THE
American Jewish Experience

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Germans versus Russians

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At a time when established Jews were becoming acutely sensitive to the opinions of their fellow New Yorkers, they were faced with the prospect of a mass migration of coreligionists from Eastern Europe, whose coming seemed to threaten their hard-won respectability. German Jews had shed the tradesman’s mien and were acquiring the higher mercantile manner. As they became Americanized, their ties with the German community in New York became less pronounced and they, along with Jews of American origin, were discovering a common identity as Jews that they had not known earlier.

Yet in the years of the great Jewish migration, to be identified as a Jew became more and more irksome. The hosts of uncouth strangers, shunned by respectable New Yorkers, seemed to cast a pall upon all Jews. Disturbed native and German Jews, heirs to the age of reason and science, condemned everything that emanated from the downtown quarter.

It had not been so earlier, when disparities had been less marked and less consequential. East Europeans, few and far between, blended into the immigrant city and created no problems. Place of origin, family pride, clan solidarity, and intellectual tastes loosely defined business and social relations, but differences were in degree rather than in kind and fleeting contacts minimized friction. Gruff-mannered East Europeans tended to hover on the edge of more elegant “German” society despite mutual animosities. The Russian-Polish Jew, assuming German airs, became the “Kavalier Dach.” Selig became Sigmund, eager to dwell in the shadow of German respectability, at last to claim, “Mayn vaib is gevoren ah datchke un ich bin gevoren ah datch” (My wife has become a lady and I a gentleman). As the East European colony took shape, the German model persisted; but it lost its primacy, for Russian pioneers could now turn to their own circles to satisfy their social needs.

Established New York Jews had every effort to become one with prog-

ress. In 1870 the New York Times saluted Temple Emanuel-El in its new Moorish edifice as one of the globe’s leading congregations, “the first to stand forward before the world and proclaim the dominion of reason over blind and bigoted faith.” Clearly an age was dawning when all men, regardless of race or ancestral faith, would come together in universal communion. “In the erection and dedication of the Fifth Avenue Temple, it was not only the congregation that was triumphant, it was Judaism that triumphed, the Judaism of the heart, the Judaism which proclaims the spirit of religion as being of more importance than the letter.” In 1873 German Emanuel-El turned to Manchester, England, and called Gustav Gottheil to its pulpit to preach Judaism’s universal message in impeccably English accents, comprehensible to all New Yorkers.

European events sustained in German Jews the conviction of the supreme merit and eventual acceptance of all things German—all, regrettably, but language. With the rise of a new Germany, New York Germans, even as they became more American, compensated for earlier rebuffs with a rising flamboyance. Jews shared in the elation and further celebrated the removal of lingering disabilities upon their kin in the new empire. They took new pride in their roots and vicariously partook of German imperial prestige, assured that the German Empire meant “peace, liberty, progress, and civilization.” German Jews, insisted Rabbi Kaufmann Kohler, free of the “shackles of mediavalism,” their minds “impregnated with German sentiment ... no longer Oriental,” stood convinced of their superiority to East Europeans and regarded all vestiges of a segregated past with discomfort.

The fears of uptowners, colored with racist phraseology, smoldered in the Anglo-Jewish press. There anti-Russian sentiment assumed a withering metaphysical rationale as “a piece of Oriental antiquity in the midst of an ever-Progressive Occidental civilization” called forth the ghost of a happily forgotten past. Uptown Jews, sensitive to the reverberations of the new German anti-Semitism, were far more distressed by the “un-American” ways of the “wild Asiatics” than were non-Jews. “Are we waiting for the natural process of assimilation between Orientalism and Americanism? This will perhaps never take place,” exclaimed the American Hebrew. The Hebrew Standard echoed these misgivings: “The thoroughly acclimated American Jew ... has no religious, social or intellectual sympathies with them. He is closer to the Christian sentiment around him than to the Judaism of these miserable darkened Hebrews.” Even Emma Lazarus in her sonnet inscribed to the Statue of Liberty, “Mother of Exiles,” called the immigrants of the 1880s “the wretched refuse of your teeming shore.”

Nothing in the newcomers seemed worthy of approval. Yiddish, or Judeo-German, “a language only understood by Polish and Russian Jews,” though intelligible to non-Jewish Germans, was denounced as “piggish jargon.” Immigrant dress, ceremonials, and rabbinical divorces were anathema.
Yiddish theaters were barbarous, Yiddish newspapers, collectively stigmatized as “socialistic,” even worse. Furthermore, “dangerous principles” were “innate in the Russian Jew.” Mounting newspaper publicity proved especially distasteful. “The condition of the Jewish quarter... has too often been the subject of extravagant word-painting.” - Lincoln Steffens’s reports of East Side life in the Evening Post and Commercial Advertiser were resented equally with Abraham Cahan’s realist fictional essays.

Our newspapers have daily records of misdemeanors, marital misery, and petty quarrels that may largely be attributed to the same source. The efforts of intelligent brethren to raise the standards of Judaism have been frustrated by the efforts of misguided people who regard all teaching and criticism, as an outrage on their suddenly acquired and misunderstood liberty.

Most intolerable of all was that “anomaly in America, ‘Jewish’ trades unions.” Germans, embarrassed by Russian business competition, dismissed their rivals, whose names often ended with “ki,” as “kikes.” So Russians often were forced to Germanize their names in order to escape the stigma among German credit men. “Uptown” and “downtown” separated employers from employees, desirable from undesirable, “classes” from “masses,” “Americans” from “foreigners,” and icily confirmed the most categorical judgments.

Making New Americans

Yet, uptowners of means spared no effort to assist downtowners. “The uptown mansion never forgets the downtown tenement in its distress.” Uptowners, taken unawares by the heavy immigration of terror-stricken refugees in 1881 and fearful of a pauper problem, attempted to restrain further immigration. But as the tide could not be stemmed, the Jewish charities of the city, aided considerably by West European Jewry,chalantly accepted their new responsibilities. The American Hebrew urged: “All of us should be sensible of what we owe not only to these... coreligionists, but to ourselves, who will be looked upon by our gentle neighbors as the natural sponsors for these, our brethren.”

The established Jewish charities proved unequal to the new demands. The United Hebrew Charities, formed in 1874 during the economic crisis, had efficiently administered extra-institutional relief, but so moderate had been the claims made upon it, that in 1880 its treasury showed a balance of $14,000. Mass migration transformed the scope of Jewish charity. The Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, improvised for the crisis, raised $300,000 to succor the first contingents of refugees. In a single year, the HEAS expended as much as had the United Hebrew Charities in its seven-year existence. “Assistance was no longer claimed as a fraternal right, nor extended as a kin-like obligation,” recalled Professor Jacob H. Hollander two decades later at the Fifth Biennial Session of the National Conference of Jewish Charities.

