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THE SOUTH PROVIDENCE KOSHER MEAT BOYCOTT OF 1910: A STUDY OF
JEWISH WOMEN'S CONSUMER ACTIVISM

BY
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines a kosher meat boycott in South Providence in 1910, placing this event in the broader context of Jewish immigrant women's activism around food issues and the popular strategy of consumer protest during the Progressive Era. Through an analysis of press accounts, census data, and community statistics, this study presents an analysis of the possible causes and impacts of this example of immigrant Jewish women's activism in early twentieth-century Providence.

As women serve as both preservers of culture and mediators of the outside world (as expressed through domestic consumption), such incidents as kosher meat boycotts provide an opportune point at which to observe the strategies used to both conserve and transform the Jewish community. It is hoped that this study of a specific example of Jewish women's consumer activism in South Providence will not only illuminate aspects of one local Jewish community, but will also raise issues for the further consideration of what such incidents suggest about the importance of women's collective actions within communities undergoing economic, social, and religious transformation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
ABSTRACT	ii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
LIST OF FIGURES	v
INTRODUCTION	1
1. PROGRESSIVE ERA CONSUMER ACTIVISM AND THE MEAT BOYCOTT OF 1910	21
2. KOSHER FOOD AND JEWISH IDENTITY: THE ROOTS OF JEWISH WOMEN'S FOOD ACTIVISM	41
3. FOOD FIGHTS: JEWISH WOMEN AND KOSHER MEAT BOYCOTTS	55
4. THE SOUTH PROVIDENCE KOSHER MEAT BOYCOTT OF 1910	67
CONCLUSION	106
BIBLIOGRAPHY	116

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE		PAGE
1	SOUTH PROVIDENCE BUTCHERS AND SELECTED BOYCOTT PARTICIPANTS	104
2	JEWISH PROVISIONS DEALERS IN SOUTH PROVIDENCE, 1909-1915	105

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE		PAGE
1	MAP OF SOUTH PROVIDENCE, WILLARD AVENUE AREA	103

INTRODUCTION

On Wednesday, June 22, 1910, a front-page story in the *Providence Daily Journal* gave unusually prominent press coverage to the normally overlooked Jewish neighborhood of South Providence. The headline, “Jews Put Ban on Kosher Meat . . . Seven Hundred Housewives Declare That Jewish Markets of South Providence Are Handling Unclean and Infected Meat—Claim Also Made That Prices Are Too High,” encapsulated two of the most urgent anxieties of the age. Unsafe food and oppressively high prices became national obsessions in the Progressive Era, as the United States struggled to address the immense social and economic consequences of decades of unchecked urban growth and industrialization. Following on the heels of several nationwide organized food protests, the boycott of local kosher butchers by the Jewish women of South Providence echoed larger dramas involving corrupt food producers, greedy retailers, and a public prepared to engage in militant consumer action to regain a sense of security about its food supply.

But within these broad concerns about food safety and the high cost of living, the South Providence kosher meat boycott also reflected the efforts of one particular immigrant community to address internal tensions and external pressures. Massive emigration from Eastern Europe to the United States after 1880 had given rise to several distinctive Jewish communities in Providence, Rhode Island. Differing in religion, language, and customs from their mostly Irish neighbors, and in cultural background and religious observance from the older, mostly German, Jewish community of Providence’s East Side, the Eastern European Orthodox Jews of South Providence constructed unique communal structures, patterns of interaction, and

systems of self-regulation. Points of conflict, such as the housewives' boycott of local kosher butchers, illuminate the function of these neighborhood systems in the community's struggle to preserve cultural traditions and religious values while adapting to a new and rapidly transforming environment. In particular, the kosher meat boycott reflected the importance of food issues and women's roles to both cultural continuity and community transformation.

Food is central to all communities, not only for basic survival, but as a conveyor of culture and signifier of communal identity. For the Orthodox Jewish community, food also carries substantial religious significance, as adherence to kosher dietary laws, or *kashrut*, is an essential component of religious observance. Ensuring a supply of kosher food was particularly important in weathering the profoundly dislocating experience of emigration to a new land, and the supervision of kosher food production became a frequent point of conflict within immigrant Jewish communities. The early decades of the twentieth century were marked by several large and often violent kosher meat boycotts in various American cities, with the largest and most turbulent protests occurring in New York City. These boycotts were generally initiated and managed by Jewish women, whose designation as "breadwinners" in traditional Jewish culture influenced these militant responses to economic pressures that prevented them from fulfilling their obligations to support and protect their families.

This thesis will examine how the 1910 kosher meat boycott in South Providence reflected this tradition of Jewish immigrant women's activism around food issues. It will also place this activism within the context of the increasingly popular

strategy of organized consumer protest in the Progressive Era. As public discourse often centered on the role of market forces in the changing economic and social landscape of the United States, reformers concerned with both workplace conditions and economic hardships drew inspiration from the tactics of organized labor and other industrial-era political and social movements to develop consumer activist strategies. Women, as the primary consumers of domestic goods and food staples, occupied a crucial position within organized consumer protests; and Jewish women, with their particular set of cultural and religious traditions and obligations, constituted an especially militant segment within this trend of consumer activism.

The study of Jewish women's consumer activism around food issues allows for an examination of the intersection of the private world of the home and the public sphere of the marketplace. As women serve as both preservers of culture and mediators of the outside world (as expressed through domestic consumption), such incidents as kosher meat boycotts provide an opportune point at which to observe the strategies used to both conserve and transform elements of Jewish life in the United States. This study of a specific example of Jewish women's consumer activism in South Providence not only will illuminate aspects of one local Jewish community, but also hopes to prompt further consideration of what such incidents suggest about the importance of women's collective actions within communities undergoing economic, social, and religious transformation.

Kosher Meat Boycotts in Scholarly Context: Collective Action, Immigrant Women, and Local History

The study of early twentieth-century working-class immigrant communities is

complicated by the lack of surviving documentation. Immigrants adapting to the conditions of industrial America generally had neither the resources nor the time to generate materials detailing their experiences, perceptions, values, or ambitions. For this reason, scholarly explorations of early immigrant groups have often been restricted to the arenas most likely to generate significant bodies of records. These records usually pertain to the collective activities of immigrants, reflecting participation in political parties, religious institutions, charitable societies, and the labor movement. Although this research has provided valuable insight into the political and economic participation of immigrant groups in modern America, it has been less successful in revealing social and cultural aspects of immigrant communities. This cultural dimension is especially important in understanding the experiences of disenfranchised or otherwise politically and economically “invisible” groups, such as women.

Over the past three decades, scholars interested in working-class and women’s history have made efforts to fill in this gap in historical understanding by examining the role that cultural traditions and communal relationships have played in shaping the experiences and behaviors of immigrant communities. The study of immigrant women’s history in particular has benefited from new approaches that resist generalizing the experiences of male immigrants and look beyond participation in political parties or labor unions for evidence of organizational life and agency. Paula Hyman’s observations of how the experiences of Jewish immigrant women differ from those of men, and Ardis Cameron’s examination of the ways that women’s informal neighborhood networks contributed to the success of the 1912 “Bread and Roses”

strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts, have uncovered a wealth of knowledge about the complexities and efficacy of immigrant women's communal life, which in turn has enriched the understanding of immigrant communities as a whole.¹

Again, as sources revealing the private and communal lives of immigrant women are scarce, much of this new historical research still focuses on collective action—frequently in the form of protests staged by supposedly apolitical members of the community such as housewives. Mass actions bring these usually hard-to-trace historical agents to the surface of the observable past, raising questions about the cultural basis for their resistance, their strategies, and their political and community consciousness.

This study draws upon a body of literature comprised of several areas of focus—including the now classic theories of working-class collective action developed by E. P. Thompson and Herbert Gutman, feminist analyses of women's political and class consciousness, explorations of working-class women's community networks, examinations of women's consumer activism in the Progressive Era, and studies of specific incidents of immigrant Jewish women's food protests. These works present useful theoretical frameworks and raise issues for investigation, particularly about the motives and strategies that characterize mass actions like food boycotts.

To situate this consideration of Jewish women's collective action, this study also will examine various accounts of the Jewish immigrant experience, including works which suggest the ways in which Jewish culture may have shaped Jewish immigrant women's reaction to and engagement in community actions, as well as the reasons why food, particularly kosher food, has presented such a focal point for

protest. In addition to these broader works on the Jewish experience, scholarly research pertaining specifically to the Jewish community of Providence will provide a context for understanding the characteristics and outcomes of the South Providence kosher meat boycott.

Perspectives on Working-Class and Women's Collective Action

Most considerations of working-class demonstrations address, in one way or another, E. P. Thompson's theories of collective action developed in his examination of the eighteenth-century English working class. In "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," Thompson develops a basis for analyzing "crowd" actions such as food riots. Rejecting a reductive view of these often violent disruptions as the "spasmodic" reactions of the poor to economic hardship, Thompson instead asserts that food riots and other popular uprisings represent a "highly-complex form of direct popular action, disciplined and with clear objectives." The objectives of riot participants were based upon a set of assumptions about societal and economic structures that lent legitimacy to civil disruption. These assumptions formed what Thompson describes as the popular conception of a "moral economy," in which economic relationships were designed to ensure the survival of the community, and in which profiteering from the hardship of others—such as manipulating market prices during food shortages—constituted a moral crime. According to Thompson, the violation of these social norms, not simply the desperation brought about by near-starvation, instigated food riots. Thompson points out that eighteenth-century food riots resembled much older patterns of communal self-regulation—as in medieval *charivari*, the primary objective was to punish communal transgressors, not to illegally

secure supplies through mass force. The persistence of these older patterns reflected the tension between the traditional conception of a moral economy and the rise of the new ideals of the market economy, suggesting that even evolving ideas and behaviors have a long transitional stage. Thompson concludes that the survival of such “premodern” strategies as food riots should caution historians against defining particular sets of values or forms of action as characteristic of specific time periods.²

Herbert Gutman has applied Thompson’s theories about “pre-industrial” values and strategies of collective action to the experiences of the working class in the industrializing United States. Gutman observes a similar persistence of traditional communal beliefs and work practices in the laboring classes of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, attributing this persistence to the constant influx of new immigrants to the American workforce. Building on Thompson’s description of working-class strategies of defending traditional communal structures, Gutman views the continuity of traditional communal and familial networks as important tools of resistance to the dislocation and de-personalization of immigration and industrialization. Gutman cites examples of “classic European food riots” in New York City, including a 1902 kosher meat boycott analyzed in greater detail by Paula Hyman, to demonstrate the persistence and effectiveness of these “pre-modern” tactics and to illustrate the tension that the women’s strategies provoked in both the authorities and the mainstream press. Gutman emphasizes the need to examine the cultural origins of immigrant communities in order to understand their collective behaviors.³

