

Housewives' voice

The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902: Immigrant Housewives and the Riots That Shook New York City. Scott D. Seligman. Potomac Books: Imprint of University of Nebraska Press 2020

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New York City (specifically the Lower East Side). May 1902. The price of kosher meat increased significantly, and it was financially out of reach for the majority of Jews, most of whom were recent immigrants from Europe who were eking out a meagre living earned under sweatshop conditions. It was an era with cramped housing, shared bathroom facilities, and poorly ventilated apartments, often with only one window. Scott Seligman, the author of this book, paints a vivid picture of poverty at the time.

A certain mythology has developed regarding religious life. A stereotype has developed, picturing the typical Jewish immigrant as observant in his lifestyle. To be quite objective, “yes” and “no.” Of course, there were pious and learned Jews who came to New York, but they were few and far between. The majority of Lower East Side Jewish immigrants could be best described as cultural Jews.

How does one measure religiosity? A 1910s survey compared the ratio of Jews to *mikva'os*. The results showed very poor usage. As Seligman describes, there were kosher butcher shops open on Shabbos! Many sold both kosher and *treif* meat. Rabbi Yaakov Yosef was brought from Europe to serve as New York's chief rabbi and address problems in religious observance. His supervisors were barred from a slaughterhouse. He tried to introduce a *plumba* (at a cost of 1 cent) being affixed to certified chickens, but the public rejected it.

Meat was a staple. Chicken was more expensive. Fish was even more expensive. For the vast majority, buying meat labelled as non-kosher was against social norms and out of the question, even if the “kosher” meat was not so “kosher.”

This is an excellent analysis of why meat prices jumped. Enter the “Meat Trust,” a virtual gang of providers in gross violation of the recently-enacted Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Price fixing was only part of their operation. They divided up territory to forestall competition. Refrigerated railroad cars were invented little more than two decades before, so they bought most of these cars and controlled their use. (Shipping slaughtered meat, often from Chicago, was much cheaper than transporting live cattle that needed more room and had to be fed *en route*. Some 6% of the animals died during the trip.) Outsiders trying to use the trains were also forced out by numerous methods including high prices supported by kickbacks.

As meat prices rose, the first to suffer was the housewife who could no longer afford to buy meat for a stew or for *cholent*, but what could be done? Traditional economic theory says that when demand decreases and supply remain constant, prices go down. So, Jewish women started a boycott. Stop buying meat until prices are more reasonable. That approach may work well in a free economy, but the women could not contend with an economy manipulated by the Meat Trust. The book details how protest morphed into violence, destruction of property, arrests, and eager coverage by local newspapers in Jewish and popular, Yiddish and English, religious and secular, all looking for an attention-grabbing story. The violence was ugly as it destroyed businesses. Protesters were arrested and fined, but one should not think that the police were not always innocent in their own behaviour. And protests spread, from the Lower East side to areas of Brooklyn to the Bronx, to Newark and to Boston.

Jewish history does not occur in a vacuum. Why were protests and boycotting initiated by women (though at a later stage as protesters split into competing groups, men assumed



prominent roles)? This was an age of women's suffrage, as state by state they were assuming rights. It was also a period of fighting for better working conditions, and in unity there is strength in any struggle. Unity equals organization, or in the pragmatic terms of a worker, that means unionization. In the year following the boycott turned riots, the Women's Trade Union League of New York, an organization of middle- and working-class women, was formed.

Was the women's protest successful? Their actions did not directly bring down the cost of kosher meat, but nevertheless it did register major success. It brought the issue of the Meat Trust to the foreground. This was also the age of the muckrakers, investigative journalism perhaps best known through the novels of Upton Sinclair that exposed unhealthy food practices (another misdoings on the Meat Trust) and virtually intolerable working conditions. This was the beginning of Theodore Roosevelt's term as President in which he pronounced the Square Deal.

In retrospect, it can clearly be said that the protests were part of the process that led muckrakers to uncover clear documentary proof of price fixing by the Meat Trust and spurred prosecution of that cartel under the provisions of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.

In summation, this book makes for interesting reading, though this reviewer would have liked to have seen more detail about the general society atmosphere during the period.