

Uprising against Butchers!

Julia Fermento-Tzaisler

In New York City in early May 1902, the price of kosher meat was raised from twelve cents to eighteen cents per pound. After several failed trials to reach a satisfying agreement between the butchers and the wholesalers of the meat, women started picketing around Monroe Street and Pike Street. In a matter of days, 20,000 Jewish women of the Lower East Side were publicly protesting against the butchers. The women boycotted kosher butchers and held a raging and often violent rally, during which they broke into butcher shops, took meat into the streets, soaked it in gasoline, and set it on fire. Reports on the protest appeared daily in the Yiddish and American press. On May 15, 1902, the Orthodox Yiddish newspaper *Tageblatt* featured the headline, “Women’s Revolution! Uprising against Butchers!” The “women’s revolution” ended after three weeks when the price per pound of kosher meat was reduced to fourteen cents.

The established historical scholarship on the 1902 kosher meat boycott avoids emphasizing religion as the main force of the boycott, focusing instead on other factors. Historian Herbert Gutman, one of the primary proponents of the “new labor history,” reads the boycott as an event that belongs to pre-industrialist America. Historian Paula Hyman argues for an understanding of the boycott as evidence of women’s participation in politics. Since the early twentieth century, Jewish revolutionary movements have been generally viewed as highly anticlerical. But revolutionary politics and religious observance need not be mutually exclusive. In order to debunk this conventional understanding, I am interested in asking: What did kosher meat symbolize for the Jewish protesters of 1902?

In the case of the 1902 kosher meat boycott, I contend that first, we need to understand kosher meat as a focal point for Jewish identity and not only as a staple food. Second, we need to examine the religious, cultural, political, and economic connection of Jewish women to kosher meat before their arrival in the United States. The kosher meat the women were fighting for was a meta-

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phor for *freedom*—freedom from the authorities, and freedom to practice religion without a rabbinical tyrant. The source for this claim can be found in the literature of the Haskalah movement, where meat appeared frequently as a metaphor for liberty and was an integral part of their ideas of Jewish modernization. The meat metaphor in the kosher meat boycott integrates the Jewish past in czarist Russia into the streets of the Lower East Side in 1902.

Eliminating the dichotomy between “the traditional” (keeping kosher) and “protest” permits us to see the unexpected interconnectedness between the two in the literature of the Haskalah and in the events that occurred several decades later on the Lower East Side. In order to better understand why the east European Jewish immigrants were so highly politicized we need to examine how memories of some particular times and places become embodied in and through performances. The kosher meat boycott can be looked at as a cultural performance, a social process of memory and forgetting. What the rioters remembered and wanted to forget can be discussed through maskilic literature.

Three maskilic writers help us understand these protests in a new light. Yehuda Leib Gordon’s 1870 Hebrew fable “Fattened Geese” is a rhymed story about a Jewish woman who buys a pair of geese several weeks before Passover. On the day of the slaughter she takes them to the rabbi, who, because of overly meticulous interpretation of kashrut, immediately adjudicates that they are not kosher. The poem poignantly calls attention to the oppressive encounter between kashrut laws, Jewish eating habits, and gender. Gordon recognizes the source of oppression and its mechanism—the rabbi as a signifier of redundant rabbinical religiosity.



In Mendele Moykher Sforim's 1869 play *The Tax, or a Gang Town of Benefactors*, Abramovitsh focuses on the ongoing unethical practices of the wealthiest members of the Jewish community. The *korobka*, a kosher meat tax imposed on members of the Jewish community, ostensibly was levied to cover the communal costs of ritual slaughter, but in fact mostly lined the pockets of the religious elite. The play condemns this corrupt practice and portrays their greed as troublingly integrated with their religiosity.

And lastly, a newly found, undated Yiddish play by Morris Winchevsky, a socialist activist, journalist, and renowned Yiddish poet who was also known as the "grandfather" of Yiddish proletarian literature, *The Kosher Meat Strike*, further illuminates this episode. I found the never-published, performed, or translated play at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York in 2016. *The Kosher Meat Strike* is a fascinating direct response to these events, placing the boycott within a historical Jewish narrative of oppression related to kosher meat. The plot revolves around an argument that divides the community: to support or not to support the striking women in their fight against butchers. Winchevsky understood the 1902 kosher meat boycott as an event that was part of a long and complex history of kashrut and maskilic literary narratives of resistance. Winchevsky's powerful and courageous poetic intervention is to refuse conventional narratives of Jewish politics, narratives that tend to either defend or condemn the divergence of Jewish law and rituals from the perceived norms of a secular-liberal politics. Like the other works discussed here, Winchevsky's play opens the door to reading the 1902 kosher meat boycott as an event within the tradition of Jewish political radicalism, and helps remind us of the often-ignored intersections of Jewish tradition and radicalism.

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11 ART CONTRIBUTOR: GABRIELLA BOROS

Suzy Post: *Jacob's Ladder*, 2020. Woodblock print. 14 x 29.5 in.
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