlem two women were arrested when they lay down on the elevated tracks to prevent a local butcher from heading downtown with meat for sale. Throughout the city's Jewish neighborhoods restaurants had ceased serving meat.[18]

However, competition between Sarah Edelson, one of the founders of the boycott, and Caroline Schatzburg, the president of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, erupted by May 18th into open quarrels between their followers at meetings. Taking advantage of this rivalry and winning the support of Edelson and her backers, on May 21st male communal leaders, with David Blaustein of the Educational Alliance presiding, held a conference of three hundred representatives of synagogues, *hevras*, landsmanshaften, and unions "to bring order to the great struggle for cheap meat."[19] In his remarks at the conference meeting, Joseph Barondess made explicit that a new leadership was asserting itself. Urging the women to be quiet and leave the fighting to the men, he noted that otherwise the women would be held responsible in the event of the boycott's defeat.[20] Calling themselves the Allied Con-

17 *Ibid.; New York Herald*, May 18, 1902, p. 9; *New York Daily Tribune*, May 19, 1902, p. 4.

18 *Forward*, May 19, May 20, 1902; *New York Herald*, May 20, 1902, p. 7; May 24, 1902, p. 4; *New York Daily Tribune*, May 20, 1902, p. 16.

19 *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 22, 1902; *New York Herald*, May 18, 1902, p. 4; May 20, 1902, p. 7; May 21, 1902, p. 6.

20 *New York Times*, May 22, 1902.

ference for Cheap Kosher Meat, the male conference leaders appointed a ten person steering committee, among whom were only three women. (Women continued, however, to engage in propaganda activities and sporadic rioting in their neighborhoods). The Allied Conference published a circular in both Yiddish and English, noting that "brave and honest men [were] now aiding the women" and declaring that the conference had "decided to help those butchers who [would] sell cheap kosher meat under the supervision of the rabbis and the conference." "The people feel very justly," continued the statement, "that they are being ground down, not only by the Beef Trust of the country, but also by the Jewish Beef Trust of the City."[21]

On May 22, the Retail Butchers Association succumbed and affiliated itself with the boycott against the Trust. On May 27, Orthodox leaders, who had hesitated to express formal endorsement of the boycott, joined the fray. By June 5 the strike was concluded. The wholesale price of kosher meat was rolled back to nine cents a pound so that the retail price would be pegged at fourteen cents a pound. Kosher meat cooperatives, which were established during the strike in both Brooklyn and Harlem, continued in existence. While meat prices began to rise inexorably again in the period following the conclusion of the boycott, the movement can still be considered a qualified success.[22]

The leaders of the boycott were not typical of other women political activists of the period. Unlike the majority of women organized in the nascent garment unions, they were not young. Unlike the female union leaders, they were housewives with children.[23] The mean age of those boycott leaders who could be traced in the 1905 New York state manuscript census was 39. They ranged from Mamie Ghilman, the thirty-two year old Russian-born wife of a tailor to Mrs. L. Finkelstein, a fifty-four year old member of the Women's Committee. All but two were more than thirty-five years of age at the time of the boycott.[24] These women were mothers of large families, averaging 4.3 children apiece living at

21 *New York Herald*, May 26, 1902, p. 6.

22 *Forward*, May 20, June 4, June 5, 1902; *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 21, May 22, May 28, May 30, June 5, 1902; *New York Herald*, May 22, 1902, p. 6.

23 Alice Kessler-Harris, "Where Are the Organized Women Workers?" *Feminist Studies*, III, 1, 2 (Fall, 1975), 92-93.

24 Nine boycott activists mentioned by name and address in the Yiddish press could be traced in the 1905 New York state manuscript census and two others in the 1902 New York City directory. While their number is regrettably small, their socioeconomic characteristics are so similar as to suggest that they are typical of the entire leadership.

home. Fannie Levy, who initiated the call for the strike, was the mother of six children, all below the age of thirteen. None had fewer than three children. While only two women were United States citizens, the strike leaders were not, for the most part, recent arrivals to America. They had been living in New York City from three to twenty-seven years, with a median residence of eleven years. Having had sufficient time to accommodate themselves to the American scene, they were not simply expressing traditional forms of cultural resistance to industrial society imported from the Old Country.[25]

