

## **Glimpses Into American Jewish History (Part )**

### **The Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902**

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“In mid-May, 1902, the retail price of kosher meat on the Lower East Side of New York jumped from 12 to 18 cents per pound. In the Gilded Age, such dramatic price fluctuations were common as great ‘Trusts’ -- oligopolies controlled by industrial barons -- cornered the market on commodities such as beef, steel and oil. In response to the rise in beef prices, for a week the small retail kosher butchers of New York refused to sell meat, their way of protesting the Beef Trust’s arrogance. However, the butchers’ boycott failed to bring wholesale prices down. Consumers had no choice but to pay the increase at the meat counter, or do without beef.

“Influenced by the emerging labor and women’s suffrage movements, Jewish homemakers on the Lower East Side began to agitate for a strike against kosher meat. Fanny Levy, whose husband was a unionized cloakmaker, and Sarah Edelson, who owned a small restaurant, mobilized the neighborhood women by going door-to-door to persuade them not to buy kosher beef, and to urge their neighbors to do the same.”<sup>1</sup>

“On May 14, these two women organized a meeting on the Lower East Side to rally support for the proposed boycott. The next day, tens of thousands of Jewish women took to the streets and demonstrated their outrage. Riots broke out as women attacked butcher shops and customers. Police officers tried to protect butcher shops, but protesting women grabbed meat and threw it out into the streets, even dousing it in gasoline and setting it on fire. Police arrested 85 people, three quarters of them women. Encouraged by the Lower East Side, women in other neighborhoods began their own boycotts.”<sup>2</sup>

The May 18, 1902 edition of the **New York Times** carried in part the following article on page 3.

#### **WOMEN RESUME RIOTS AGAINST MEAT SHOPS**

**Brooklyn Police Take Twenty-two Prisoners in Street Fight.**

#### **LOWER EAST SIDE DISTURBED**

**Business Places Attacked, Customers Assaulted, and Meat Thrown Away  
in the Borough of the Bronx.**

“The kosher meat riots which started on Thursday night in Manhattan were taken up in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn last night resulting in several butchers’ shops being attacked. The attack was made along Seigel Street, and half a dozen stores had show windows broken and the proprietors were compelled to close their doors. It was not until the Jewish Sabbath was at an end that the attack was made.

“A mob of 500 then went through the densely crowded Hebrew quarters, and at Graham Avenue and Seigel Street, Joseph Seleskv was selling meat in alleged violation of the agreement to fight the wholesalers. He refused to close up, and his place was practically wrecked. It was then that he closed up.

“At 10 o'clock the trouble in the streets became so acute that the reserves from the Hamburg, Herbert and Greenpoint stations were ordered out under Inspectors Druhan and Brennan. The police, numbering nearly 400, attacked the crowd of over 2000 persons and dispersed them by using their clubs freely. During the charge cobblestones and other missiles were thrown. Women leaving butcher shops had their meat taken from them.

“Twenty-two prisoners, all of them women, were taken, and until the patrol wagons arrived a drug store at Manhattan Avenue and Seigel Street was turned into a temporary police station.

#### RIOTING IN THE BRONX

“In the Bronx the women threw meat that had been bought of kosher butchers into the street after they had taken it away from persons who had purchased it; coaxed, inveigled, persuaded and forced intending purchasers not to buy, and in two instances were arrested for mischievous work.

“These butcher are charging extortionate prices, they explained and they begged the women and girls not to buy any meat of the men. The women, all in white waists and black skirts, attracted a crowd in a little time, and five of the boldest of them led the others to I. Jacobs’s shop, on Third Avenue. A little girl came out with a package of meat and the women seized her, took the package away, opened it, screaming in triumph, scattered the meat the street. Then they yelled again rushed at another woman, took the package she had, and, tearing the meat it contained apart threw it all about the pavement. These acts were cheered by the entire crowd of women.”

Again and again the women yelled “Down with the butchers,” and “We’ll have our rights!” and “Don’t buy from them!”

There were similar disturbances on the Lower East Side and in Harlem. Women demonstrators did their best to prevent other women from purchasing kosher meat due to the high price.

“Those who had bought the meat tried to disappear, but the other women seized them by the hair and slapped them as they tried to run. The bolder women joined in the fight and

for some time there was a lively fair pulling in the street. The crowd got excited and yelled, and the half dozen luckless women who insisted on buying meat were sorry afterward. The women seized each one of them and tore at their hair and bonnets and threw their meat into the street. The owners were too much afraid of the crowd to do anything but try to get away, which they did as quickly as they could.”

Because of the lack of meat the demand for milk and eggs increased considerably on the Lower East Side, and this soon resulted in shortages of these items, despite the fact that farmers were asked to increase shipments of milk the city.

On May 22<sup>nd</sup> the Retail Butchers Association, having been pressured by customers, aligned itself with the boycotters and refused to sell kosher beef in member shops. Five days later, Orthodox religious leaders, who had mostly remained on the sidelines, formally endorsed the boycott.

“The press noted the women’s impressive organization and strategy. The *New York Herald* reported that ‘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.’

On June 9<sup>th</sup> “Three weeks into the boycott, the price of kosher meat was lowered four cents when the Meat Trust agreed to drop prices to 14 cents a pound. Even though prices would rise again, the boycott had mobilized and politicized a group not traditionally involved in organized protest. Unlike most women involved in the labor movement in this period, the women who participated in the boycott were mostly homemakers in their thirties. Although mainly immigrants, most of the women had been living in the United States for many years and were asserting what they saw as *American* rights—the right to demand fair prices, the right to protest publicly, and the right to speak freely and openly. The boycott would become a model for future protests and was in many ways a precursor to larger scale strikes, including the 1909 shirtwaist strike.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/US-Israel/bc1902.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://jwa.org/thisweek/may/15/1902/kosher-beef-boycott-of-1902>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.