Although both Thompson and Gutman address the role of women in food riots, particularly as the members of the community most intimately concerned with food issues, neither develops a strong theory of female participation in such collective actions. In her study of women's activism in early twentieth-century Barcelona, Temma Kaplan explains the prevalence and militancy of working-class women's collective actions by constructing a theory of "female consciousness." Grounded in the acceptance of traditional gender roles, female consciousness motivates women to defend, with violence if necessary, the rights and obligations that accompany their position within the community. Kaplan builds on Thompson's and Gutman's observations of radical collective actions used to defend traditional communal structures, pointing out that female consciousness, though essentially conservative, has led to revolutionary situations.⁴

Kaplan also takes the consideration of political consciousness expressed by working-class mass actions further than either Thompson or Gutman. Whereas both earlier theorists hold that "crowd" actions are "political" in only a nascent sense, Kaplan makes a forceful argument for the potential political power of "female consciousness" expressed in the mass actions of traditionally-oriented women. Her article takes to task more formalized movements for not recognizing the organizational power of female consciousness, particularly critiquing feminists for not acknowledging the important vision of social justice contained within traditional women's defense of their communities, and socialists for failing to utilize traditional women's networks to promote the socialist agenda. Kaplan's points reflect those raised by scholars like Mari Jo Buhle, who in her history of women in American

Socialism points out the complications of women's involvement in the Socialist Party. Kaplan's work, like Buhle's, anticipates the critiques that other scholars like Paula Hyman and Dana Frank would make of Socialist failures to build upon the housewife protests of early twentieth-century New York.⁵

The work of Ardis Cameron in her examination of the 1912 "Bread and Roses" strike in the textile mills of Lawrence, Massachusetts, provides particular insight into this question of working-class women's social and political consciousness. Taking issue with historians' use of terms like "prepolitical" and "premodern" to describe women's collective actions, Cameron asserts that such assessments are based on a limited conception of political activity, restricted to voting, lobbying, forming unions, and running for office. Women, for the most part excluded from these activities, are locked out of this definition of politics. Cameron advocates a broader notion of political activity "developed relationally, from neighbor to neighbor, and rooted in the material reality of everyday life." Maintaining that women's neighborhood relationships and day-to-day activities in their roles as nurturers and protectors of their families constitute a political consciousness, Cameron asserts that collective actions such as food boycotts and rent protests comprised a "gestural language of female acts" through which this consciousness was expressed and enacted. Cameron also notes that while these gestural acts were rooted in the ordinary and routine, they were "nevertheless bound up with larger issues of identity, power, and legitimacy." As relationships between women transformed immigrant neighborhoods into "landscapes of subterfuge," the collective actions of working class women served not only as

methods to address practical concerns of food and shelter but also as expressions of “community cohesion, identity, and collective power.”⁶

In addition to expressing a sense of community solidarity and collective power, the strikes and boycotts that formed part of the vocabulary of this “gestural language of female acts” also ignited public anxiety about challenges to traditional notions of appropriate female behavior. The image of the “Amazon” taking to the streets in violent rejection of female submission had frightened supporters of traditional gender roles from the earliest entry of women into the labor movement. As Cameron points out, the striking Lawrence women were characterized as “radicals of the worst sort,” just as women who participated in other major labor actions, such as the great shirtwaist strike of 1909, had to defend themselves against accusations of prostitution and “unladylike” behavior. By engaging in public protest against the high cost of food or rent, militant housewives joined what Jacquelyn Dowd Hall has described as a tradition of “disorderly women.” The powerful spectacle of women engaged in street actions such as meat boycotts reflected a convergence of “disorderly” female participation in the modern labor movement with the militant defense of traditional female roles described by Kaplan.⁷

This scholarship provides a useful framework for the analysis of Jewish women’s activism in food protests, particularly in its emphasis on the importance of the study of cultural traditions and communal norms to understanding community reactions to economic conditions and social change. Traditional cultural values and accepted social norms, such as the role of women in the community, can be used to resist threats to traditional community structures, and radical actions can arise from

conservative motivations. This consideration of what collective actions reveal about working-class culture and consciousness forms an important basis for later studies of specific actions organized by Jewish housewives in early twentieth-century America.

Women's Consumer Activism in the Progressive Era: Kosher Meat Boycotts and Cost of Living Protests

The Progressive Era saw the development of a distinctive “consumer consciousness,” as concerns about working conditions, rising prices, unsafe products, and the inordinate influence of large corporations encouraged reformers and activists to focus attention upon the potential power of organized consumers to effect change. As the primary managers of the household budget and domestic consumers, women played a prominent role in the Progressive Era consumer's movement, from grassroots protests to participation in national organizations like the Consumers' League.⁸

In her “collective biography” of four prominent Jewish women activists, Annelise Orleck notes that these women developed their political consciousness at an early age from “watching their mothers battle to improve their families' standard of living.” Responsible for the well-being of their families, immigrant and working-class mothers “saw their homes as directly linked to the larger economy and fought to keep them safe from deprivation.” This connection of domestic duty to the public marketplace often translated into collective action against the difficulties of life in urban, industrial America. Orleck points out that five times between 1902 and 1908, Jewish mothers “organized and picketed, boycotted and marched in protest over increases in staple food prices and rents.”⁹

Two such instances of Jewish women's activism around food issues have been frequently addressed in recent scholarship: a boycott of New York City kosher butcher shops in 1902 that evolved into a riot, and massive and violent cost-of-living protests that engulfed New York City in 1917. Though both incidents have been mentioned at least briefly in many studies of immigrant women's history, each protest receives the most complete treatment in articles by Paula Hyman and Dana Frank, respectively.¹⁰ These studies provide useful models and raise important issues for consideration in the study of the 1910 Providence meat boycott.

In her study of the 1902 kosher meat riot, Hyman makes excellent use of both English-language and Yiddish press coverage to document the strike of Jewish women against the "Beef Trust" perceived as the source of the skyrocketing meat prices. Hyman describes how the women's actions represented an intersection of traditional, moral economy-based strategies such as those described by Thompson and Gutman with more "modern" tactics inspired by the socialist and labor movements. Refuting, or perhaps more accurately complicating, Gutman's analysis of the boycott as a resurgence of relatively apolitical, atavistic behaviors of communal regulation, Hyman describes the housewives' protest as the political strategy of a disenfranchised group. Though the boycott was based in part on communal traditions reflecting the values of a "moral economy," Hyman asserts that the strategy was more importantly an expression of the women's sophisticated understanding of modern economic structures of supply and demand and of their power as consumers. Hyman addresses the efficacy of women's community networks, contrasting the housewives' initial neighborhood-based protest strategies with the attempts of various reform and Socialist organizations

to organize and formalize the movement. While raising interesting questions about the short-lived duration of the organized protest and the seeming failure to develop lasting political ties from the boycott experience, Hyman ultimately concludes that the kosher meat boycott politicized the participants, providing a “prelude to the explosion of women activists in the great garment industry strikes at the end of the decade.”¹¹

Dana Frank’s description of the violent street protests by Jewish housewives in New York over the high cost of living in 1917 provides one of the most thoroughly considered analyses of women’s consumer activism and its relation to more formalized political efforts. Frank compares the motivations and goals of the housewives in the strike with those of Socialist organizers, many of whom were also women. Though the cost-of-living protests differed from the 1902 boycott in that kosher foods were not the central focus, Frank’s article raises several important points that can be used for comparison. Both protests centered on concerns about abrupt decreases in the community’s standard of living defined by forced changes in accustomed dietary habits. Both protests also included organizational assistance and strategy from the Socialist Party. Like Hyman, Frank points out that, while Socialist organizers desired to capitalize on the motivation and solidarity displayed by the housewives’ grassroots protests, the Socialist leadership was fairly ambivalent about the efficacy of consumer politicization as a strategy, preferring to focus on producer-oriented tactics such as the campaign for a living wage. Frank argues that for working-class housewives, consumer activism was a form of labor organization, as their work was to manage the home and provide for their families through efficient shopping, and thus, their “workplace” was the marketplace. This echoes Kaplan’s

assertion that the female consciousness of traditional women has not been properly integrated into Socialist and other reform movements.¹²

The examples of Jewish women's consumer activism described by Hyman and Frank succeed in reconstructing the figure of the Jewish housewife, generally considered apolitical and conservative, as a potential agent of radical social action in defense of her community. As Orleck points out, the "frequency of Jewish housewives' protests in the years following 1902 suggests that these immigrant women saw themselves engaged in a common struggle to protect the quality of life of the Jewish working-class family." This struggle was intimately connected to the activism of Jewish women in the labor movement. The working daughters of Jewish housewives learned their radicalism from watching their mothers' struggles, and activist garment workers often retained their militancy after marrying and becoming housewives themselves. The life of Clara Lemlich Shavelson provides one vivid example of this intergenerational interaction: after gaining her first experience in organized community protest during the New York rent strikes of 1907, Lemlich went on to become one of the key figures of the 1909 shirtwaist-makers' strike, a prominent labor activist, and the leader of successful housewives' meat boycotts during the Depression. Cameron also connects women's neighborhood activism with broader activities of protest, asserting that food boycotts and similar actions served to "radicalize neighbors and kin, thus broadening the extent and focus of dissent." Beyond the specific conditions that instigate a particular boycott or protest, the mobilization of women's community networks could, in some situations, "generate

into a coherent attack upon an entire system of exploitation,” as in the 1912 Lawrence textile strikes.¹³

This scholarship indicates that many issues pertaining to Jewish housewives’ activism remain open to interpretation. Is the consumer activism illustrated by kosher meat boycotts an expression of sophisticated political consciousness or an echo of traditional methods of community self-regulation? Does the consciousness expressed by these mass actions around food issues reflect a radical vision of a more humane society or a conservative defense of traditional communal relationships and gender roles? Has consumer activism in the form of mass actions proven an effective strategy—either in resolving economic issues or in politicizing traditionally disempowered groups? Further examination of other instances of these early consumer actions in immigrant communities, such as the Providence kosher meat boycott, may provide insights that can illuminate these questions.