It was the imperious demand of stricken humanity. But, as the situation lost its bitter novelty and the burden settled in onerous pressure, benevolence waned and something akin to patronage grew. The charitable association became no longer a semi-social device whereby the more prosperous members of the community relieved the misfortunes of neighbors and associates, but a tax-like charge for the indefinite relief of misery and dependence of a distinct class, different in speech, tradition and origin, unsought in arrival and unwelcome in presence, whose only claim was a tenuous tie of emotional appeal and an identical negation in religious belief.

Help continued nevertheless. Local groups and individuals, aided by the Independent Order of B’nai B’rith, the Baron de Hirsch Fund, and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, ministered to the needs of immigrants. The Forty-Eighter Michael Heilprin of the Nation came to a premature end as a result of his exertions to settle immigrants on the land. When refugees overflowed Castle Garden and the lodging houses nearby, the State Commissioners of Emigration opened the Ward’s Island buildings to the newcomers and Jacob H. Schiff contributed $10,000 for the erection of auxiliary barracks. The United Hebrew Charities provided free lodgings, meals, medical and midwife care, and, for countless unfortunates, free burial. The UHC’s employment bureau did its best, even when “the market was overladen with the kind of work offered” and “applicants were nearly all without special trade or calling and... physically unable to comply with the conditions demanded in this country.” In 1885, despite depressed trade conditions, the UHC’s employment bureau turned away only 744 of 3036 applicants as unemployable.

German Jews devised comprehensive schemes to divest downtown brethren of the marks of oppression and to remodel them in the uptown image. Mrs. Minnie D. Louis’s sixteen-verse poem outlining uptown’s Americanizing mission, “What it is to be a Jew,” opened with the image of the ghetto Jew,

To wear the yellow badge, the locks,
The caftan-long, the low-bent head,
To pocket unprompted knocks
And stumble on in servile dread—
‘Tis not this to be a Jew

and closed with a portrait of the American Jew, fully realized,

Among the ranks of men to stand
Full noble with the noblest there;
it was renamed the Educational Alliance. From 9 A.M. to 10 P.M., class and meeting rooms, an auditorium seating seven hundred, library, gymnasium, shower baths, and a roof garden entertained a wide range of activities. While adults learned "the privileges and duties of American citizenship," youngsters received the benefits of its many advantages. Vocational courses, classes in English, civics, American history, and English literature, and Edward King's especially popular classes in Greek and Roman history were augmented by sermons, public lectures sponsored by the Board of Education, and flag-waving exercises on the national holidays.

Not until the first decade of the twentieth century was the Educational Alliance to bridge the gap between modern, urban New York and the psychological world of Torah and ghetto by conducting its courses in Yiddish. But its initial program remained an outstanding unifier. A host of clubs, each with patron author, poet, scientist, statesman, or philosopher—including the George Eliot Circle for girls—crowded the calendar and vied for the never-adequate meeting rooms. In a city growing more sensitive to the collective pleasures given by music, musical training especially was encouraged. Piano, violin, mandolin, and singing classes met regularly and the melodic din of rehearsing trios, quartets, orchestras, choral groups, and a child's symphony echoed through its halls. If drawing classes elicited a poor response, art exhibitions jointly sponsored with the University Settlement, assisted by the public schools, set unprecedented attendance records. A ten-cent admission charge to Saturday evening concerts and entertainments discouraged only the mischief makers from attending. The first English performances in the Jewish quarter, "As You Like It" and "The Tempest," added Shakespearean fare to Purim and Hanukkah plays. Physical exercise, slighted by serious youngsters, was promoted by a full and vigorous athletic program. Dr. Jane Robbins, a founder of the College Settlement, spoke to young women on personal health and feminine hygiene in 1898, and leading physicians lectured to young men on "The Marriage Question: Its Physical and Moral Sides." A few years later the Henry Street Settlement welcomed similar talks, prescribing the introduction of such education into the public schools. In the first decade of the new century, a few hundred paid and voluntary workers descended upon the Alliance, its annex, and its two subbranches to direct and supervise a beehive of activity that weekly attracted some 37,000 adults and youngsters.

Deeply influencing the children, the Educational Alliance remained alien to the adult East Side, more so perhaps than the public schools and settlements, for these at least did not represent themselves as Jewish. At the Alliance, English was the official language and at the Alliance's People's Synagogue Dr. Adolph Radin conducted religious services in Hebrew and German. Yiddish, in immigrant eyes the touchstone of Jewishness, was taboo. Although the Alliance's successive Russian-born directors, Isaac Spec-
torsky and David Blaustein, could do little to affect the major lines of institutional policy, they were sensitive to the needs of their countrymen. The reading room, visited by a thousand persons daily, bulged with over one hundred Hebrew, Russian, and Yiddish journals. The Zionist Hebrew Literary Society, where youngsters sampled their first Hebrew idyl or renewed a romance with a reborn Hebrew literature, "is certainly in the line of moral culture," noted David Blaustein apologetically in the Alliance’s annual report. The Russian-American Hebrew Association, founded in 1890 by Dr. Radin, its president and sole officer, "to exercise a civilizing and elevating influence upon the immigrants and to Americanize them," broke precedent to permit Zevi H. Maslansky, the East Side’s magnetic Zionist preacher, to lecture in his native Yiddish. No less than Hebrew and Yiddish, Russian, the language of the intelligentsia, was unwelcome at the Alliance, although on occasion Russian-speaking societies met on the premises. Radin, a Posen Jew, felt moved to explain that "Russian" simply designated the place of origin of the immigrants, not the “half-barbarous civilization often signified by that name.”

**Philanthropy versus Self-Help**

Despite their failings, German-Jewish charitable institutions aroused the admiration of all New Yorkers. Echoing Andrew Carnegie, Jacob H. Schiff, writing in the *Independent*, reaffirmed the stewardship of wealth with Jewish overtones. "Philanthropy as the aim and ideal of Judaism," succinctly described the path taken by the religious impulse.

Few human needs were overlooked. Old institutions were modernized and expanded and new ones were established to meet unanticipated requirements. Mount Sinai, formerly the Jews’ Hospital, admitted more free clients than any other private institution in the city; nearly nine-tenths of its patients in the 1880s were treated without charge. The Hebrew Orphan Asylum Society and the Hebrew Sheltering and Guardian Society generously provided for orphans, while the Clara de Hirsch Home for Working Girls provided adolescents with recreational facilities. The Association for the Improved Instruction of Deaf Mutes—the oldest oral and only Jewish school for the deaf in the country—and societies for the blind and the crippled aided the handicapped. In 1893 a Jewish Prisoners’ Aid Association was formed reluctantly to minister to the relatively small but growing number of Jewish prison inmates. Before the turn of the century offending Jewish lads had been sent to the state-maintained House of Refuge or to the Catholic Protectory, as Jews proved laggard in providing for their youthful transgressors. But a precipitous rise in juvenile delinquency led to the founding in 1907 of the Hawthorne School of the Jewish Protectory and Aid Society. The Lakeview Home for Jewish unmarried mothers followed; and a few years later, the Jewish Big Brother and the Jewish Big Sister associations were formed to supervise youngsters on probation. Rounding out the major Jewish social agencies organized primarily to care for immigrant needs was the National Desertion Bureau, founded in 1911 to locate missing husbands.