In socioeconomic terms, the women initiators of the boycott appear representative of the larger immigrant Jewish community of the Lower East Side. Their husbands were, by and large, employed as artisans in the garment industry, though three were self-employed small businessmen. The husband of Annie Block, a member of the Women's Committee, was a tailor, as were three other husbands. Fannie Levy's husband was a cloakmaker and Bessie Norkin's a carpenter, while J. Jaffe's husband, Meyer, and Annie Levine's husband, Morris, topped the occupational scale as a real estate agent and storekeeper respectively. With one exception, all of their children above the age of sixteen were working – two-thirds of them in artisan trades and the remainder as clerks or low level business employees (e.g. salesladies). Only the eighteen year old son of the real estate agent was still in school (though his older brothers were employed as garment industry operators). Thus, the women formed not an elite in their community, but a true grass roots leadership.[26]

It is clear from their statements and their activity that the women who led the boycott had a distinct economic objective in mind and a clear political strategy for achieving their goal. Unlike traditional food rioters, the Lower East Side housewives were not demanding the imposition of a just and popular price on retailers. Nor were they forcibly appropriating meat for purchase at a popularly determined fair price, though they did retain a traditional sense of a moral economy in which food should be available at prices which the working classes could afford. Rather, recognizing that prices were set by the operation of the laws of supply and demand, as modified, in this case, by the concentration of the wholesale meat industry, they hit upon a boycott of meat as the most effective way to dramatically curtail demand. They referred to themselves as strikers; those who did not comply with the boycott were called

25 New York state manuscript census, 1905.
26 *Ibid.*

"scabs." When they were harassed in the street by police, they complained that denial by police of their right to assemble was an attack on their freedom of speech. Thus, Lower East Side women were familiar with the political rhetoric of their day, with the workings of the market economy, and with the potential of consumers to affect the market.[27]

While the impulse for the boycott originated in spontaneous outrage of women consumers at the price of kosher meat and their sense that they had been manipulated (or swindled, as they put it) by the retail butchers, who had sold out their customers in their agreement with the wholesalers, this incident was not simply an explosion of rage. It was a sustained, though limited, movement, whose success lay in its careful organization. As the *New York Herald* rightly commented, "These women were in earnest. For days they had been considering the situation, and when they decided on action, they perfected an organization, elected officers, . . . and even went so far as to take coins from their slender purses until there was an expense fund of eighty dollars with which to carry on the fight."[28]

In fact, the neighborhood focus of the boycott organization proved to be its source of strength. The initial boycott committee, composed of nineteen women, numbered nine neighbors from Monroe Street, four from Cherry Street, and six from adjacent blocks.[29] This was not the anonymous city so often portrayed by antiurban polemicists and historians but a neighborhood community whose residents maintained close ties. The first show of strength on May 15th was preceded by an early morning house-to-house canvas of housewives in the heart of the boycott area. A similar canvas occurred the next day in Harlem under the aegis of local women. Rooted in the neighborhood, where many activities were quasi-public rather than strictly private, housewives were able to exert moral (as well as physical) suasion upon the women whom they saw on a daily basis. They assumed the existence of collective goals and the right to demand shared sacrifices. Individual desires for the consumption of meat were to be subordinated to the larger public good. As one boycott enthusiast stated while grabbing meat from a girl leaving a butcher store, "If we can't eat meat, the customers can't eat meat."[30] Shouting similar sentiments in another incident, striking women attempted to remove the meat

27 *Forward; New York Herald*, May 26, 1902, p. 6.
28 *Ibid.*, May 16, 1902, p. 4.
29 *Forward*, May 15, 1902.
30 *Ibid.*

from cholent pots which their neighbors had brought to a local bakery on a Friday afternoon. [31] Participants in the boycott picketed local butchers and also resolved not to speak to the "scabs" in their midst.[32] The constant presence in the neighborhood of the housewife leaders of the boycott made it difficult for individuals to evade their surveillance. The neighborhood, a form of female network, thus provided the locus of community for the boycott: all were giving up meat together, celebrating dairy shabbosim together, and contributing together to the boycott fund.

The women who organized and led the boycott considered themselves the natural leaders of such an enterprise. As consumers and housewives, they saw their task as complementary to that of their wage-earning spouses: "Our husbands work hard," stated one of the leaders at the initial planning meeting. "They try their best to bring a few cents into the house. We must manage to spend as little as possible. We will not give away our last few cents to the butcher and let our children go barefoot." In response, the women shouted, "We will not be silent; we will overturn the world."[33] Describing themselves as soldiers, they determined to circulate leaflets calling upon all women to "join the great women's war."[34] An appeal to their "worthy sisters," published by the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust in the *Forward*, expressed similar sentiments, calling for "help . . . in the name of humanity in this great struggle which we have undertaken out of need."[35]