Jewish Immigration and the Roots of Jewish Women’s Food Activism

While the scholarship on food activism in immigrant communities provides important insights into the role of Jewish women as potential economic and political actors, it generally gives cursory attention to the ways that specific aspects of Jewish culture may have shaped women’s collective actions. The body of literature about the Jewish immigrant experience is vast, but only fairly recently have scholars closely examined the experiences of Jewish women both in Eastern Europe and after arrival in the United States. Paula Hyman articulates the need for this more specific study in her book *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: The Roles and Representation of Women*, which considers how both traditional and modern

conceptions of gender have shaped Jewish women's experiences. In discussing the cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors that have influenced the decision to acculturate to the norms of the dominant culture, Hyman points out that these pressures are experienced differently by women and men.¹⁴

The established works of Jewish immigration history such as Irving Howe's *World of Our Fathers* have been joined by a number of considerations of women's experiences within Jewish culture. In particular, Susan Glenn's *Daughters of the Shtetl* provides an excellent context for understanding how women's experiences within both Old and New World Jewish cultures provide a basis for Jewish women's activism. Glenn's explanation of women's position as "breadwinners" in the Jewish household provides a basis for understanding Jewish women's attitudes toward their roles as consumers and as activists. The traditional concept of the ideal Jewish housewife as a woman able to provide for her family through her shrewd management of household resources and at times through her own commercial endeavors sanctioned the actions of Jewish women in the marketplace, providing support for the housewife activists described by Hyman, Frank and Orleck.¹⁵

This image is amplified and complicated by other scholars, such as Andrew Heinze, who considers the Jewish housewife, or *baleboste*, as the principle consumer in the Jewish family, a primary agent for Jewish assimilation into mainstream, middle-class American culture. This suggestion raises the tensions that confronted Jewish women, like their counterparts in other immigrant communities, as they sought to both maintain traditional customs and roles and fit into and succeed in American society. Kosher foods—the main issue of the Providence boycott—are central to this issue. As

a cultural identifier that separated Jews from their neighbors, adherence to *kashrut*, the Jewish dietary laws, proved a point of both cohesion and division within the Jewish community. As German Reform Jews, generally more assimilated, often rejected *kashrut*, keeping kosher became a source of identity for Eastern European Orthodox Jews. In her examination of the transformation of Jewish culture, Jenna Weissman Joselit explains the costs and pressures of keeping kosher from both within and without the Jewish community. Noting not only the economic costs of maintaining *kashrut* (meat is more expensive and extra cooking utensils are required), Joselit also describes how the professionalization of home economics and the rise of “scientific cookery” induced many Progressive reformers to “wage war” against kosher foods. This, like the opposition from the Reform community, caused kosher food to be an important focal point for Eastern European Jews seeking to preserve their traditions. As the protectors of the home, Jewish women no doubt felt this conflict most strongly.¹⁶

The Jewish Community of South Providence: Collective Action and Local History

Although the body of literature about the immigrant Jewish community in Providence is relatively small, it is interesting to note that what scholarship exists often addresses similar issues of community cohesion and assimilation. In her article on Jewish identity in early twentieth-century Providence, Laura Grossfield focuses on the institution-building impulses of upwardly-mobile Jews. Grossfield notes that as Jews moved from the immigrant-dominated areas of South Providence and the North End to the more economically-advantaged East Side, the institutions they developed

mirrored those of the dominant American society. She sees in this a trend towards the creation of a secular Jewish identity that would “enable them simultaneously to acculturate and yet maintain their Jewishness.”¹⁷ Patrick Janson also discusses the “organizational impulses” of Jews in Providence, noting a predominance of institutions which promoted Jewish acculturation into mainstream American society rather than resistance to assimilation.¹⁸

The most substantial treatment of the immigrant Jewish community in Providence is Judith Smith’s comparison of the experiences and social structures of the Italian and Jewish immigrant communities. Though Smith’s primary focus is on family life after emigration, her research also provides useful descriptions of life in the countries of origin, showing how these cultural norms and experiences influenced immigrants’ actions and attitudes after arrival in the United States. While Smith’s study of Jewish immigrants centers on the Smith Hill community, her analysis provides many useful models and insights for the examination of the South Providence community. Smith places the 1910 women’s boycott of kosher butchers in the context of the immigrant community economy, with its overarching assumption of reciprocal obligation and emphasis on mutual benefit associations. Smith also compares the kosher meat boycott with similar food-based protests in the Italian community, such as the 1914 “Macaroni Riots” in Providence’s Federal Hill neighborhood.¹⁹

Aside from the work of Judith Smith, the existing literature on the immigrant Jewish community of Providence appears to take little interest in the organizational impulses of women aside from the development of charitable and cultural societies and the foundation of community institutions such as orphanages and hospitals.

Though accounts of Jewish women's clubs and aid societies detail significant contributions to community life, this focus reflects the tendency of historians to give primacy to the more obvious or more discernible activities of formal organizations, to the neglect of equally important informal community networks. The South Providence kosher meat boycott also represents a significant aspect of Jewish women's lives—suggesting that the housewives in South Providence resorted to militant actions when necessary to ensure their community's economic and cultural stability. Further study of this incident may provide insights into modes of community organization within Providence's immigrant Jewish neighborhood that have received little attention.

While the 1910 kosher meat boycott in South Providence bears strong similarities to the events described in other studies of Jewish women's consumer activism, there are also significant differences. Unlike the New York protests, the Providence boycott appears to have been relatively peaceful; the newspaper accounts of the event make no mention of extreme violence or the destruction of property. No permanent or semi-permanent organization seems to have arisen from the boycott, unlike the Ladies' Anti-Beef Trust Association in New York or the West End Mother's Mothers' Protective Association that arose from a similar protest in Boston in 1912.²⁰ An examination of these differences reveals particular factors influencing the women's action in Providence, mitigating the tendency to create grand generalizations about the experience of immigrant groups without acknowledging differences between specific communities.

This thesis will integrate and apply the issues raised by the literature to the specific example of the 1910 kosher meat boycott in Providence. In particular, it will attempt to address the ways that Progressive Era discourses, women's consumer activism, and transitions within Jewish culture influenced the development and resolution of the incident. An examination of the specific causes and outcomes of the South Providence boycott will provide insight into the ways that immigrant women's collective actions simultaneously reflected and shaped the cultural, economic, and religious transformations of their communities.

CHAPTER ONE

PROGRESSIVE ERA CONSUMER ACTIVISM AND THE MEAT BOYCOTT OF 1910

It is not surprising that kosher meat boycotts and other forms of food activism occurred repeatedly in several American cities during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The period between 1890 and World War I found the United States grappling with the consequences of industrialization, urbanization, mass immigration, and the growth of large corporate interests. As more commodities and food staples were produced by large agricultural concerns and shipped over great distances to feed burgeoning American cities, concerns about food quality and price fixing became items of popular debate. Journalists and other writers offered scathing exposés of sanitary and economic abuses by corporate food producers—among them *The Jungle*, Upton Sinclair’s 1906 examination of the Chicago meat packing industry. These critiques fanned the flames of public protest and at times encouraged the passage of new regulatory laws, such as the 1906 Meat Inspection Act and Pure Food and Drug Act. Widespread anxiety about rising prices, unsafe food, and corrupt politicians and business magnates gave rise to public outcry and organized actions against the “food trusts” suspected of controlling the nation’s food supply and contributing to the “high cost of living.”

Efforts to address the “high cost of living” in the early twentieth century were part of the “amalgam of social criticism, popular protest, political restructuring, economic regulation, and social welfare legislation” known as the Progressive

movement.¹ A wide variety of reformers mobilized to address the myriad problems of “modern conditions,” from the spread of tuberculosis to the control of urban areas by corrupt political machines. While incorporating activists from all levels of American society, the Progressive movement included a disproportionately high percentage of female participants, with many of the most significant organizations and reform efforts engineered by middle- and upper-class women’s groups.

One of the arguments for women’s involvement in Progressive reform movements derived in large part from a conception of “municipal housekeeping.” Frequently used by suffragists as a justification for women’s political participation, municipal housekeeping applied the female duty to protect and nurture to managing issues in the public sphere. Closely connected to middle-class conceptions of female domesticity, the issues addressed by “municipal housekeepers” often centered around protection for children and laboring women, housing, sanitation, and food safety; but Progressive women also saw protesting political corruption and agitating for business regulation as an extension of their domestic role. While many of the civic organizations formed to promote Progressive reforms were composed of middle-class members, a number of cross-class alliances were forged. One such alliance was the Women’s Trade Union League, founded by middle- and upper-class women to help working-class women organize unions.²

Cross-class alliances may have seemed natural, even necessary, to many women in the Progressive Era, as the anxieties of modern living made women at all levels of society more aware of the need for organization and government protection. As Nancy Dye points out, confronting the problems created by industrialization and an

economy seemingly controlled by “faceless interests” caused even middle-class women to recognize that the concept of “separate spheres” was no longer appropriate; the home and the threatening outside world were linked and private issues were now seen as public and political matters. Dye asserts that it was this redefinition of the relationship between the home and community that characterized the Progressive Era. As scholars like Cameron and Orleck have shown, working-class women had never experienced this division between their domestic and communal lives. In her analysis of working-class feminism in Seattle during the World War I era, Greenwald reveals that working-class women’s clubs incorporated the everyday elements of housework, such as shopping, cleaning, and childcare, into a radical vision of a restructured social and economic system that included a reconsideration of the relation of women’s work both within and without the home. Complementing the strong presence of women in Seattle’s trade unions, the activities of such women’s organizations as the Union Card and Label League and the development of working-class consumer cooperatives provided opportunities for working-class women to socialize and discuss issues of women’s rights, contributing to a working-class feminism that included a strong sense of class solidarity as well as the consciousness of women’s traditional roles within the family and the community.³

This sense of the connection between private and public life in the Progressive Era was a major component in the rise of organized consumer activism as a reform strategy. While female reformers increasingly agitated for governmental intervention to bring about their vision of a “new, human state, identified with the values of the home rather than those of the marketplace, with expanded powers to protect its

powerless and dependent constituencies,” they did so through measures that showed an awareness of how they might exert control over the evils of the marketplace through their roles as consumers.⁴ Lizabeth Cohen notes that a recognition of the “centrality of consumers to the nation’s economy and polity” became a strong aspect of the Progressive Era agenda, giving rise to what she terms the “first-wave consumer movement.” Progressives identified consumers as a “new category of American citizenry . . . desirous and deserving of political and social reforms to limit the dangers of an industrializing, urbanizing, and politically corruptible twentieth-century America.”⁵ In his classic work on Progressive Era political thought, Richard Hofstadter notes that consumer consciousness provided a “focus for the common interests of all classes that had to concern themselves over family budgets,” that cut “across occupational and class lines, and did a great deal to dissolve the old nineteenth-century American habit of viewing political issues solely from the standpoint of the producer.”⁶

Women, as the primary purchasers of food and household goods, were the leaders and grassroots of Progressive consumer-oriented strategy. The most noted efforts were, again, orchestrated by upper- and middle-class women, as these classes had the most income to wield in “conscientious consumption.” Initially, consumer strategies were used as part of movements to protect industrial workers, not consumers. One of the primary consumer organizations, the National Consumers’ League, was founded in 1899 to “unite consumers for the purpose of protecting women and children in the garment trades against industrial exploitation.” The NCL’s “White Label Campaign” encouraged consumers to purchase only linens and other

garments made by shops that maintained acceptable working conditions for employees. Eventually, the League expanded its activities to include agitation for pure food and drug legislation and participation in the anti-trust food boycotts that took place during 1910.⁷

Such boycotts became a prominent strategy for Progressive Era activists concerned with food and other cost of living issues. Inspired by tactics developed by the organized labor movement, food activists used boycotts to stage “strikes” against the various corporate trusts suspected of artificially raising prices or providing substandard or dangerous products. Unlike the spontaneous collective actions described in E. P. Thompson’s studies of eighteenth-century food riots, the food protests of the Progressive Era were relatively structured incidents, with planned meetings and demonstrations, which provided opportunities for women of all classes to take on leadership roles and activate community networks.⁸

The South Providence kosher meat boycott took place only three months after the end of a nationwide meat boycott and two months after a series of very turbulent kosher meat boycotts in New York. While it is impossible to determine whether the Jewish housewives of South Providence were directly inspired by these events, it is likely that the prevalence of the boycott strategy may have influenced their decision to strike against their neighborhood butcher shops. Because these events occurred so close in time to the South Providence action, and because they received fairly extensive coverage in the press, an examination of these meat boycotts will serve to illustrate the goals, strategies, and debates that characterized such consumer actions in 1910.