Uptown institutions, however proficient and commendable, did not satisfy downtowners. East Europeans, treated as mendicants, were hardly grateful for the bounty bestowed. Efficient charity, with its documents and inquests, seemed incapable of performing the religious obligation of Zedakah—on its highest plane, pure loving-kindness. Prying strangers outraged the sense of decency of folk who in their home circles were often persons of consequence. As soon as it was possible, self-respecting immigrants made every effort to assist their own.

In the philanthropic institutions of our aristocratic German Jews you see beautiful offices, desks, all decorated, but strict and angry faces. Every poor man is questioned like a criminal, is looked down upon; every unfortunate suffers self-degradation and shivers like a leaf, just as if he were standing before a Russian official. When the same Russian Jew is in an institution of Russian Jews, no matter how poor and small the building, it will seem to him big and comfortable. He feels at home among his own brethren who speak his tongue, understand his thoughts and feel his heart.

From their earliest coming, immigrants in need instinctively turned to their fellow townsman. "The amount of small charity given directly from the poor to the poorer will never be known." The many-sided landsmanschafts, uniting the features of the Old World burial, study, and visitors-of-the-sick societies, bound the immigrant to his shetel and birthplace. At first these societies had been coextensive with synagogues. But with the onset of the great migration each town and village asserted its individuality. As early as 1892 a contemporary directory listed 136 religious societies in the Lower East Side and doubtless there were more. Ninety-three were registered as Russian-Polish; the rest, classified as Austro-Hungarian, embraced Austrian, Hungarian, Rumanian, and some German congregations. The Beth Hamedrash Hagadol on Norfolk Street alone welcomed all Jews.

After 1880 landsmanschafts independent of synagogue ties began to supersede the religious societies. The better managed benevolent societies furnished insurance, sick benefits, and interest-free loans, as well as cherished cemetery rights. In time, women’s auxiliary aid societies were founded, whose members were tutored in the parliamentary amenities by their male sponsors. In 1914, 534 benevolent societies, with from fifty to five-hundred members each, embraced virtually every immigrant household in New York City. When landsmanschafts affiliated with fraternal orders, they were transformed into familiar American lodges. Since the established German associations discouraged the entrance of newcomers, East Europeans formed their
own. In 1887 Hungarians organized the Independent Order Brith Abraham, which conducted its business in German, but welcomed all comers; this organization soon became the largest of all Jewish fraternal orders. In 1900 the Workmen’s Circle and in 1912 the Jewish National Workers’ Alliance were founded by Jewish trade unionists dissatisfied with the quasi-religious ritual and tone of the existing orders.

By the late 1880s, East Europeans had already begun to organize their own communal charities. Russians and Austro-Hungarians founded their respective free burial societies. The cathedral Russian congregation established the Passover Relief Committee of the Beth Hamedrash Hagadol and prided itself on its catholicity: “In dispensing money and matzos to the poor, all are recognized as the children of one Father, and no lines are drawn between natives of different countries.” The Hevra Hachnosas Orchim (the Hebrew Sheltering Society), formed in 1890, undertook to feed, lodge, and clothe friendless immigrants and to aid them in finding employment or in seeking out landsleit. In 1909 the Hebrew Sheltering Society was united with the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, founded in 1902 to ease the entrance of newcomers into the country. The expanded HIAS was to serve the needs of immigrants for over half a century.

The self-help principle took characteristic communal form in 1892 in the Gemillat Hasidim Association, the Hebrew Free Loan Society. The Society, relying solely on the endorsement of merchants of standing, made interest-free loans of from $10 to $200 to immigrants eager to set up independently in business. Within little more than a decade, the Society’s funds soared to over $100,000 as grateful borrowers, recalling the source of their success, contributed to its capital.

East Europeans also founded their own hospitals. Beth Israel, beginning in 1889 as a dispensary on Birmingham Alley, “the shortest and most dismal street in the whole city,” grew to become the Lower East Side’s leading hospital. Lebanon Hospital, Beth David, and the Hungarian People’s Hospital followed, and in 1904 Galicians and Bukovinians undertook to found Har Moriah. Despite the opposition of the United Hebrew Charities, East Side physicians organized the Jewish Maternity Hospital in 1906 so that East Side mothers no longer had to depend on the New York Lying-In Hospital. These East Side institutions could be trusted to be kosher and to treat East European patients and physicians as equals. (Although 90 percent of Mount Sinai’s patients were East Europeans, East European physicians were not admitted to that hospital’s staff.) In 1897 institutional care for the aged poor also was inaugurated with the founding of the Home of the Daughters of Jacob.

Levantine Jews maintained an existence independent of Yiddish New York. As early as 1884 Gibraltarans, culturally akin to the Levantines, founded Congregation Moses Montefiore in East Harlem. However, the number of true Levantines did not become significant until over two decades later when unrest within the Turkish empire brought a mixed multitude of ten thousand to the city. Dominantly Judeo-Spanish (Ladino) in speech, they included several hundred Greek-speaking Jews, and one thousand Arabic-speaking Jews from Aleppo in Syria. At first they were aided especially by the sisterhood of the city’s oldest congregation, the Sephardic Shearith Israel, distant kin indeed to the newcomers. But in 1913 these latest immigrants organized a mutual benefit society and the Oriental Ozer Dalmat Society to care for their own needy.

The religious urgency to provide a genuinely Jewish education for their sons drove downtowners to trust to their own resources. Half the Lower East Side children receiving a religious education in the 1890s attended the classes of the Hebrew Free School Association, but most of them were girls, for these classes did not answer the needs of East Europeans (many of whom even suspected that the cookie-laden Mrs. Minnie Louis of the Downtown Sabbath School was a Christian missionary). Parents gladly sacrificed to send their sons to the traditional Hebrew schools; the registration in 1903 at the Lower East Side’s 307 cheders (religious elementary schools) was 8616 boys and only 361 girls. There the rebe (religious teacher) linked the generations in intimacy of mood, ritual, and language, and slaked the consciences of parents who welcomed the opportunities thrown open to their children by the public schools, but who dreaded the impiety and the emptiness created between generations.