Sharper formulations of class resentment mingled with pride in their own talents in some of the women's shouts in the street demonstrations. One woman was heard lamenting to another, "Your children must go to work, and the millionaires snatch the last bit from our mouths." Another called out, "My husband brings me eight dollars a week. Should I give it away to the butcher? What would the landlord say?" Still another screamed, "They think women aren't people, that they can bluff us; we'll show them that we are more people than the fat millionaires who suck our blood." When the son of the Chief Rabbi, who supervised the kashrut of the meat, passed through the area, he was met with shouts of "Trust - Kosher *Korobke*," a reference to the kosher meat tax, much despised by the poor in Czarist Russia.[36]

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31 *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 18, 1902.
32 *Forward*, May 18, 1902.
33 *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 15, 1902.
34 *Ibid.*
35 *Forward*, May 19, 1902.
36 *Ibid.*, May 15, 1902.

The ringleaders who were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct defined their behavior in political terms and considered it both just and appropriate to their status as housewives. "Did you throw meat on the street?" Rosa Peskin was asked. "Certainly," she replied. "I should have looked it in the teeth?" When the judge condescendingly commented, "What do you know of a trust? It's no business of yours," she responded, "Whose business is it, then, that our pockets are empty . . .?" "What do you have against a woman who has bought meat," the judge persisted. "I have nothing against her," retorted Peskin. "It doesn't matter to me what others want to do. But it's because of others that we must suffer." Rebecca Ablowitz also presented the boycotters' rationale to the judge: "We're not rioting. Only see how thin our children are, our husbands have no more strength to work harder . . . If we stay home and cry, what good will that do us?"[37]

Of similar conviction and eloquence was Mrs. Silver, one of the most articulate spokeswomen of the boycott, who headed the campaign to interrupt services in the synagogues. When one irate opponent roared that her speaking thus from the bima was an effrontery (*chutzpa*) and a desecration of God's name (chillul ha-Shem), Mrs. Silver coolly responded that the Torah would pardon her.[38]

The climate of the immigrant Jewish community facilitated the resolute behavior of the women. While a few rabbis, particularly those with close ties to the meat industry, were hostile to the boycott enterprise, they were the exception. Support for the boycott was widespread within the community. Friendly crowds packed the courtroom to cheer the arrested women. In every one of the synagogues on the Lower East Side, it was reported, "the uprising of the Hebrew women was referred to by the rabbis."[39] Most synagogue members warmly greeted the women who brought their cause to the congregation. When police were brought in to arrest Mrs. Silver after a disturbance erupted in one synagogue, a congregant rose to compare the woman to the prophet Zachariah, "who preached truly and whose blood demanded vengeance." So persuasive was he that Mrs. Silver was released.[40] Feeling that they could count upon the support of the traditionally observant community, the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, in an appeal printed by the *Forward*, called for communal ostracism of the one prominent rabbi, Dr. Adolph N. Radin of the People's Synagogue,

37 *Ibid.*
38 *Ibid.*, May 18, 1902.
39 *New York Herald*, May 18, 1902, p. 4.
40 *Forward*, May 18, 1902.

who had not only refused to approve the boycott but had treated representatives of the Association rudely in his synagogue. He should be removed from his position as chaplain to Jewish prisoners, urged the women, for if this "half-German" could refer publicly to the boycotting women as "beasts" and receive them so coarsely in front of his congregation, how must he treat the unfortunate Jewish inmates he sees within the confines of the prison?[41]

Both the socialist *Forward* and the Orthodox *Yiddishes Tageblat* portrayed the initial disturbances as well as the later movement in a sympathetic manner and were offended by the rough treatment meted out to the women and their families by the police as well as by the unsympathetic attitude of much of the English language press. Jewish socialists, in particular, stood squarely behind the protest. The *Forward* heralded the boycott with the banner headline, "Bravo, bravo, bravo, Jewish women!"[42] To the *Forward*, the boycott provided an opportunity not only to support a grass roots protest action but also to level an attack upon the collusion of the rabbis with the German Jewish meat trust. There was little reason for the differential between kosher and non-kosher meat to stand at five to six cents a pound, proclaimed the newspaper's editorial. Those who raised the prices "are Yahudim with gilded beards, who never eat kosher. Why are they suddenly so *frum* (pious)? Since when is there a partnership between those who give rabbinic endorsements in the Chief Rabbi's name and those Yahudi meat handlers . . . The Chief Rabbi's son is merely a salesman for the Trust," continued the editorial. "He goes about in carriages collecting money in the name of his unfortunate father's endorsement . . . Whether the strike of the good Jewish women brings down the prices or not," concluded the *Forward*, "one thing remains certain, the bond between the Trust and the rabbis must end. If they are truly pious, let them serve their religion and not the Trust in whose pay they are in."[43] In Russian Poland, noted the paper the next day, the meat tax was seven cents a pound, but at least there the *korobke* supported all kehilla (communal) activities. Here, on the other hand, it went only to the Trust.[44]