The Meat Boycott of 1910

As Eric Rauchway notes, the high cost of living was widely considered “the biggest problem in the country” in 1910.⁹ Debate about the causes of the perceived increase in the costs of staple commodities ranged from the overuse of farm land and overpopulation caused by massive immigration to the higher standard of living now demanded by Americans.¹⁰ Nearly all theorists also cast suspicion on the major corporate interests that had taken over much of the country’s food production, giving rise to accusations that the “Milk Trust,” the “Beef Trust,” and the “Egg Trust” were using the modern advances of cold storage and railway transportation to manipulate prices by withholding supplies and artificially increasing demand.¹¹

The growing faith in the power of organized consumers to resolve the economic and social problems created by “modern conditions” is vividly illustrated by a massive meat boycott that swept the nation in 1910. Engineered by the National Anti-Food Trust League, an organization started in Washington, D.C., by a group of women with connections to Congress, the boycott quickly spread as thousands of clubwomen and working people undertook a thirty-day pledge to abstain from meat in an effort to break the “Meat Trust” and force prices down. Though the outcomes of this “anti-food trust” movement are difficult to determine, a brief examination of the 1910 meat boycott highlights many of the issues and debates surrounding Progressive Era consumer activism and provides a context for understanding women’s activism around food issues.

In early January of 1910, the *New York Times* reported that the “women of the National capital, including a number of wives of congressmen,” proposed to

counteract the power of the major producers and distributors of basic commodities by organizing “1,000,000 American householders into an enormous boycotting machine.” Promising to strike at one overpriced, trust-controlled commodity at a time, the National Anti-Food Trust League selected the “Meat Trust” as its first target. The organization requested that members sign pledges to abstain from buying or eating meat for a defined time period, usually thirty days. Officers were elected at a meeting in the Arlington Hotel in Washington, D. C., with journalist E. L. Scharf elected president. Membership dues were set at twenty-five cents, and a system was set up to keep records of signed pledge cards on file in the national office in order to monitor the strength of the boycott as it spread across the nation.¹²

By January 19, the League’s national office reported receiving 200,000 membership petitions, in addition to requests for membership applications from organizations across the country. As well as including several “important members of Congress,” the League also received a letter of endorsement from President Taft. Associations ranging from the Central Labor Union of Washington, D. C., to the League of American Pen-Women indicated their willingness to join the fight against the Meat Trust.¹³

The call to boycott meat spread first to the Midwest, with Ohio noted as the first state to show large-scale consumer organization. On January 20, the *New York Times* reported that eleven thousand residents of Cleveland had pledged not to eat meat for thirty days, with some boycotters vowing to go on a vegetarian diet until Easter. By the next day, the reported number had increased to 75,000 people, as workers in the large railroad shops and other industries signed no-meat petitions.

Cincinnati, Columbus, and Toledo reported wide-scale interest in the boycott, which then spread to Nebraska and western Iowa. Within days, large boycott efforts were noted in Pittsburgh, St. Louis, and Baltimore, and there were reports that the strike had spread south to Memphis and Atlanta. In the West, the boycott was discussed by labor organizations in San Francisco and by preachers in Tacoma. In the Northeast, Boston announced the formation of a “No Meat Club” at a mass meeting in Faneuil Hall. By the end of March, the national office of the Anti-Food Trust League reported that the boycott included at least 800,000 people—from members of Pittsburgh’s Council of Women’s Clubs to New York’s National League baseball players. Though somewhat shy of the goal of one million participants, the number of pledges to boycott meat indicates that the Anti-Food Trust League’s objective and strategy had struck a chord that echoed across both state and class lines.¹⁴

Boycott Strategies and Public Anxieties

The League’s meat boycott attained this level of nationwide participation despite considerable criticism of its strategies. In addition to the predictable outcry from the meat industry, critiques of the League’s boycott tactics were leveled by the press, numerous “experts,” and, most significantly, several major labor organizations. These critiques, and the League’s responses, illustrate the debate that accompanied the development of consumer-oriented collective strategies.

In addition to the “no meat” pledges, the League encouraged the use of other tactics to encourage unity among boycotters and to allay anxieties about the consequences of a non-meat diet. In Baltimore, the Federation of Labor printed fifty thousand buttons proclaiming, “I don’t buy meat: do you?,” to be distributed among

the various unions in the city. Participants in St. Louis declared their support for the boycott by purchasing buttons printed with the slogan, “Meat shop closed for thirty days.”¹⁵ Sympathetic restaurant owners encouraged diners to select vegetable dishes. In New York City, members of major manufacturing firms sat down to a “meatless luncheon” at the Machinery Club. The Anti-Food Trust League assembled a committee of home economics experts to devise substitutes for food staples likely to be targeted for boycott, and issued a list developed by this committee giving recipes and formulas for foods “believed to be capable of offering as much nutrition as beef.”¹⁶ While most of the antitrust protesters adhered to the peaceful nature of the boycott, some cities reported instances of violence and crime, as some strike supporters attacked purchasers and sellers of meat and others used the anti-meat sentiment as justification for looting.¹⁷

Many food activists and social reformers greeted the Anti-Food Trust League’s attack on the meat industry with calls for “universal vegetarianism,” which were met with equally fervent condemnations of the no-meat diet by advocates of meat as a source of protein and nutrition. In February, Dr. Horace Fletcher gave a lecture before a group of Pittsburgh clubwomen, predicting the end of meat eating in the United States within ten years.¹⁸ In a large article in the *New York Times*, Dr. Harvey W. Wiley of the U. S. Department of Chemistry cautioned that complete abstinence from meat would be “as foolish as it would be criminal.” In addition to destroying the “great cattle, sheep, and hog raising industries of the country,” and crippling farmers, the boycott could result in the physical and mental deterioration of the American people. In vivid language, Wiley warned that a reduction in meat consumption would

jeopardize America's international standing: "We might become a race of mollycoddles! We certainly would not be able to maintain our position in the world, for much of the vim, alertness, energy, and inventiveness that characterize the Americans as a nation comes from the admirable mixed food that we eat."¹⁹

Wiley's position echoed the sentiments of the *New York Times* editorial board, which also linked national meat consumption with national strength. Decrying the "nitrogen starvation" that would inevitably result from a vegetable-based diet, one *Times* editorial worried that the meat boycott would put the United States on the same footing as other nations, who "by necessity, never by preference," adhere to a vegetarian diet. "Those races, taking them by and large, are a poor, spindling lot, without mental or physical energy enough to attempt or even to imagine any escape from the domination of the meat-eating peoples except into the nothingness and annihilation of some vague, incomprehensible nirvana."²⁰

These expressions of anxiety about the impact of reduced meat consumption on the American national character included a chord of anti-immigrant and anti-working-class sentiment. During the League's boycott the *New York Times* ran a number of short articles describing incidents in which laborers participating in the no-meat movement died when their resolve collapsed and they gorged themselves on meat. These workers were generally depicted as "foreigners," and the tone of the articles expresses a perception of working-class boycott participants as ignorant and gluttonous.²¹

This hyperbolic discourse about meat eating reflected the central role that food—and the business of food—played in conceptions of the United States'

economic, civic, and moral health. With its attack on the Meat Trust, the Anti-Food Trust League tapped into public anxieties about not only high food prices, but the changing nature of the nation itself.

Grassroots Organizing and Cross-Class Alliances

Although the Anti-Food Trust League initially was comprised of upper- and middle-class women and their male allies, working-class groups were most active in organizing support for the meat boycott. In several cities, the Central Labor Union was instrumental in enlisting boycott participants, and independent industrial unions encouraged thousands of workers to sign no-meat pledges. In Pittsburgh, for example, three thousand employees of Carnegie Steel signed boycott pledges, and employees of United States Steel, despite contract agreements prohibiting actions with other organizations, signed informal petitions passed around by fellow workers. Smaller labor organizations, from carpenters in Kansas City to transit workers in New York, also contributed their membership to the anti-food trust movement.²²

Many prominent labor organizations, however, rejected the Anti-Food Trust League's call to boycott. Some did so to protest the movement's "attack on one of our most important industries," as noted in the Toledo Central Labor Union's denouncement of the boycott as "an insidious attempt to reduce the wages of working men by lowering the standard of living." For the most part, however, labor leaders opposed the League's movement against the Meat Trust because of ambivalence about the boycott strategy itself. Union leaders claimed that boycotts had been tried in the past but had resulted in only short term improvements. In Cleveland, despite the quick enlistment of thousands of workers early in the boycott movement, the United Trades

and Labor Council came out against the meat strike on the grounds that it would harm only small retailers and not the meat packing trust itself. In New York, the Central Labor Union asserted that the nationwide meat strike would only strengthen other large food trusts, as the sales of those commodities would rise to replace meat purchases. Representatives of New York butchers' unions decried the power of the Chicago packing houses but warned that the packers could always put their stock in cold storage and wait out the boycott, being free then to charge whatever prices they desired. The butchers' unions, like Boston labor leaders, maintained that governmental actions such as federal indictments, not consumer protests, would be effective in breaking the Meat Trust.²³

