
BOOK REVIEWS

Scott D. Seligman, *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902: Immigrant Housewives and the Riots That Shook New York City.*

*Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2020. Pp. 276. \$32.95.
ISBN 9781640123588 (hardcover).*

It is not often that a scholar is able to revive a major historical event from the depths of obscurity, but that is what Scott D. Seligman has managed to do with his account of a consumer uprising led by Jewish women in response to the rising costs of kosher meat. In *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, Seligman walks readers through this case study in consumer activism set against the backdrop of the Roosevelt administration's prosecution of the Big Six Beef Trust, a Chicago-based syndicate of meat-packers who conspired to monopolize the market and gouge consumers.

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At the book's onset, Seligman poses a number of questions he intends to answer:

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? ... 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 (xii)?

The book's strength is in unearthing the historical details, mostly by way of newspapers and other archival documents, to bring to light this successful and unusual protest, which otherwise would not be known. Readers come to understand the many facets of this complicated set of circumstances, as Seligman answers all of these questions in detail.

The account begins with six chapters, which set the scene for the boycott to follow. Seligman falls short in the first chapter by including irrelevant details about the boycott leaders' Jewish practice (e.g. their wearing of *sheitls* and *mikvah* usage [3]), perhaps to make up for the lack of germane historical details available on these women. Despite this rocky beginning, Seligman quickly gains his footing and the rest of the account is compelling and focused. After introducing us to the four leaders—Sarah Edelson, Caroline Schatzberg, Paulina Finkel, and Sarah Cohn—and briefly describing life in the Lower East Side tenements (1-14), Seligman pivots in order to provide readers with an understanding of the Beef Trust (18), the logistics of providing both *treif* (20) and kosher beef (25-32), and the events leading up to kosher butchers on the Lower East Side shutting down their businesses to protest a fifty percent increase in the price of wholesale kosher beef in early 1902 (63-70).

The bulk of the book details what followed the butchers' boycott: on May 12, 1902, thousands of Jewish women, united by their commitment to *kashrut* and their outrage at the increased price of meat, took to the streets, intent to shutter every kosher butcher shop in the Jewish quarter. Using meticulous research and a dramatic narrative voice, Seligman

makes the boycott come alive and shows exactly how and why it came together as it did, from the initial idea of hosting a small meeting (78-79) to the massive rioting that resulted (85-98). Readers see those who crossed picket lines assaulted (85), meat doused in kerosene (95, 114) or ripped up and thrown at police (86), windows smashed, police brutality in response to the uprising (88), and dissent among the protesters (151-52). The author demonstrates the tactics used by the women, from pamphlet distribution (81) to picket lines to taking the *bimah* (123-25) to reach the men in the community, and what historical circumstances influenced those tactics. He also relays how the women of the Lower East Side formed and successfully ran their own kosher meat cooperatives (185-93). By the time readers reach the boycott's quiet ending in mid-June, we see exactly why this protest—with its fevered pitch, collective consumer power, and unlikely heroes challenging powerful corporate interests—deserves an academic spotlight shone upon it.

Seligman devotes the final three chapters to the aftermath of the boycott. Here he connects the meat boycott to consumer boycotts that came after, such as the rent strikes of 1904 and 1907 and further food boycotts occurring in the following decades (211-20). Like the kosher meat boycott of 1902, these strikes and the associations that were created to organize them were dissolved when their goals had been achieved, leaving the ties between them and previous boycotts tenuous and difficult to unearth. Seligman also relays what becomes of the Beef Trust, from the Supreme Court case against it in 1905 to its eventual dissolution in 1920 (221-23, 237).

The author excels in detailed description and his use of primary source materials, such as photos from the Library of Congress and copious newspaper articles written at the time. I do offer two critiques in my role of reviewer. First, throughout the book, readers may find the analysis wanting when it comes to the strategic tactics and forms of expression used by the strikers. The book would have been stronger if Seligman had applied some protest theory, which would have allowed him to provide a complex analysis of how union strikes informed tactics, the deepening alliance that the protestors had with labor unions, the women's speeches in synagogues, and the newspapers' responses to the boycotts.

Seligman also does a disservice to the individuals he documents and his own analysis by continually dismissing the leaders of the movement as unworldly housewives. Many were housewives, but they were not naïfs and were enveloped in a milieu of unionization and socialism. They understood market forces and were in conversation with the working men and women

around them. Edelson's husband spent two decades as a butcher (2), and she went on to lead the boycott and later open a successful kosher meat cooperative (189). The first meeting about the boycott took place in the saloon her family owned (78). Thousands of women worked in the garment industry at the time, which had been both organizing and unionizing for several years prior. To be clear, Seligman does not intend any disservice and, in fact, took up this project because of his admiration for the women involved. Yet by not engaging more with the social environment in which the women lived, Seligman does not fully answer his own questions of where the women acquired their organizational skills and why they chose the tactics they did.

Despite these criticisms, *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902* is a worthwhile addition to any bookshelf dedicated to American Jewish history. Seligman's writing style is influenced by his journalistic training; readers never doubt the academic integrity of the historian, but there is a colorful, descriptive element to the narration that makes the reading enjoyable throughout. He manages to turn a short-lived historical event about beef prices into an inspiring drama, and he makes a compelling case that its effects reverberate in consumer protest movements to this day. Moreover, Seligman does us a valuable service in pushing scholarship forward, providing this historical account that connects to so much of today's Jewish scholarship on food ethics, activism, material culture, and women's history.

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Daniel Weidner, *The Father of Jewish Mysticism: The Writing of Gershom Scholem.*

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2022. Pp. 234 + xi. \$40.00. ISBN: 9780253062086 (paperback).

Scholem has made Jewish studies more complicated for us, to be sure. He draws a wedge between religion and politics; he shows language's inability to disclose the meaning that we want it to (or even that *it* wants to); he