While the *Forward* conducted its pro-boycott campaign, the labor movement as a whole extended monetary donations and aid

41 *Ibid.*, May 19, 1902, p. 2; *New York Herald*, May 18, 1902, p. 4; May 19, 1902, p. 3. Communal pressure forced Radin to offer a public apology to the women whom he had insulted.

42 *Forward*, May 18, 1902.

43 *Ibid.*, May 17, 1902.

44 *Ibid.*, May 18, 1902.

to the boycott; two men active in the Ladies' Garment Workers' Union were appointed as vice-president and secretary of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, while the posts of president and treasurer remained in women's hands.[45] In Harlem it was the Women's Branch No. Two of the Workmen's Circle, with the support of the parent organization, that coordinated local boycott activity.[46]

Communal support was not, however, without its limits. Jewish communal leaders were clearly upset by the initiative assumed by the women activists. The sight of Jewish women engaged in picketing and in the physical coercion of butcher shop customers as well as of their arrest at the hands of a none too gentle police force aroused concern. "Don't give the Trust and the police an opportunity to break heads," cautioned the *Forward*. "More can be accomplished lawfully than not. . . Agitate quietly in your homes."[47] Moreover, when the boycott was recognized as a force to be reckoned with, men tried to wrest control of the movement from its female leaders. However, the women were never entirely displaced, and the Yiddish language media continued, if somewhat ambivalently, to view the success of the boycott as a legitimate example of the "power of women."[48] (On the other hand, the *American Hebrew*, the organ of the Uptown Jews, studiously ignored the kosher meat riots.)[49]

In a larger sense, the immigrant Jewish community was quite supportive of women's political activity. East European Jewish immigrants were highly politicized; just how highly can be seen in the meat boycott, whose participants were sufficiently traditional to buy kosher meat and to use the synagogues and *hevras* as areas for potential recruitment. Indeed, the development of the boycott suggests that the compartmentalization of the immigrant community by historians into Orthodox, socialist and anarchist, and Zionist sectors does not do justice to the interplay among the groups. Boundary lines were fluid, and socialist rhetoric tripped easily from the tongues of women who still cared about kosher meat, could cite Biblical passages in Hebrew, and felt at ease in the synagogue. Moreover, the boycotters consciously addressed themselves to several different constituencies - synagogues, landsmanshaften, the labor movement, and socialist groups.

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45 *Ibid.*

46 *Ibid.*, May 17, 1902, p. 1.

47 *Ibid.*, May 18, 1902.

48 See cartoon of women holding key to locked kosher meat trust, *Forward*, May 24, 1902.

49 *American Hebrew*, May 2 through June 7, 1902.

Even within the traditional community, women had never been banned from the *secular* public sphere. In developing cadres of female activists, both the Jewish labor and Zionist movements in Russia built upon the relative freedom of public activity accorded women within the Jewish community. As Mary Van Kleeck of the Russell Sage Foundation commented in her study of one Lower East Side trade which employed Jewish women, "The Jewish girl . . . has a distinct sense of her social responsibility and often displays an eager zest for discussion of labor problems . . . Her attitude is likely to be that of an agitator. Nevertheless, she has the foundation of that admirable trait, 'public spirit,' and a sense of relationship to a community larger than the family or the personal group of which she happens to be a member."[50] Sufficient toleration existed within the family circle to enable Jewish women to express their "public spirit," to permit wives and mothers to attend evening meetings and to demonstrate in the streets. As the *Yiddishes Tageblat* put it, somewhat condescendingly, at the beginning of the boycott, "The women this time let the men play at home with the children while they went to attend the meeting."[51] While this was clearly a situation worthy of comment, it was not a violation of communal values.