This debate left the meat strike to be taken up by more informal "no-meat" clubs and, most significantly, women's organizations. Women played a significant role in organizing the boycott on all levels, from the instigation of the Anti-Food Trust League to grassroots mobilization within the labor unions that did participate in the meat strike. Numerous articles early on in the movement attested to women's participation, ranging from simple observations that "the women are in it, too" to the inclusion of a woman speaker at a mass organizational meeting of the Federated Trades Council of Milwaukee. Major women's organizations such as the Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumers' League promoted the meat boycott at their annual meetings in January, as prominent activists such as Rose Schneiderman of the WTUL and Florence Kelley of the NCL spoke on the topic. The National Progressive Women's Suffrage Union (NPWSU), headed by Sofia Loebinger, took up the cause of the boycott, as did numerous women's clubs. Equally active were a

number of upper- and middle-class women's clubs, ranging from the Pittsburgh Congress of Women's Clubs' promised enlistment of five thousand members to the organizing efforts of Mrs. Anita Comfort-Brooks, president of the Gotham Club in Manhattan. Comfort-Brooks's plans to unite "possibly the women of the entire country" included a nationwide postcard-writing campaign to petition President Taft to take action against the Meat Trust, the organization of "anti-meat clubs" in many of the cities' finest hotels, and the posting of 55,000 posters around New York publicizing the protest.²⁴

Women's engagement in the meat boycott incorporated both the "municipal housekeeping" theme of the suffrage movement and growing interest in the recent successes of working women in organizing for better conditions. NPWS President Sofia Loebinger blamed the oppressive increase in food prices on "man's indifference," asserting that, "Woman is the one chiefly affected, and she has a right to be up in arms for a voice in this vital matter. We ought to have woman inspectors in all the markets and stores." Comfort-Brooks connected her efforts to promote the meat boycott among various classes of women to the successful 1909 shirtwaist makers' strike, the "Uprising of the 20,000," which showed that "when women get together . . . results must come."²⁵

Despite this connection to prevalent feminist themes and actions, the anti-food trust movement revealed significant tensions within these cross-class female alliances, as well as between women and men in working-class organizations. While labor activists like Rose Schneiderman accepted the difficulties in forming alliances with upper- and middle-class women's groups, the distance between the experiences of the

two classes of women was at times exploited by the press to make the boycott seem frivolous. In one series of statements, clubwoman Anita Comfort-Brooks provided easy fodder for a New York press already somewhat ironic about the efficacy of the meat boycott strategy. Asserting that “it is about time that we did something for the poor people,” Comfort-Brooks admitted that “I have been living in a hotel for the last ten years, and so I do not know just how much women have to pay for meats, coal oil, vinegar, and such things: but I know that it is too much. Why, a small steak for luncheon at a restaurant that used to cost 75 cents now costs \$1.25.” Dismissing widely held apprehensions that abstaining from meat would pose nutritional problems, Comfort-Brooks acknowledged that she herself lived “almost entirely on cake and candy.” Such frivolous remarks provide a marked contrast to Consumers’ League President Maud Nathan’s acknowledgement of the nutritional sacrifices already made by working-class women. Urging participation in the boycott, Nathan (a Jewish woman married to a successful broker) reminded her listeners that “[E]ven now the poor shop girls, for the most part, have to substitute for their former chicken or meat sandwiches lunches of éclairs, cakes, or other food of little value.”²⁶

This difference in the boycott experiences between working women and upper-class participants was also reflected by the plight of the wives of the small retail butchers who stood to lose much from the extended meat boycott and from a tandem movement advocating the disposal of meat kept for long periods in cold storage. In an article describing an open-air rally of Comfort-Brooks’s “Gotham Beef Party” (named to evoke the Boston Tea Party) and the National Progressive Woman’s Suffrage Union at Madison Square, the *New York Times* focused on the comments of a “a rosy-

cheeked little foreigner, wearing a bright blue dress, a typical small butcher's wife, who had come out to represent the butchers and to tell the GBP how wrong they were." In response to Loebinger's assertion that the butchers should join the boycotters in the fight against the Meat Trust, the woman "told how all the teamsters, icehouse men, as well as the butchers themselves, would lose their jobs." Loebinger's reply was that she "liked a good beefsteak," but believed that "a little boycotting would bring the Beef Trust to time." The punctuation of these remarks by the arrival of "four occupants of a handsome automobile" to stop and sign Loebinger's opinion, underscored the class differences of the speakers.²⁷

Such differences in experiences and perspectives within the woman-led portion of the meat boycott extended to the channels of power open to various groups. Working-class women often had to contend with male union leaders' disapproval of the boycott strategy. When the Central Trades and Labor Council of St. Louis voted down a resolution to join the boycott, calling it a farce, Mrs. S. Spragon, a woman delegate, denounced the council: "You men are a bunch of quitters," she cried, "and you voted down the resolution simply because the working women were first to start the movement here."²⁸ This accusation voiced frustration with the reluctance of many union leaders to accept consumer-oriented strategies, which were generally associated with women. As boycotts held the potential for the loss of many jobs for laboring men, union leaders continued to prefer producer-oriented strategies, such as the agitation for a living wage.

In contrast, the club women and suffrage activists involved in the meat boycott dealt with a different level of male authority. In one encounter, Loebinger and a group

of delegates from the National Progressive Woman's Suffrage Union confronted an alderman in New Jersey about the issue of cold storage of meat, after attending a board meeting from which women were usually barred. The alderman, Joseph Schloss, was a butcher by trade and responded aggressively to the women's presence, saying "These women ought to be at home minding their families. . . No woman can make an intelligent argument." To Schloss's assertion that he "represents the dealers, and it is to the dealers the consumers must look to their meat," Loebinger replied that, to the contrary, "It's to the consumers the dealers must look to for their patronage."²⁹

The Meat Industry's Response

The first reports of the Anti-Food Trust League's protest noted that meat dealers appeared largely unconcerned by the boycott. Reports from Chicago note that the major meat packing companies refused to take notice of the boycotts and declined interviews.³⁰ As the boycott grew in size and reach, however, some meat dealers grew uneasy. The *New York Times* reported that major meat packers had threatened to target Ohio—the state with the earliest response to the boycott—by refusing to reduce prices to retailers in the states, threatening to sell their meat to other areas and intimating that striking communities in Ohio would "pay higher prices in the future for any losses the packers suffer now."³¹

Soon after the meat boycott began to spread, many cities began reporting of its success. By the end of January, Omaha announced that butchers had reduced prices; prices dropped in Pittsburgh by two cents for some kinds of meat; and Boston noted a decline in meat costs of two to four cents a pound. Baltimore reported that many large dealers had a 35 percent reduction in sales once the boycott began. Several cities also

reported the closing of many butcher shops, mostly small independent retailers.³² This decline in prices lasted only a short while, however. By March 23, meat prices were up again by two cents a pound in New York. The *New York Times* reported that “all sides” in the conflict admitted that meat prices were the highest since the Civil War and were likely to keep rising.³³

Governmental Action Against the Packers

Despite the somewhat transitory effect on meat prices, the boycott did seem to foment enough public outcry to direct the government’s attention to the problem of the Meat Trust. On January 24, a federal Grand Jury in Chicago began proceedings against the nation’s major meat packing companies, citing the corporations for violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and contempt of an earlier injunction against fixing prices, and calling for the dissolution of the National Packing Company (NPC), a distributing body in which the major houses held the majority of stock. After eight weeks of investigation, the federal court in Chicago ordered the dissolution of the NPC and indicted ten of its subsidiaries for violation of antitrust laws. While this action validated the belief of consumer groups and their allies that the trust was indeed responsible for an unjust increase in meat prices, there was little hope that the indictment would have much concrete effect. The NPC vowed to fight the action, and the large companies indicted in the anti-monopoly proceedings—Armour, Morris, and Swift—denied that the Court’s decision would affect them individually. In cynical statements quoted by the *New York Times*, the company heads claimed to have operated NPC only as a proxy to prevent public outcry at their efforts to buy out

competitors. The dissolution of NPC simply removed the burden of maintaining this screen.³⁴

The Rise of Consumer Consciousness

While the concrete outcomes of the 1910 meat boycott are difficult to determine, the protest seems to have had the lasting impact of raising consumer consciousness. If nothing else, participants in the boycott experienced a sense of their power as consumers. Interestingly, this consciousness was often expressed in terms comparing consumer power to the power of organized labor or even the business trusts that were under attack. In St. Louis, a city employee participating called for the formation of a permanent “consumers’ trust” to defend consumer interests.³⁵ In a letter to the *New York Times*, a reader from East Orange, New Jersey—“a householder and a family man,”—called for New York City to join the meat strike. “We hear a great deal about organized capital, organized labor: why not have the organized consumer?”³⁶ Maud Nathan, President of the Consumers’ League, asserted that,

While we do not stand for the boycott principle, we do stand for combined efforts to bring about better conditions than those at present, when the food supply of the people is in the hands of a few large concerns. The consumer, after all, is the real master of the situation, and if he sets earnestly about it he can compel fair treatment even from the trusts.³⁷

Despite its mostly negative editorials about the meat boycott as a strategy, the *New York Times* asserted that a positive outcome of the nationwide boycott movement was the development of “a class consciousness and a class organization” among consumers:

[T]his may mean that what are called labor and capital are no longer to have a monopoly of organization, and that at last the third and most deeply interested party to every quarrel between employers and employees is to have a word to

say for itself. . . There will be power behind it whenever it is raised, and, whenever the power happens to be directed with wisdom, results will be sure to follow—results likely to be equally surprising and unpleasant to those who hitherto have been wont so coolly to ignore the public.

The *Times* expressed the hope that this sense of power would “make it easier for public to become articulate beyond just election days.”³⁸

The Anti-Food Trust League’s nationwide meat boycott is an important example of the debates that raged around the perceived economic crisis in America and the appropriate measures to solve it. Though rejected by several major labor organizations as an ineffective strategy, the League’s meat strike revealed how much Progressive reformers and other associations had learned from labor movement tactics. The host of objections to the League’s anti-food trust movement offered by labor leaders—from the fear of driving independent meat dealers and small retailers out of business to the complaint that abstaining from meat would lower the quality of life for working men—were rooted primarily in a distrust of the effectiveness of the consumer boycott strategy. According to many in the labor movement, in the battle to manipulate the market forces of supply and demand, the advantage lay with the meat packers.

Despite this pessimism within the labor movement, the meat boycott can be seen as a politicizing experience for its participants, particularly women. The general meat boycott of 1910 provided an outlet for women’s organizing, and perhaps laid a foundation for the more effective consumer movements of the Depression and New Deal. Most importantly for this thesis, the Anti-Food Trust League’s meat boycott emphasized the centrality of food issues as a topic for public discourse and a focus for women’s political action that sometimes crossed both class and ethnic lines. The

following chapters will consider the particular significance of food issues within the immigrant Jewish community, as well as the Eastern European religious and intellectual traditions that contributed to Jewish women's activism. As will be seen in the discussion of the kosher meat protests that followed soon after the end of the League's boycott, the intersection of Jewish women's domestic and communal roles provided a powerful impetus for grassroots organization around food issues.

CHAPTER TWO

KOSHER FOOD AND JEWISH IDENTITY: THE ROOTS OF JEWISH WOMEN'S FOOD ACTIVISM

As noted in the previous chapter on Progressive Era consumer activism, food issues have provided a powerful focal point for local and national organizing.