Late afternoon and early evening, pedagogues in basements or tenement flats, above saloons and dance halls, drove youngsters through the mechanics of prayer-book reading, rarely understood in the Old World, but in the New not even feared or respected. More ambitious and systematic were the Talmud Torahs which at first dispensed shoes and clothing along with a traditional religious education. In 1886 the Machzike Talmud Torah acquired its own building on East Broadway and soon shed its charitable aspect. In the same year the Yeshiva Etz Chaim was founded as an all-day school where a small number of youngsters pursued talmudical learning. In 1901 the Americanized Jacob Joseph Yeshiva was organized “to prepare Hebrew boys for life in this country.” Finally, the Yeshiva Isaac Elchanan, organized in 1896 for the pursuit of advanced talmudical studies, completed the educational ladder for traditional Jewish learning. While most parents strained to pay the small fees, many were neglectful or unable to meet their obligations. The announcements in 1908 that three out of every four children received no religious education was doubtless exaggerated. Even so, it did reflect poverty, indifference, and weakened parental control. A dismal literal translation of the Talmud testified to the hopelessness of inspiring respect for traditional knowledge among the American-born.

A few enthusiasts, disgusted with formalistic Jewish studies, pioneered modern Jewish schools in an effort to link son to father, to breathe meaning
into an ancient heritage in the modes of a new age. Zionists opened modern Hebrew schools in the 1890s while Jewish nationalists founded Yiddish folk schools around 1910, both groups searching for bridges over the chasm separating the generations that would unite the most advanced democratic ideals to a transvalued Jewish tradition. Random trials also were made with socialist Sunday schools, sponsored by the Socialist party, where lessons in “capitalist ethics” were replaced by lessons in “socialist ethics.” At Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman’s Ferrer Center and School, two dozen youngsters were regaled with the lessons of anarcho-communism and listened to lectures by Clarence Darrow, Edwin Markham, and Lincoln Steffens that pointed to the free development of the individual. However humanitarian in intent, these experiments remained on the fringe of the immigrant community and acquired but a small and uncertain following.

The Larger Giving

Traditions of Jewish communal responsibility left little need for outside aid. Despite seasonal unemployment and acute poverty in the mid-nineties and during the 1907 and 1914 depressions, the resources of city, state, and non-Jewish private agencies were lightly taxed. In crisis years, aroused private citizens lent a hand, and examples of nonsectarian charity were many. In 1882 non-Jewish merchants and bankers contributed to the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society, while in 1891, at a banquet honoring Jesse Seligman, non-Jews contributed to the Russian Transportation Fund for the Moscow refugees. In the depressed nineties Mrs. Josephine Shaw Lowell’s East Side Relief Work “put our poor ‘Hebrew Jews’ at work to clothe the poor Negroes of the Sea Islands,” and John B. Devins, pastor of Hope Chapel, transformed the East Side Relief Workers’ Committee into the Federation of East Side Workers that included Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. In 1907 Mrs. Russell Sage and Warner Van Norden made substantial gifts to the United Hebrew Charities; Henry Phipps, too, proved a generous and steady supporter of the Legal Aid Bureau of the Educational Alliance.

Where municipal, state, and private institutions felt the pressure of the newcomers, they shared the burdens with the Jewish agencies. The City’s Board of Estimate annually allotted a small sum to the United Hebrew Charities; and the state earmarked more substantial amounts for the Hebrew Orphan Asylum Society, the Hebrew Sheltering and Guardian Society, the Aguilera Free Library Society, and the Jewish hospitals. The Charity Organization Society, the New York Association for Improving the Condition of the Poor, the Children’s Aid Society, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children cooperated with the United Hebrew Charities. The Sloane Maternity, the New York Lying-In, and the Mother and Babies’ hospitals aided expectant mothers in out-patient departments. The Tribune Fresh Air Fund, the Herald Ice Fund, the spectacular fund-raising of the World and the Journal, and Nathan Straus’s sterilized milk for the children of the tenements also contributed to the well-being of the immigrant East Side.

Two nonsectarian agencies proved especially useful. The Deutscher Rechts Schutz Verein, founded in 1876 by German immigrants, became the Legal Aid Society in 1894. By then most of its litigated cases were recorded on the East Side, and in 1899 an East Side branch was opened at the University Settlement. The society’s panel of prominent attorneys, cooperating with the Legal Aid Council of the United Hebrew Charities and the Legal Aid Bureau of the Educational Alliance, arbitrated petty disputes without charge and kept thousands of cases from reaching the court dockets. The Provident Loan Society, authorized by a select committee of the Charity Organization Society, also performed a special service. Operating as a small loan association, it proposed to reduce the high interest rates of pawnbrokers, permitted to charge 3 percent per month, by charging 1 percent. By 1911 there were three Provident Loan Society branches on the Lower East Side and one each in the Bronx, Williamsburg, and Brownsville, the major foci of East European Jewish settlement.

Promise of Community

At the turn of the century all East Europeans, despite their diversity, were characterized as “Russians.” Russian immigrants, with their numbers, variety, intellectual drive, and sense of historical exigency, defined and redefined the quarter’s horizons of heart and mind. Despite their nostalgia for the scenes of their childhood and youth, having fled a despotic homeland to which there was no returning, they were quick to embrace America as their first true homeland. Galicians, however, harbored a genuine affection for the benevolent Austrian empire and could easily return. While idealistic Russians formed the Lermontoff Benevolent Society and a host of liberty-loving clubs, celebrating the Russia to be, wistful Galicians founded the Crown Prince Rudolph Verein, the Franz Joseph Kranken Unterstutzung Verein, and the Franz Ferdinand Benevolent Society, honoring the Hapsburg empire as it was. In 1884 Hungarians organized the Magyar Tarsulat (Society) and in the same year lonely Rumanians banded together in the Rumanisch-Amerikanischer Bruderbund. The huge Russian colony, agitated by the winds of the world to come rather than by monuments to attained liberties, overshadowed the lesser enclaves. In 1904 immigrants isolated from the main currents of the quarter formed the Federation of Galician and Bukovinian Jews to promote intercourse with culturally more energetic Russians.

The low intermarriage rate, even between individuals of the diverse East
European Jewries, reflected their group solidarity. After 1900 the equipoise between the sexes in each group and a clan-centered social life especially limited contacts. The barriers that separated East European Jews from non-Jewish New Yorkers militated against marriage outside the fold. After 1900, however, the association of Jewish women with Italians and non-Jewish Russians in the apparel trades led to some marriages. The highly publicized nuptials of Americanized "emancipated" Jewish women and social reformers were unusual. Yet, in these years, such alliances were only slightly less frequent than marriages between uptowners and downtowners.