If the immigrant Jewish community helped to sustain the meat boycott, the English-language socialist press was far more ambivalent in its attitude to this form of political activity. Indeed, it saw the only appropriate weapon for workers in the struggle against capitalism in the organization of producers rather than consumers. As *The Worker* commented,

> The Meat Trust does not care two-cents for such opposition as this, no matter how sincere the boycotters may be . . . [A boycott] is so orderly and law-abiding, so free from all taint of socialism or confiscation or class hatred, so truly individualistic, and above all, so perfectly harmless – to all except the poor workingmen . . . We cannot oppose the aggression of twentieth century capitalism with weapons fitted to the petty conflicts of eighteenth century small producers.[52]

Added the *Daily People*, organ of the Socialist Labor Party, "It does not make the capitalist hungry if the workingman goes without food. . . ."[53] Such an attitude overlooked the potential of community organization outside the workplace. It precluded reaching out to the neighborhood as a possible secondary locus of political activism, and incidentally resulted in an inability on the

50 Mary van Kleeck, *Artificial Flower Makers* (New York: 1913), pp. 34-35.
51 *Yiddishes Tageblat*, May 15, 1902.
52 *The Worker*, May 18, 1902, p. 2.
53 *Daily People*, May 21, 1902, p. 2.

part of the socialists to tap the ranks of the politically conscious housewife.

The difference in attitudes between the Yiddish-speaking and English-language socialists is also of broader interest. While the Jewish socialists were often seen as assimilationist, they remained closer to the shared value of their own immigrant community than to the perhaps ideologically purer stance of the American radicals.

The boycott movement enables us to look at the potential for political organization among Lower East Side women, the majority of whom were housewives unaffiliated in any formal sense with the trade union movement.But it also raises questions for which there are no readily available answers.

Was there any precedent for this type of direct action among married women in Eastern Europe? One can find a tenuous connection to the Eastern European scene in reference to the *korobke*, the meat tax, which in the nineteenth century constituted as much as one-third of the budget of some Jewish communities and was passionately resented. Some Hasidic rebbes in the first half of the last century urged passive resistance against the tax, even including a boycott on the purchase of meat.[54] Clearly, the ability to draw an analogy, as both the women activists and the *Forward* editorials did, between the *korobke* and the high price of kosher meat caused by collusion between the meat trust and rabbis selling their hechsher (certification of kashrut) was an appealing propaganda device. It linked the 1902 boycott to the longstanding disaffection of the poor with the authorities of the Eastern European kehilla. However, the boycott's leaders do not refer to earlier Eastern European examples of reaction against the *korobke*, nor is there any other evidence of direct influence from the Eastern European to the American scene.

As interesting as the boycott is as a vehicle for examining the political sensibilities and assessing the political potential of Jewish housewives on the Lower East Side, the fading away of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association is as significant as its sudden appearance. If the neighborhood network was so effective a means to reach women and mobilize them, why was it not sustained to deal with other social problems? True, the 1904 and 1907–08 rent strikes on the Lower Side espoused similar tactics and hailed the meat boycott as their model. Beginning with a house-to-house canvas in-

54 Raphael Mahler, *ha-Hasidut veha-Haskalah* (Merhavia: 1961), pp. 33–34. On the growing tension between the kehilla leadership and the masses, see Isaac Levitats, *The Jewish Community in Russia, 1772–1844* (New York: 1943).

itiated by women, strike leaders promoted neighborhood solidarity by collecting written pledges of refusal to pay rent. In 1908 women also lent their support to retail butchers protesting the rising cost in wholesale meat prices.[55] These further incidents of local activism confirm the growing consumer consciousness of Lower East Side women. However, there appears to be no overlap in leadership between these several expressions of female popular protest.[56] Were women coopted into already established fraternal and political organizations, or did the politics of crisis bring with it inertia once the crisis had passed?

Because its leaders faded into obscurity with the conclusion of the boycott, because of the very nature of a short-lived grass roots movement, it is impossible to assess the impact of the movement upon its participants. However, it is likely that the political awareness expressed by the boycotters was no isolated phenomenon but was communicated effectively, if quietly and informally, to their younger sisters and daughters. The boycott alerted the immigrant community as a whole and the labor movement in particular to the political potential of women. Moreover, the communal support of the boycott could only have encouraged women themselves to further activity. As Alice Kessler-Harris notes of Jewish women in the garment trades, whose numbers in the unions exceeded their proportion in the industry as a whole, they "unionized at their own initiative" and were "responsible for at least one quarter of the increased number of unionized women [in America] in the second decade of the twentieth century."[57] In that sense the kosher meat boycott should be seen not as an isolated incident but as a prelude to the explosion of women activists in the great garment industry strikes at the end of the decade.[58]

55 Daphne Kis, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-80.

56 Personal communication from Jenna Weissman Joselit.

57 Kessler-Harris, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

58 Louis Levine, *The Women's Garment Workers: A History of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union* (New York: 1924).