Because of their traditional roles as household managers and nurturers, women have played a prominent part in food protests, taking the lead both in grassroots organizing and in effectively linking cost-of-living issues to a broader agenda of social and political reform. For immigrant Jewish women engaged in such protests, however, food activism had significance beyond fair prices and health regulation. Kosher dietary law, or *kashrut*, invests food issues with important religious and cultural aspects essential to Orthodox Jewish identity. In addition to stretching limited resources to feed their families, immigrant Jewish women in early twentieth-century America confronted the dilemma of maintaining kosher households in a new land where the communal structures ensuring the availability of ritually pure food were limited, contentious, or nonexistent.

This chapter will situate the food activism of immigrant Jewish women within the complicated mix of religious practice, cultural debate, and community politics that characterized the maintenance of *kashrut* in the United States during the period of the greatest influx of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe. If, as Donna Gabaccia asserts, “we are what we eat,” the problem of keeping kosher in early twentieth-century America reflected the struggle of immigrant Orthodox Jews to reconcile the preservation of their traditional communal identity with the conditions and pressures

of their new home. In her study of immigrant food traditions, Hasia Diner points out that food, “so central to the Judaic sacred system and the promise of America, got caught up in a complicated set of internal Jewish fights about class, immigrant status, religion, generation, and gender. Because they [Jews] venerated food, and because so much about their food world changed in America, it became a locus of contestations and conflict.”¹ Periodic uprisings, such as the kosher meat boycotts led by Jewish housewives, often represented the intersection of external pressures—such as the general high cost of living in 1910—with these internal debates over kosher food.

As the primary purchasers of food for their families, Jewish women often served as mediators between conflicting impulses of cultural preservation and adaptation to life in the United States. To understand the basis and form of Jewish women’s food protests, it is important to consider the nature of the Jewish immigration experience, particularly in regard to women’s roles within both traditional Eastern European communities and ethnic enclaves in the United States.

Jewish Immigration and the Cultural Implications of Food

The greatest influx of Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe occurred between 1881 and the start of World War I, as an estimated two million Jews left the Pale of Settlement within the Russian Empire to migrate to the United States. Fleeing from the persecution of the restrictive May Laws imposed in 1882, which increased limitations on Jewish residency and access to occupations, and from the brutal pogroms that brought death and destruction to many Jewish communities, Eastern European Jews sought refuge in the haven that the United States appeared to offer. In several successive waves, thousands of Jews joined their *landsmen* (members of their

home communities) who had moved to American cities. While an estimated 70 percent of these new arrivals settled in the neighborhoods of New York City, many others established Jewish enclaves in other urban areas, primarily in the northeastern part of the United States.²

Accustomed to maintaining self-reliant communities within hostile mainstream cultures, Eastern European Jews counteracted some of the extreme dislocation of the immigration experience by transplanting many of the religious and social structures that had sustained them in the *shtetls* (small towns) of the Pale to the ethnic enclaves they developed in the United States. Although more established and prosperous American Jewish communities often provided assistance to new immigrants, cultural and religious differences—these older communities tended to be dominated by German Reform Jews, while new immigrants were Eastern European and Orthodox—encouraged the development of separate and distinctive institutions within Jewish neighborhoods. In addition to establishing synagogues, *cheder* (Hebrew schools), and *kehillah* (communal councils), Jewish immigrants developed a number of secular institutions to help immigrants adapt to life in the United States while reinforcing their Orthodox Jewish identity. Mutual benefit societies, free loan associations, and other charitable and social organizations formed by both men and women provided essential communal and economic assistance in acclimating immigrants to their new environment.³

Ethnic entrepreneurs, including grocers and butchers, were frequently among the members and beneficiaries of these institutions, gaining financial backing for their enterprises and a loyal customer base from a community desirous of familiar and

necessary kosher goods.⁴ The availability of Jewish products greatly shaped the development of Jewish neighborhoods. As Diner notes, ethnic markets “functioned as the spines of the Jewish communities. Jews lived primarily where they could buy Jewish food Grocery stores, fish markets, bakeries, restaurants, cafes, and cafeterias in the larger cities, delicatessens in even smaller ones, defined Jewish urban space.”⁵

This food-centered urban space did not develop without difficulty, however. The supply of kosher products required a system of supervision which evolved slowly and with considerable contention in the new land. In addition, the impulse to preserve Jewish religious and cultural values by upholding food traditions at times conflicted with both assimilationist pressures and the desire of many immigrants to take advantage of what several scholars describe as the new experience of “American abundance.” As mediators between the marketplace and the home, Jewish women bore much of the responsibility of negotiating this tension between cultural preservation and adaptation to the American consumer landscape. Jewish women’s engagement in the debates and controversies over kosher food in the United States reveals much about the evolution of American Jewish identity, and provides a useful context for the examination of the food activism displayed in the kosher meat boycotts.⁶

Keeping Kosher: Jewish Women’s Role in Cultural Preservation and the Evolution of American Jewish Identity

For Orthodox Jews, kosher observance is an essential component of women’s roles within the home. Though women are generally not formally involved in the

determination of the ritual purity of food (which is the responsibility of male religious officials), their traditional duties as wives and mothers include the adherence to the laws of *kashrut* within their homes. Among other rules, this kosher observance includes the maintenance of two sets of plates, pots, and utensils—one for meat, another for milk, an additional set of plates for Passover, and separate storage, cooking, and cleaning facilities. Food must be prepared using kosher cooking practices, and care must be taken in shopping to ensure that all food purchased is permitted and has been prepared according to kosher law.

In the Eastern European *shtetl* adherence to kosher practices was an integral part of community life, with well-defined (if not entirely corruption-proof) communal structures governing the supervision and sale of kosher foods. Transplanting these structures to the new land was a slow and not always effective process. In studies of the development of *kashrut* supervision in the United States, several scholars have pointed out the difficulties in establishing the authority of Jewish communal bodies, such as the *kehillah*, within the growing immigrant Jewish community. As Harold Gastwirt asserts in his examination of the evolution of *kashrut* supervision in New York City, *kehillah* authority had failed to become a strong force in immigrant Jewish communities by the late nineteenth century, and “Jewish religious life in the United States had become synagogue centered and clearly voluntaristic.”⁷ In adapting to the changes and influences of their new home, many Eastern European Jews found adherence to traditional cultural and religious practices more malleable than in the confines of the tight-knit *shtetl* community. While most immigrant Jews attempted to retain fundamental aspects of their religious identity, including keeping kosher, many

found themselves examining the costs and benefits of *kashrut* in terms of life in a new country, where cultural trends and different economic structures complicated the adherence to Jewish food traditions.

Kosher observance placed unique financial and social burdens upon Jewish families in the United States. In addition to the expense of maintaining separate dishware and cooking utensils, Jewish women also had to budget for the higher cost of kosher food, which was generally more expensive due to the supervision and processing required in its production. The limited number of kosher suppliers also impacted on the ability of many Jewish families to follow *kashrut*, as many cities outside of the eastern United States lacked qualified kosher manufacturers and butchers. In addition to these economic difficulties of keeping kosher, social and ideological changes within the Jewish community caused many Jews to question their adherence to *kashrut*. Hasia Diner suggests that the contrast between the abundance and variety of food in the United States and the limited diet that Jewish immigrants had been accustomed to in Eastern Europe encouraged many Jews to experiment with new foods and ways of eating. As a better standard of living was a prime motivation for immigration for many families, many socially-mobile Jews chafed at restrictions on their enjoyment of American foods and the pleasures of dining out in restaurants.⁸

Diner also asserts that, as Jews became more integrated into the American mainstream, many felt less comfortable with dietary restrictions that distinguished them from the rest of American society. Jenna Joselit links this discomfort to ideological changes within Judaism, reflected in the growth of the Jewish Reform movement, noting that “Reform Jews of the early nineteenth century harbored

profound doubts about the religious, cultural, social, and even aesthetic significance of a practice that so dramatically set them apart from the rest of the body politic.” Jews active in leftist political movements, such as Socialism, also tended to reject the religious restrictions placed on food. For many Jews in the United States, from socially mobile Reform Jews to radical labor activists, strict adherence to *kashrut* conflicted with the Jewish identity they were forming in their new home.⁹

Scholars record several instances reflecting reactions against *kashrut*, mostly among upper- and middle-class Jews, from a banquet celebrating the ordination of the first American Reform rabbis in 1883 that featured shrimp in the first course, to a Purim Ball in Long Island in 1910 at which lobster and ham sandwiches were served.¹⁰ While such violations provoked disapproving responses from the Orthodox Jewish community, and while *treyf* (non-kosher) delicacies like shrimp and lobster were beyond the economic means of most Jewish immigrants, the public flaunting of kosher laws revealed a growing acceptance of a Jewish identity that did not require strict adherence to *kashrut*.¹¹

This internal debate about kosher dietary practices intersected with external attacks on traditional Jewish food arising from Progressive Era reform efforts to “improve” immigrant diets. The convergence of “scientific cookery” and the professionalization of home economics with Americanization programs in the early twentieth century resulted in a nationwide movement to induce immigrants to adopt American-style food practices designed to impart not only newly developed standards of nutrition but also standardized cultural values. “Proper” food was seen as the basis of both physical and civic health, and the traditional diets of most immigrant groups

were considered the source of many of the social problems that plagued immigrant communities.