In time bridges of communication formed between Germans and Russians. Yet only a complex transformation wrought on both groups by American and world experiences over more than half a century was to boil away the mutual incomprehension and intolerance that kept Jews apart. In these years, cooperation was rare and halfhearted in the lone area of social encounter between uptown and downtown—charitable endeavor. In 1901 the downtown Auxiliary Society of the United Hebrew Charities disbanded, no longer content with a subordinate, mere fund-collecting role. In the same year the Downtown Burial Society, Chessed Shel Emes, assumed full responsibility for the Lower East Side, and the United Hebrew Charities dissolved its Free Burial branch. After 1904 requests for aid to the UHC declined; inadequate relief discouraged those in desperate need, while the galaxy of mutual aid societies provided for those less seriously distressed. Yet, even as Germans and Russians pulled apart, the rise of an American-trained generation of Russians spelled the onset of a new equilibrium. Indeed, as early as 1901 downtowners envisioned a United Hebrew Community, "to effect a union of Jewish societies and congregations in New York City."

In the early years of the twentieth century, the beginnings of accommodation between Germans and Russians were discernible, as the spirit of American reform penetrated both groups.

CHAPTER 10

The study of immigrant Jewish women has proceeded rapidly in recent years. No longer are they seen as mere passive extensions of their immigrant husbands. In fact, evidence now reveals that many women immigrated to America unmarrried. What's more, immigrant Jewish women often assumed assertive roles: they educated themselves, obtained paying jobs, and in some cases played active roles in the labor movement and in community politics. Where other immigrant women found themselves barred from participation in what was considered to be the "male sphere," Jewish women faced far fewer restrictions. They could appear unescorted at evening lectures and classes and participate in public demonstrations without giving rise to scandal.

Once married, Jewish women did not so frequently leave home to enter the marketplace. But while a 1911 study from New York contends that only a paltry 1 percent of immigrant Jewish wives were employed "officially," many more were certainly working in fact, either at home or in so-called "Mom and Pop" businesses like groceries, delicatessens, or candy stores. Nor were married women necessarily inhibited from participating in community politics. To the contrary, Jewish housewives operating at the grass-roots level led various strikes and boycotts. As Paula E. Hyman, a modern Jewish historian who specializes in women's history, points out, they expressed their political concerns in their own neighborhoods, "where they pioneered in local community organizing."

Professor Hyman focuses here on a women-led kosher meat boycott. Kosher meat—meat slaughtered and prepared according to the dietary requirements set forth in Jewish law—gave rise to various scandals in the immigrant period (and later), as unscrupulous merchants sought to exploit an essentially captive market by price-fixing; some even passed non-kosher meat off as kosher and sold it at great profit. In the absence both of state consumer legislation and effective Jewish community controls, shoppers—women, in the main—had to fend for themselves. In May 1902, as the retail price of kosher meat soared, they did just that, and undertook to boycott kosher meat in an effort to force prices down.

As an incident, the meat boycott quickly faded; attention turned to other
problems. As a case study, however, the boycott has lingering significance for it portrays immigrant Jewish women in a new light. It shows, for example, that even those who were married with growing families and years of experience on American soil could if provoked assert themselves and organize effectively, using traditional friendship groups as their base. It also shows that women had developed considerable political savvy—a valuable asset in America, and one that Jewish women activists both in the labor movement and in Jewish women's organizations would later exploit with success.

Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: The New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902

Paula E. Hyman

Women have always participated in politics. Despite their eclipse in the conventional seats of political power, women in preindustrial societies frequently engaged in popular protest, particularly when the price, or availability, of basic foodstuffs was at issue. As one English historian of the working class and of popular culture has pointed out regarding eighteenth-century food riots, women were "those most involved in face-to-face marketing [and hence] most sensitive to price significancies. ..." In fact, he adds, "it is probable that the women most frequently precipitated the spontaneous actions." In the popular ferment of the early days of the French Revolution, women were also conspicuous by their presence. The image of grim-faced market women on the march to Versailles to bring the royal family back to Paris has been sharply etched in the mind of every student of history or enthusiast of historical dramas. Even before the emergence of modern political movements committed to the recruitment of women into the political process, the "crowd" was an important means of expression for women's economic and political interests.

Immigrant Jewish women, too, took to the streets in spontaneous food riots on several occasions. Like their British and French forerunners more than a century before, they were reacting to the sharp rise in the price of food. Most noted and flamboyant of these incidents were the 1902 kosher meat riots in New York City. Erupting in mid-May, they precipitated political activity which continued for almost a month, attracting considerable attention within both the Jewish community and the larger urban society. Indeed, in a fierce and vitriolic editorial of May 24, 1902, the New York Times called for a speedy and determined police repression of this "dangerous class ... especially the women [who] are very ignorant [and] ... mostly speak a foreign language ... It will not do," the editorial continued, "to have a swarm of ignorant and infuriated women going about any part of this city with pe-
troblem destroying goods and trying to set fire to the shops of those against whom they are angry.”

What impelled immigrant Jewish housewives to take to the streets (of Williamsburg, in this case) with bottles of kerosene in their hands? Was this simply an act of spontaneous rage, a corroboration of the English writer Robert Southey’s comment that “women are more disposed to be mutinous than men”? Are the kosher meat riots a late manifestation, as Herbert Gutman has suggested, of a preindustrial sensibility that focused upon the illegitimacy of violating a fair price for food? Finally, and most importantly, what can we learn of the self-perceptions, political consciousness, and sense of community of immigrant Jewish women by examining their role in this incident?

Despite their superficial similarity to earlier food riots, the kosher meat riots of 1902 give evidence of a modern and sophisticated political mentality emerging in a rapidly changing community. With this issue of the high price of food, immigrant housewives found a vehicle for political organization. They articulated a rudimentary grasp of their power as consumers and domestic managers. And, combining both traditional and modern tactics, they temporarily turned their status as housewives to good advantage, and used the neighborhood network to stage a successful three-week boycott of kosher meat shops throughout the Lower East Side, parts of upper Manhattan and the Bronx, and Brooklyn. The dynamics of the kosher meat boycott suggest that by focusing almost exclusively upon organized political activity in the labor movement and the socialist parties, historians have overlooked the role of women. Although for a great part of their life absent from the wage-earning market, immigrant Jewish women were not apolitical. They simply expressed their political concerns in a different, less historically accessible arena—the neighborhood—where they pioneered in local community organizing.

In early May, 1902, the retail price of kosher meat had soared from twelve cents to eighteen cents a pound. Small retail butchers, concerned that their customers would not be able to afford their produce, refused to sell meat for a week to pressure the wholesalers (commonly referred to as the Meat Trust) to lower their prices. When their May 14 settlement with the wholesalers brought no reduction in the retail price of meat, Lower East Side housewives, milling in the street, began to call for a strike against the butchers. As one activist, Mrs. Levy, the wife of a cloakmaker, shouted, “This is their strike! Look at the good it has brought! Now, if we women make a strike, then it will be a strike.” Gathering support on the block—Monroe Street and Erie Street—Mrs. Levy and Sarah Edelson, owner of a small restaurant, called a mass meeting to spread the word of the planned boycott.

