

The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902: Immigrant Housewives and the Riots that Shook New York City, by Scott D. Seligman. Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books (University of Nebraska Press), 2020. 312 pages. \$32.95, cloth. \$32.95, electronic.

In early 1902, the price of beef—a staple of the American diet—rose precipitously. This was especially a problem for consumers of kosher meat, not only since many of them were poor recent immigrants from Eastern Europe, but also because, for a variety of technical reasons, kosher meat was more expensive to begin with. That May, Jewish immigrant housewives responded with a boycott that lasted for weeks and led to violent clashes between the female “strikers” (as they were often called) and the kosher butchers, as well as between the women and the police. The boycott movement began on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, but soon spread to other parts of New York and even to other cities. In *The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902*, Scott Seligman tells this remarkable story of women’s grassroots social activism in a highly accessible and readable way.

The biggest strengths of the book lie in its vivid descriptions of the workings of the meat industry and of the strike itself, along with the way it weaves together what might have appeared to be separate stories into one multi-level narrative. On the streets of New York, the fight was between the housewives and the butchers. But Seligman does not tell that story in isolation. Rather, he connects it to the larger issue of the powerful Meat Trust that manipulated the price of beef nationally and put tremendous pressure on other points along the supply chain. Ultimately, the consumer paid the price. Although these national dynamics may not have been completely visible to the boycotters, Seligman is able to link their

struggle to the broader efforts of the federal and New York State governments to rein in the Trust through court cases and regulation. He also integrates into his narrative the struggle to maintain standards of kashrut, and the tragic story of Rabbi Jacob Joseph, brought from Europe to help maintain those standards. The tale is thus one of both internecine Jewish communal strife and an issue that roiled the entire country.

If there is a weakness in the book, it is in its more general depictions of Jewish immigrant life, community, and culture. Although the movement was eventually hijacked by men, its original leaders were women. Seligman aims to give them a voice, but there are obstacles to doing so. One is simply that the women who stepped forward to lead the boycott in May 1902 receded from the public eye after the movement died down. But another is that their voice is in Yiddish, and Seligman does not know his subjects' language. He cites a couple dozen articles from the Yiddish press, which were apparently translated for him, but mostly relies on the English-language press. His descriptions of Jewish life in Eastern Europe and the Lower East Side sometimes read like translations of translations, a problem his discussions of the trusts and the larger political issues don't have.

Ultimately, Seligman argues, the events of 1902 had lasting significance. Not only did they provide a model for subsequent fights over the cost of food, but they also helped inspire campaigns for union organizing, tenant rights, and women's suffrage. The prominent careers of labor leaders like Pauline Newman and radical activists like Clara Lemlich Shavelson in some part can be attributed to the long-term influence of the 1902 movement. As Seligman writes, "The women of the 1902 strikes ushered in a new spirit of activism and an awakening among their sisters in the Jewish community. This applied not only to community movements like food and rent strikes; it also applied to labor actions, and was an important factor in the central role that Jewish American women played in the American labor movement well into the twentieth century" (p. 244).

The Great Kosher Meat War of 1902 is a useful addition to the literature, picking up where an oft-cited 1980 article by the late Paula Hyman left off (Seligman references the article at the beginning and end of the book). A good read, accompanied by amazing images from the time of the boycott, it would certainly be suitable for classroom or research use by college students, and perhaps advanced high school students as well. Although instructors focusing on Jewish immigration history might want to supplement it with other material, it would make a good addition to courses or units on American social, women's, consumer, and political history, or the history of the Progressive Era.