Dieticians waged war on the preferred tastes of Eastern European Jews, charging that their predilection for sour and pickled foods caused “irritation,” which made “assimilation more difficult.” According to professional home economists, “Jewish dietary problems” contributed to constipation, excess weight, anxiety, and the general emotionalism seen as a principal problem in Jewish communities. Jewish mothers supposedly were too indulgent in feeding their children, neglecting to impart to them the important “value of self-denial.” Diner observes that by 1910 these assessments had been taken up by many members of the Jewish community itself, noting that “leaders of American Jewry—writers, rabbis, teachers, and communal activists from within and without the immigrant community—asked repeatedly why Jewish homes seemed to be, as they saw them, such hotbeds of tension and discord. Bad food was high on their list of answers.”¹² American cooking techniques, first taught to immigrant women through settlement house classes, were also featured in cookbooks developed by Jewish women. *The Settlement Cook Book*, produced in the early 1900s by “a little band of Hebrew women,” undertook to “familiarize Jewish housewives with the basics of American cuisine.”¹³

While sectors of the educated Jewish elite seemed to embrace the attack on traditional Jewish food as part of an acceptance of new principles of nutrition and social science, other Jewish leaders retaliated with a defense of kosher practices equally grounded in modern scientific study. Joselit notes a number of interesting efforts by rabbis and doctors to rationalize *kashrut* by asserting that kosher practices

resulted in food that conformed to “contemporary notions of freshness, purity, and what we would call today ecological balance.” In 1903, Dr. B. Bernheim proclaimed that the ancient fathers who devised the Jewish dietary laws “were not fools but wise men. Each and every one of them was, as you might say, a bacteriologist, a pathologist.” Scientific studies were undertaken to prove the nutritional and medical soundness of *kashrut*, incorporating the latest modern scientific theories. Dr. N.E. Aronstam, a Darwinian scholar, claimed at the 1911 International Exhibition of Hygiene that the laws of *kashrut* corresponded to an “evolutionary food chain in which permissible foods, such as fish with scales, were ‘of greater nutritive value’ because they ‘stand higher on the ladder of evolution than fish without.’” Joselit observes that this research by male scientists and physicians was often distilled into literature and pamphlets designed to appeal to Jewish women, who, “in their newly assumed role as ‘home engineers,’ presided over an environment that more closely resembled a laboratory than the proverbial castle.”¹⁴

It should be noted that many Jewish immigrants did not have the economic resources or leisure to systematically pursue scientific cookery or to ponder the medical foundations of *kashrut*. It is unlikely that most working-class Jewish housewives would have called themselves “home engineers” or worried about the evolutionary status of the carp they prepared for dinner. But this Progressive Era discourse about traditional Jewish dietary practices reveals the centrality of food to considerations of ethnicity, Americanism, and the fulfillment of women’s roles as wives and mothers. When Jews questioned the necessity of following kosher dietary laws, they suggested a new vision of Jewish identity. When food reformers criticized

the immigrant Jewish diet, they also critiqued the way in which Jewish women cared for their families. Charged with the responsibility of choosing the food for their households, Jewish women were required to engage these issues, and ultimately to decide whether their family diet would preserve cultural traditions or reflect new, American Jewish values.

Such debates over *kashrut* and Jewish food identity formed a backdrop for the perhaps more tangible and volatile food activism of Jewish women. It is perhaps a testimony to the strength of religious and cultural traditions that, despite increasing pressures to abandon *kashrut*, Jewish women repeatedly engaged in street actions to ensure the availability and quality of kosher foods in their neighborhoods. The kosher meat boycotts that occurred periodically in New York and other cities reveal how Jewish women's religious and cultural priorities influenced their reactions to economic conditions arising from both the increasingly corporate national meat industry and the community politics of kosher meat supervision. To understand the development of these conflicts, it is necessary to examine the laws governing the production and supervision of kosher meat and the efforts made to govern this process in early twentieth-century America.

***Shehitah*: Ritually Pure Food as a Foundation of Community**

Shehitah, or the laws regulating the slaughtering of meat so that it is ritually fit for Jewish consumption, is a primary issue for Orthodox Jewish communities. Meat from animals permitted for consumption under the laws of *kashrut* is not considered kosher unless the animals have been slaughtered according to *shehitah*. In his description of ritual slaughtering practice and its role in Jewish society, Jeremiah

Berman notes the cultural significance of *shehitah*, asserting that, “Jewish slaughtering prescriptions, though purely ritualistic in intent, most profoundly affect the social and ethical life of Jews.” According to Berman, the need for kosher meat is an important factor in the structure of Jewish communities, and the *shohet*, or ritual slaughterer, is one of the most indispensable members of Orthodox Jewish society. “The Jew desirous of observing his dietary laws requires the services of a *shohet*, and to this end he must make his home in a Jewish settlement.” Berman notes that “in practically every new settlement in America the first group act of Jews was that of taking title to a separate burial place, and the second that of engaging a *shohet*.”¹⁵

The certification and employment of the community *shohet* has long been a topic of communal contention. According to Harold Gastwirt, originally all Jews, including women, were permitted to slaughter, so long as they were properly trained in the laws of *shehitah*. Ashkenazic authorities eventually excluded women from becoming *shohatim* because of their “delicate constitution.” In Talmudic times, ritual slaughterers also sold the meat they prepared, which often gave rise to suspicions of laxness in the *shohatim*’s adherence to *shehitah*. Rabbis increasingly took control of *shehitah* training and inspection, and in the early part of the fourteenth century, a division between the slaughtering and selling of meat was noted in several European communities, with the retail aspect relegated to kosher butchers.¹⁶ Control over the inspection of kosher slaughtering practices and butcher shops came under the jurisdiction of the *kehillah*, which paid the *shohet* from fees collected from the community. Rabbis also collected fees for their inspection duties, which often resulted in intense rivalries between rabbis and suspicions of collusion and corruption.

Despite incidences of abuse and political infighting, the supervision of kosher meat in Jewish communities in Europe was at the very least overseen by a communal system that had been established over centuries and that was invested with religious authority. Historians of American kosher supervision assert that the development of a similar system in the United States was slow. Berman notes that, in the United States,

in most instances the communities are without power, the authority of the rabbi is not respected, and the *shohet* has become a workman paid by the butcher. The result is that in many American cities, not only does the Jewish community not receive the benefit of strictly kosher meat and the revenues of a *Shehitah* tax, but it is treated to spectacles of irresponsible rabbinical bans, strikes, lockouts, and even the perpetration of crimes.¹⁷

Hasia Diner suggests that problems in the supervision of kosher meat arose from the “basics of the political structure” of the United States, asserting that the state and federal governments were not particularly interested in religious functionaries, and the general emphasis on *laissez faire* economics gave Jewish butchers free reign to set prices and to call their products kosher.¹⁸ It was not until the 1920s that Jewish communities in the United States developed communal structures that were able to effectively supervise the slaughter and sale of kosher meat. These structures were typified by the institution of the *vaad*, a permanent committee comprised of representatives of Orthodox synagogues in a given city which was authorized to pay ritual slaughterers, license kosher meat shops, and hire overseers to inspect kosher butcher stores. Even with the establishment of committees such as the *vaad*, however, conflicts over the supervision of kosher meat extended well into the 1930s.¹⁹

These issues of communal politics were further complicated by the structure of the meat industry in the United States. After the development of the American railway system and technological advances in refrigeration in the late nineteenth century, most

butchering and meat packing was done in the Midwest, primarily in Chicago, which became the principle meat supplier for the Eastern United States.²⁰ The dictates of *shehitah* made this system less than ideal for kosher meat suppliers, as kosher law requires meat to be rinsed and salted within seventy-two hours of slaughter. The transport of dressed meat from Chicago to stores in the East risked exceeding this time limit. Donna Gabaccia notes that, though the higher prices generally charged for kosher meat enticed Chicago meat packers to hire a *shohet* to prepare kosher meat for shipment to East Coast communities, Jewish consumers were skeptical, and continued to prefer locally slaughtered meat.²¹ The suspicion of the Chicago-based meat industry that inspired much food activism in the Progressive Era was particularly acute for Jews concerned about the ritual purity of their meat supply.

The controversies and complications of kosher meat supervision contributed to the conditions that gave rise to Jewish women's actions against the kosher butchers in their communities. It is important to note that, though Jewish women bore the responsibility for providing their families with kosher meat, they had no formal input in the system that ensured the ritual purity of the meat available to them. As in the nationwide protests against large corporate trusts and corrupt government officials, Jewish women engaged in collective actions in an attempt to enforce the conditions that would enable them to fulfill their religious and domestic duties.

Jewish Identity in the United States and the Kosher Meat Boycotts

The growing Jewish communities in American cities created a high demand for kosher meat. Gabaccia notes that during the first decades of twentieth century, there were more than ten thousand kosher butcher shops in the United States, with nine

thousand in New York alone. The additional processing and supervision required by kosher law caused the price of kosher meat to exceed that of non-kosher meat, often by several cents a pound. Joselit attributes the kosher meat riots that broke out periodically in New York City to a snapping of the “thread of endurance” that enabled Jewish housewives to spend extra money on keeping kosher in times of rising prices.²² The level of Jewish women’s tolerance for the high cost of kosher meat may have been set by the shifting attitudes described in this chapter. As Diner points out in her analysis of Jewish immigrants’ reactions to the comparative abundance of food in the United States, the expectation of a higher standard of living fueled the ambitions of many residents of America’s Jewish immigrant communities. The women involved in kosher meat boycotts and other food protests “twinning an American consciousness of themselves as entitled to eat meat with their concerns about Jewish standards”—creating a combination of social, political, and religious motives that proved a potent force for community organizing.²³ That Jewish housewives took to the streets to demand access to fairly priced, ritually pure meat reflects not only their commitment to preserving traditional religious and cultural practices, but their sense of themselves as political actors.

CHAPTER THREE

FOOD FIGHTS: JEWISH WOMEN AND KOSHER MEAT BOYCOTTS

In addition to the general meat boycott organized by the Anti-Food Trust League, 1910 also was marked by a series of kosher meat protests that swept through Harlem, the Bronx, the Lower East Side, and parts of Brooklyn.¹ Unlike the generally peaceful League boycott, which operated primarily through petitions and pledges to abstain from buying meat, the action against the kosher meat dealers in New York included a considerable level of violence. Speakers and picketers attacked butchers and customers, smashed shop windows, and doused meat with kerosene. A rabbi was badly beaten in Newark for attempting to disperse a crowd, and at one point a Williamsburg butcher and his wife chased boycotters out of their shop with horsewhips.

The violence was not random by any means; the press coverage of these protests indicates a high level of organization. Mass meetings were organized by such prominent speakers as Mrs. Annie Pastor, the mother of Rose Pastor Stokes—a former cigar maker who had married millionaire J. G. Phelps Stokes and “converted” him to Socialism. Colorful reports describe how a group of about three hundred women, led by a woman “almost six feet in height, determined of manner and speech, and clad in a dark dress, with a red cap,” systematically shut down the butcher shops in a section of the Lower East Side. The protesting women were also joined by a number of butchers, as seven hundred members of the Hebrew Retail Kosher Butchers’ Protective Association decided not to buy meat for twenty four hours. Vowing to “stand together and fight the [Meat] trust,” an “army” of butchers marched from First

and Houston to 40th Street, “visiting slaughterhouses, getting prices, and protesting to the owners about the increase.”²

The protests continued for two weeks, from the beginning of April until a truce was called for the Passover holiday. After this hiatus, there were scattered reports of similar riots in Detroit and Cincinnati. One month after the last news report of these disturbances, Jewish housewives in Providence launched a boycott of the kosher butchers in their neighborhood. While it would be difficult to ascertain a direct connection between these protests, the 1910 kosher meat “riots” in New York provide a useful point of comparison for both the Providence action and incidences of Jewish women’s food activism described by other scholars.

The previous chapter described the influence of both traditional religious practices and evolving conceptions of Jewish identity upon Jewish women’s activism around food issues. In addition to describing various examples of kosher meat boycotts, this chapter will develop a context for the political consciousness reflected by such actions by considering how the roles and responsibilities that Jewish women brought with them from Eastern Europe intersected with intellectual transformations in Jewish society to inspire Jewish housewives’ activism.