The next day, after a neighborhood canvas staged by the organizers, thousands of women streamed through the streets of the Lower East Side, breaking into butcher shops, flinging meat into the streets, and declaring a boycott. “Women were the ringleaders at all hours,” noted the New York Herald. Customers who tried to carry their purchased meat from the butcher shops were forced to drop it. One woman emerging from a butcher store with meat for her sick husband was vociferously chided by an elderly woman wearing the traditional shetiel that “a sick man can eat tref meat.” Within half an hour, the Forward reported, the strike had spread from one block through the entire area. Twenty thousand people were reported to have massed in front of the New Irving Hall. “Women were pushed and hustled about [by the police], thrown to the pavement . . . and trampled upon,” wrote the Herald. One policeman, trying to rescue those buying meat, had “an unpleasant moist piece of liver slapped in his face.” Patrol wagons filled the streets, hauling women, some bleeding from their encounters with the police, into court. About seventy women and fifteen men were arrested on charges of disorderly conduct.

After the first day of street rioting, a mass meeting to rally support and map strategy was held at the initiative of the women activists, who had formed a committee. Two of their number addressed the crowd, as did the popular figure Joseph Barondess and the Zionist leader Rabbi Zelt. The next day, May 16, Lower East Side women again went from house to house to strengthen the boycott. Individuals were urged not to enter butcher shops or purchase meat. Pickets were appointed to stand in front of each butcher shop. On each block funds were collected to pay the fines of those arrested and to reimburse those customers whose meat had been confiscated in the first day of rioting. The Tribune reported that “an excitible and aroused crowd roamed the streets . . . As was the case on the previous day, the main disturbance was caused by the women. Armed with sticks, vocabularies and well sharpened nails, they made life miserable for the policemen.” On the second day of rioting another hundred people were arrested. The boycott also spread, under local leadership, to the Bronx and to Harlem, where a mass meeting was held at Central Hall.

On Saturday, May 17, the women leaders of the boycott continued their efforts, going from synagogue to synagogue to agitate on behalf of the boycott. Using the traditional communal tactic of interrupting the Torah reading when a matter of justice was at stake, they called on the men in each congregation to encourage their wives not to buy meat and sought rabbinic endorsement of their efforts. For once, urged a boycott leader, citing a biblical passage, let the men use the power of “And he shall rule over her” to the good, by seeing to it that their wives refrain from purchasing meat.

On Sunday, May 18, most butcher shops on the Lower East Side bowed to pressure and closed their doors. And the boycott had spread to Brooklyn, for the broken windows of open butcher shops had been broken and meat
burned. That night, the women held another meeting, attended by more than five hundred persons, to consolidate their organization, now named the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association. Under the presidency of Mrs. Caroline Schatzburg, it proposed to continue house-to-house patrols, keep watch over butcher stores, and begin agitating for similar action among Christian women. Circulars bearing a skull and crossbones and the slogan “Eat no meat while the Trust is taking meat from the bones of your women and children” were distributed throughout the Jewish quarters of the city. The association established six similar committees to consolidate the boycott in Brownsville, East New York, and the Bronx. Other committees were set up to visit the labor and benevolent societies, labor union meetings, and lodges and to plan the establishment of cooperative stores. The association also sent a delegation to the mayor's office to seek permission for an open-air rally. Local groups of women continued to enforce the boycott in their neighborhoods. In Brooklyn four hundred women signed up to patrol neighborhood butcher stores. Buyers of meat continued to be assaulted and butcher shop windows smashed. In Harlem two women were arrested when they lay down on the elevated tracks to prevent a local butcher from heading downtown with meat for sale. Throughout the city's Jewish neighborhoods restaurants had ceased serving meat.

However, competition between Sarah Edelson, one of the founders of the boycott, and Caroline Schatzburg, the president of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, erupted by May 18 into open quarrels between their followers at meetings. Taking advantage of this rivalry and winning the support of Edelson and her backers, on May 21 male communal leaders, with David Blaustein of the Educational Alliance presiding, held a conference of three hundred representatives of synagogues, hebras, landsmanshaften, and unions “to bring order to the great struggle for cheap meat.” In his remarks at the conference meeting, Joseph Barondess made explicit that a new leadership was asserting itself. Urging the women to be quiet and leave the fighting to the men, he noted that otherwise the women would be held responsible in the event of the boycott's defeat. Calling themselves the Allied Conference for Cheap Kosher Meat, the male conference leaders appointed a ten-person steering committee, among whom were only three women. (Women continued, however, to engage in propaganda activities and sporadic rioting in their neighborhoods.) The Allied Conference published a circular in both Yiddish and English, noting that “brave and honest men [were] now aiding the women” and declaring that the conference had “decided to help those butchers who [would] sell cheap kosher meat under the supervision of the rabbis and the conference.” “The people feel very justly,” continued the statement, “that they are being ground down, not only by the Beef Trust of the country, but also by the Jewish Beef Trust of the City.”

On May 22, the Retail Butchers Association succumbed and affiliated itself with the boycott against the Trust. On May 27, Orthodox leaders, who had hesitated to express formal endorsement of the boycott, joined the fray. By June 5 the strike was concluded. The wholesale price of kosher meat was rolled back to nine cents a pound so that the retail price would be pegged at fourteen cents a pound. Kosher meat cooperatives, which were established during the strike in both Brooklyn and Harlem, continued in existence. While meat prices began to rise inexorably again in the period following the conclusion of the boycott, the movement can still be considered a qualified success.

The leaders of the boycott were not typical of other women political activists of the period. Unlike the majority of women organized in the nascent garment unions, they were not young. Unlike the female union leaders, they were housewives with children. The mean age of those boycott leaders who could be traced in the 1905 New York state manuscript census was thirty-nine. They ranged from Mamie Gilman, the thirty-two-year-old Russian-born wife of a tailor, to Mrs. L. Finkelstein, a fifty-four-year-old member of the Women's Committee. All but two were more than thirty-five years of age at the time of the boycott. These women were mothers of large families, averaging 4.3 children apiece living at home. Fannie Levy, who initiated the call for the strike, was the mother of six children, all below the age of thirteen. None had fewer than three children. While only two women were United States citizens, the strike leaders were not, for the most part, recent arrivals to America. They had been living in New York City from three to twenty-seven years, with a median residence of eleven years. Having had sufficient time to accommodate themselves to the American scene, they were not simply expressing traditional forms of cultural resistance to industrial society imported from the Old Country.

In socioeconomic terms, the women initiators of the boycott appear representative of the larger immigrant Jewish community of the Lower East Side. Their husbands were, by and large, employed as artisans in the garment industry, though three were self-employed small businessmen. The husband of Annie Block, a member of the Women's Committee, was a tailor, as were three other husbands. Fannie Levy's husband was a cloakmaker and Bessie Norkin's a carpenter, while J. Jaffe's husband, Meyer, and Annie Levine's husband, Morris, topped the occupational scale as a real estate agent and storekeeper respectively. With one exception, all of their children above the age of sixteen were working—two-thirds of them in artisan trades and the remainder as clerks or low-level business employees (e.g., salesladies). Only the eighteen-year-old son of the real estate agent was still in school (though his older brothers were employed as garment-industry operators). Thus, the women formed not an elite in their community, but a true grass-roots leadership.

It is clear from their statements and their activity that the women who led
the boycott had a distinct economic objective in mind and a clear political strategy for achieving their goal. Unlike traditional food rioters, the Lower East Side housewives were not demanding the imposition of a just and popular price on retailers. Nor were they forcibly appropriating meat for purchase at a regularly determined fair price, though they did retain a traditional sense of a moral economy in which food should be available at prices which the working classes could afford. Rather, recognizing that prices were set by the operation of the laws of supply and demand, as modified, in this case, by the concentration of the wholesale meat industry, they hit upon a boycott of meat as the most effective way to dramatically curtail demand. They referred to themselves as strikers; those who did not comply with the boycott were called “scabs.” When they were harassed in the street by police, they complained that denial by police of their right to assemble was an attack on their freedom of speech. Thus, Lower East Side women were familiar with the political rhetoric of their day, with the workings of the market economy, and with the potential of consumers to affect the market.

While the impulse for the boycott originated in spontaneous outrage of women consumers at the price of kosher meat and their sense that they had been manipulated (or swindled, as they put it) by the retail butchers, who had sold out their customers in their agreement with the wholesalers, this incident was not simply an explosion of rage. It was a sustained, though limited, movement whose success lay in its careful organization. As the New York Herald rightly commented, “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.”

In fact, the neighborhood focus of the boycott organization proved to be its source of strength. The initial boycott committee, composed of nineteen women, numbered nine neighbors from Monroe Street, four from Cherry Street, and six from adjacent blocks. This was not the anonymous city so often portrayed by antiurban polemics and historians but a neighborhood community whose residents maintained close ties. The first show of strength on May 15 was preceded by an early morning house-to-house canvas of housewives in the heart of the boycott area. A similar canvas occurred the next day in Harlem under the aegis of local women. Rooted in the neighborhood, where many activities were quasi-public rather than strictly private, housewives were able to exert moral (as well as physical) suasion upon the women whom they saw on a daily basis. They assumed the existence of collective goals and the right to demand shared sacrifices. Individual desires for the consumption of meat were to be subordinated to the larger public good. As one boycott enthusiast stated while grabbing meat from a girl leaving a butcher store, “If we can’t eat meat, the customers can’t eat meat.”

Shouting similar sentiments in another incident, striking women attempted to remove the meat from cholent pots which their neighbors had brought to a local bakery on a Friday afternoon. Participants in the boycott picketed local butchers and also resolved not to speak to the “scabs” in their midst. The constant presence in the neighborhood of the housewife leaders of the boycott made it difficult for individuals to evade their surveillance. The neighborhood, a form of female network, thus provided the locus of community for the boycott: all were giving up meat together, celebrating dairy shabbosim together, and contributing together to the boycott fund.

The women who organized and led the boycott considered themselves the natural leaders of such an enterprise. As consumers and housewives, they saw their task as complementary to that of their wage-earning spouses: “Our husbands work hard,” stated one of the leaders at the initial planning meeting. “They try their best to bring a few cents into the house. We must manage to spend as little as possible. We will not give away our last few cents to the butcher and let our children go barefoot.” In response, the women shouted, “We will not be silent; we will overturn the world.” Describing themselves as soldiers, they determined to circulate leaflets calling upon all women to “join the great women’s war.” An appeal to their “worthy sisters,” published by the Ladies’ Anti-Beef Trust in the Forward, expressed similar sentiments, calling for “help . . . in the name of humanity in this great struggle which we have undertaken out of need.”

Sharper formulations of class resentment mingled with pride in their own talents in some of the women’s shouts in the street demonstrations. One woman was heard lamenting to another, “Your children must go to work, and the millionaires snatch the last bit from our mouths.” Another called out, “My husband brings me eight dollars a week. Should I give it away to the butcher? What would the landlord say?” Still another screamed, “They think women aren’t people, that they can bluff us; we’ll show them that we are more people than the fat millionaires who suck our blood.” When the son of the Chief Rabbi, who supervised the kashrut of the meat, passed through the area, he was met with shouts of “Trust—Kosher Korolke,” a reference to the kosher meat tax, much despised by the poor in Czarist Russia.

The ringleaders who were arrested and charged with disorderly conduct defined their behavior in political terms and considered it both just and appropriate to their status as housewives. “Did you throw meat on the street?” Rosa Peskin was asked. “Certainly,” she replied. “I should have looked it in the teeth?” When the judge condescendingly commented, “What do you know of a trust? It’s no business of yours,” she responded, “Whose business is it, then, that our pockets are empty . . . ?” “What do you have against a woman who has bought meat,” the judge persisted. “I have nothing against her,” retorted Peskin. “It doesn’t matter to me what others want to do. But it’s because of others that we must suffer.” Rebecca Ablowitz also pre-
sented the boycotters' rationale to the judge: "We're not rioting. Only see how thin our children are, our husbands have no more strength to work harder. . . . If we stay home and cry, what good will that do us?"

Of similar conviction and eloquence was Mrs. Silver, one of the most articulate spokeswomen of the boycott, who headed the campaign to interrupt services in the synagogues. When one irate opponent roared that her speaking thus from the bima was an effrontery (chutzpah) and a desecration of God's name (chilul ha-Shem), Mrs. Silver coolly responded that the Torah would pardon her.

The climate of the immigrant Jewish community facilitated the resolute behavior of the women. While a few rabbis, particularly those with close ties to the meat industry, were hostile to the boycott enterprise, they were the exception. Support for the boycott was widespread within the community. Friendly crowds packed the courtroom to cheer the arrested women. In every one of the synagogues on the Lower East Side, it was reported, "the uprising of the Hebrew women was referred to by the rabbis." Most synagogue members warmly greeted the women who brought the charge to the congregation. When police were brought in to arrest Mrs. Silver after a disturbance erupted in one synagogue, a congregant rose to compare the woman to the prophet Zachariah, "who preached truth and whose blood demanded vengeance." So persuasive was he that Mrs. Silver was released. Feeling that they could count upon the support of the traditionally observant community, the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, in an appeal printed by the Forward, called for communal ostracism of the one prominent rabbis, Dr. Adolph N. Radin of the People's Synagogue, who had not only refused to approve the boycott but had treated representatives of the association rudely in his synagogue. He should be removed from his position as chaplain to Jewish prisoners, urged the women, for if this "half-German" could refer publicly to the boycotting women as "beasts" and receive them so coarsely in front of his congregation, how must he treat the unfortunate Jewish inmates he sees within the confines of the prison?

Both the socialist Forward and the Orthodox Yiddishes Tagblat portrayed the initial disturbances as well as the later movement in a sympathetic manner and were offended by the rough treatment meted out to the women and their families by the police as well as by the unsympathetic attitude of much of the English language press. Jewish socialists, in particular, stood squarely behind the protest. The Forward heralded the boycott with the banner headline: "Bravo, bravo, bravo, Jewish women!" To the Forward, the boycott provided an opportunity not only to support a grass-roots protest action but also to level an attack upon the collusion of the rabbis with the German-Jewish meat trusts. There was little reason for the differential between kosher and non-kosher meat to stand at five to six cents a pound, proclaimed the newspaper editorial. Those who raised the prices "are Yahudim with gilded beards, never eat kosher. Why are they suddenly so frum (pious)? Since when is there a partnership between those who give rabbinc endorsements in the Chief Rabbi's name and those Yahudi meat handlers? . . . The Chief Rabbi's son is merely a salesman for the Trust," continued the editorial. "He goes about in carriages collecting money in the name of his unfortunate father's endorsement. . . . Whether the strike of the good Jewish women brings down the prices or not," concluded the Forward, "one thing remains certain, the bond between the Trust and the rabbis must end. If they are truly pious, let them serve their religion and not the Trust in whose pay they are in." In Russian Poland, noted the paper the next day, the meat tax was seven cents a pound, but at least there the korobke supported all kehilla (communal) activities. Here, on the other hand, it went only to the Trust.

While the Forward conducted its pro-boycott campaign, the labor movement as a whole extended monetary donations and aid to the boycott; two men active in the Ladies' Garment Workers' Union were appointed as vice president and secretary of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association, while the posts of president and treasurer remained in women's hands. In Harlem it was the Women's Branch No. Two of the Workmen's Circle, with the support of the parent organization, that coordinated local boycott activity.

Communal support was not, however, without its limits. Jewish communal leaders were clearly upset by the initiative assumed by the women activists. The sight of Jewish women engaged in picketing and in the physical coercion of butcher shop customers as well as their arrest at the hands of a none too gentle police force aroused concern. "Don't give the Trust and the police an opportunity to break heads," cautioned the Forward. "More can be accomplished lawfully than not . . . ." Moreover, when the boycott was recognized as a force to be reckoned with, men tried to wrest control of the movement from its female leaders. However, the women were never entirely displaced, and the Yiddish language media continued, if somewhat ambivalently, to view the success of the boycott as a legitimate example of the "power of women." (On the other hand, the American Hebrew, the organ of the Uptown Jews, studiously ignored the kosher meat riots.)

In a larger sense, the immigrant Jewish community was quite supportive of women's political activity. East European Jewish immigrants were highly politicized; just how highly can be seen in the meat boycott, whose participants were sufficiently traditional to buy kosher meat and to use the synagogues and hevras as areas for potential recruitment. Indeed, the development of the boycott suggests that the compartmentalization of the immigrant community by historians into Orthodox, socialist and anarchist, and Zionist sectors does not do justice to the interplay among the groups. Boundary lines were fluid, and socialist rhetoric tripped easily from the tongues of women who still cared about kosher meat, could cite biblical
language socialists is also of broader interest. While the Jewish socialists were often seen as assimilationist, they remained closer to the shared value of their own immigrant community than to the perhaps ideologically purer stance of the American radicals.

The boycott movement enables us to look at the potential for political organization among Lower East Side women, the majority of whom were housewives unaffiliated in any formal sense with the trade-union movement. But it also raises questions for which there are no readily available answers.

Was there any precedent for this type of direct action among married women in Eastern Europe? One can find a tenuous connection to the Eastern European scene in reference to the _korobke_, the meat tax, which in the nineteenth century constituted as much as one-third of the budget of some Jewish communities and was passionately resented. Some Hasidic rebbes in the first half of the last century urged passive resistance against the tax, even including a boycott on the purchase of meat. Clearly, the ability to draw an analogy, as both the women activists and the _Forward_ editorials did, between the _korobke_ and the high price of kosher meat caused by collusion between the meat trust and rabbis selling their hechsher (certification of kashrut) was an appealing propaganda device. It linked the 1902 boycott to the long-standing disaffection of the poor with the authorities of the Eastern European kehillah. However, the boycott's leaders do not refer to earlier Eastern European examples of reaction against the _korobke_, nor is there any other evidence of direct influence from the Eastern European to the American scene.

As interesting as the boycott is as a vehicle for examining the political sensibilities and assessing the political potential of Jewish housewives on the Lower East Side, the fading away of the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association is as significant as its sudden appearance. If the neighborhood network was so effective as means to reach women and mobilize them, why was it not sustained to deal with other social problems? True, the 1904 and 1907-8 rent strikes on the Lower East Side espoused similar tactics and hailed the meat boycott as their model. Beginning with a house-to-house canvas initiated by women, strike leaders promoted neighborhood solidarity by collecting written pledges of refusal to pay rent. In 1908 women also lent their support to retail butchers protesting the rising cost in wholesale meat prices. These further incidents of local activism confirm the growing consumer consciousness of Lower East Side women. However, there appears to be no overlap in leadership between these several expressions of female popular protest. Were women co-opted into already established fraternal and political organizations, or did the politics of crisis bring with it inertia once the crisis had passed?

Because its leaders faded into obscurity with the conclusion of the boy-
of the decade.

explosion of women activists in the Great Garment Industry strikes at the end

boycott should be seen as an isolated incident but as a product of the

second decade of the twentieth century. In that sense the Kosher News

serves as an example of the increased number of militant women in America, in the

same spirit of those who protested and were responsible for at least one

of the inquests in the unions exceeded their proportion in the industry as a whole.

Half of the New York Jewish Women's Garment Workers Union, whose

boycott coordinated by the January 1920 meeting of women activists in New York. The

boycott could only have encouraged workers to remain in other activities, as

the political potential of women, however, the communal support of the

immigrant community as a whole and the labor movement in particular to

and information to their younger sisters and daughters. The boycott showed

was no isolated phenomenon but was in communication with other boycotts

However, it is likely that the political awareness expressed by the boycotters

impossible to assess the impact of the movement upon its participants.

but because of the very nature of a short-lived grass-roots movement, it is