Jewish Women’s Roles, Cultural Currents, and Kosher Meat

Jewish women who migrated from Eastern European *shtetls* to American cities carried with them the traditional responsibilities of the *baleboste*, the efficient housewife. As described in numerous accounts of *shtetl* life, Jewish women were expected to take an active role in the economic affairs of the household. Married Jewish women frequently engaged in money-making endeavors that would allow them

to work from their homes, including running small stores, taking in boarders, and managing inns and restaurants. Though women were rarely the primary income earners of the household, Susan Glenn describes this economic role of the Jewish housewife as that of “breadwinner.” Glenn’s analysis is based upon traditional Jewish interpretations of gender roles, in which the ideal Jewish man is a scholar dedicated to studying Torah (a pursuit attainable for only a privileged few), and the ideal Jewish woman supports her husband in his quest for holiness by providing for the family’s material needs.³ The reality of Jewish family life most likely represented a median between these ideals, but these cultural values contribute much to an understanding of immigrant Jewish women’s activism in the marketplace. As Orleck points out, “In contrast to the image of the sheltered middle-class housewife then dominant in the United States, Eastern European Jewish religious tradition glorified strong, economically sophisticated wives and mothers.”⁴

While immigrant Jewish women arrived in the New World with the image of the *baleboste* in their baggage, they also confronted the challenges of their new surroundings with considerable experience in dealing with drastic, often cataclysmic, social and economic change. Glenn challenges the “frozen-in-time portrait” of *shtetl* life often presented by sentimentalized anthropological studies such as Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog’s *Life is With People*, pointing out that Eastern Europe, like the United States, experienced a radical transformation at the end of the nineteenth century. As the Russian Empire industrialized, thousands of Jews engaged in the artisan trades lost their sources of livelihood. The oppressive May Laws prevented Jews from settling in rural areas, thus closing out agricultural occupations.

Jews also faced mass expulsions from major cities—Kiev, Moscow, and St. Petersburg—and forced resettlement into the Pale, increasing crowding and economic hardship. In the Pale, Jews were generally cut off from major industrial centers, and discriminatory hiring practices often excluded Jews from factory employment. In addition, pogroms like the Kishiniev massacre of 1903 terrorized Jewish communities.⁵

These economic and social calamities were accompanied by significant shifts in ideology and social mores. Started in Germany in the 1820s, an educational movement known as *Haskalah* challenged traditional Jewish community structures and values. In addition to promoting women's education, the *Haskalah* movement included strong connections to Socialism and Zionism, which provided political and social outlets for women. Many talented women joined the Bund, the "General Jewish Workers' Union in Lithuania, Poland, and Russia," a Jewish socialist movement founded in 1897. This and similar labor and revolutionary organizations provided a basis for a secular conception of Jewish life that challenged traditional Orthodox beliefs and community structures.⁶

Orleck asserts that this "unique political culture of Eastern European Jews" nourished Jewish immigrant "housewives' predilection for protest." Both in Europe and in the United States, Jewish housewives incorporated the radical theories of Socialism and labor organization into the articulation of their roles as providers for their families and as consumer activists, seeing "a power in organized consumers that paralleled that of organized producers."⁷

Elements of the Old World Jewish experience can be traced in the forms and focus of Jewish housewives' activism in the United States. Accounts of *shtetl* life explain that boycotts and ostracism were often used to punish community transgressors. Orleck points out that kosher meat had historically been a flashpoint for community conflict and organizing, dating back to eighteenth-century Poland, when "rural Polish Jewish of that period expressed outrage at the monopolistic practices of town-based ritual-slaughterers, in much the same way that twentieth-century urban immigrants blamed high kosher meat prices on the monopolies held by American meat trusts."⁸ The kosher meat boycotts that took place in American cities during the first decades of the twentieth century reflect how these older patterns and historic issues combined with new ideologies and expectations to provide a basis for Jewish women's collective actions.

The Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902

Like the 1910 protest described above, the 1902 kosher meat boycott in New York City was marked by considerable violence and destruction of property. On the first day of the boycott, thousands of women took to the streets of the Lower East Side, harassing customers, smashing the windows of butcher shops, and throwing meat into the street. A police officer trying to rescue customers had "an unpleasant moist piece of liver slapped in his face." Women protesters were shoved and pushed to the ground by police. Within days, most of the shops on the Lower East Side had closed their doors and the strike had spread to the Bronx, Harlem, and Brooklyn, where shops were broken into and meat burned.⁹

As tumultuous as the women's attack on the butchers was, this action also reflected extensive community organization. In her influential study of the turbulent and effective kosher meat protests in New York in 1902, Paula Hyman concludes that, rather than express a "preindustrial" sense of a "moral economy," the kosher meat protest reflected a "sophisticated political mentality emerging in a rapidly changing community." Though the boycott included acts of violence similar to those of premodern food riots, Hyman notes that:

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 popularly 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.

Hyman point out that the women participants in the boycott took on the vocabulary of the organized labor movement, referring to themselves as "strikers" and to those who did not join the boycott as "scabs." This awareness indicates that the Jewish housewives of the Lower East Side 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."¹⁰ As in later food protest, the use of this rhetoric also reflects in the influence of women's increasing participation in labor movement activities, culminated in the garment workers strikes at the end of the decade.

Like other scholars of working-class women's actions, Hyman shows how female neighborhood networks were instrumental in organizing and executing the strike. Personal relationships and appeals to community solidarity were used (along

with physical force) to encourage women to adhere to the boycotts. “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 to the boycott fund.”¹¹

Hyman also points out how religious traditions played a role in the women’s organization of the strike. Women went to the synagogues to gain support for the boycott, using the traditional custom of interrupting the Torah reading “when a matter of justice was at stake” to call on Jewish men to encourage their wives to join the protest. 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 passages in Hebrew, and felt at ease in the synagogue.¹²

In her analysis of the demographic characteristics of the boycott leaders, Hyman concludes that these organizers were representative of the majority of women in the Lower East Side. The participants in the strike were not the young, unmarried women laborers expected to take part in radical actions, but middle-aged housewives with several children. Most had been in the United States for an average of eleven years, and most were the wives of artisans in the garment trades. Hyman also points out that many of the boycott’s leaders were neighbors, providing evidence of the activation of informal women’s networks to organize the strike.¹³

In addition to the mobilization of neighborhood networks, the strike was also driven by more formal organizations generated by the local community leadership. Early in the boycott, the organizers formed the “Ladies’ Anti-Beef Trust Association.”

This official body made it possible for the strikers to organize various local committees, set up patrols, distribute circulars, and start outreach efforts to Christian women to encourage similar food protests. However, in spite of this increased organizational potential, Hyman points out that a rivalry between two of the women leaders of the association allowed male community members to assume leadership of the organization. The men modified the organizational structure of the group, changed the name to the Allied Conference for Cheap Kosher Meat, and limited the women's participation.¹⁴

Hyman also notes that a majority of religious authorities and Jewish labor activists were involved in the protest. Labor unions made monetary donations and helped organize the boycott. In Harlem, the Woman's Branch No. Two of the Workmen's Circle, with the support of the men's branch, organized the local protests. In general, Yiddish Socialists were supportive, while English-language Socialist newspapers critiqued the boycott strategy as ineffective, reflecting similar objections to those expressed by labor leaders to the general meat boycotts launched in 1910 by the Anti-Food Trust League.¹⁵

One solution to the kosher meat crisis offered by the strikers was the establishment of cooperative butcher shops. A *New York Times* article from 1902 describes the success of these shops, even after the end of the boycott. Comparing the small cooperative butcher shop that Jewish women established on 245 Stanton Street to similar and broader efforts in European countries, the article quotes Mrs. Sidney Webb, who articulated the benefits of the cooperative shop movement for women and the opportunities it provided for female leadership. "The unit of co-operation, the

customer, is a woman; and if co-operation is to become the dominant form of industrial organization a vigorous and successful propaganda among the women customers must stand first and foremost in the programme of the co-operative leaders.”¹⁶ Cooperative stores enabled women to exert their economic power, not only through strategic consumption, but as owners of the marketplace. While the establishment of cooperative stores did not become a widespread strategy in American communities until the crisis of the Depression, the existence of such efforts early in the organized consumer movement revealed a growing interest in new commercial structures that would return the power of the marketplace to its female constituents.

The Cost of Living Protests of 1917

In her examination of the wave of street protests over the high cost of living initiated by working-class Jewish housewives in New York in 1917, Dana Frank identifies many of the same features and arrives at several of the same conclusions as Hyman’s study of the 1902 kosher meat protests. As in the 1902 and 1910 kosher meat boycotts, physical force played a role. Frank notes that for the women involved, “the mild-sounding phrase ‘establishing a boycott’ meant both violence and great vigilance. It meant forcing members of their neighborhood community to publicly demonstrate their observance of the collective ban.”¹⁷

Like Hyman, Frank asserts that the women who participated in the cost of living protests were not engaging in “prepolitical” behavior, but instead expressing their own politics and efficacy:

When they protested against rising food prices, New York’s immigrant Jewish women demonstrated their own perceptions of political economy: who they believed was in power; what they thought should be done to alleviate their

distress, and, most importantly, how they believed they as women could affect the economic system in which they were enmeshed. Through their boycott, demonstrations, and neighborhood solidarity, the city's Jewish women acted upon their own model for political action.¹⁸

Consumer activism—expressed by food boycotts—was a practical strategy for these women, as it allowed them to act within the marketplace “at the point at which they were accustomed to encountering it.” “They knew from experience in haggling with local grocers that prices were not absolute; they knew that purchasing power could affect prices, if applied craftily; and they knew that grocers’ stocks were extremely perishable.” In addition, local markets were generally run by other members of the neighborhood. Day to day interactions would make local women quite familiar with the produce merchants and butchers they dealt with, many of which were likely to be neighbors or kin.¹⁹

Frank refers to Kaplan’s theory of female consciousness, noting that the obligation to care for their families was a primary factor in motivating the women in the cost of living protest. The protesting women “demanded their rights to feed their children, demanded that the market yield up a “living” to their families.” Unlike Hyman, however, Frank describes the women’s protest as closer to the basis of the premodern “moral economy,” noting that “in voicing their demands as consumers, New York’s immigrant Jewish mothers displayed no complex theory of the political economy of food.” However, like the Anti-Food Trust League’s meat boycott of 1910, the 1917 cost of living protests reflected a persistent belief that “through carefully orchestrated solidarity, ordinary people *could* affect the market from below.”²⁰

The demographic characteristics of the protesters were similar to those observed by Hyman, as most were women in their late thirties and mothers of several children. Frank points out that the women participating in the cost of living protests were not the “poorest of the poor,” but housewives of moderate means who had experienced a dramatic decline in their living standards because of rising prices. After adapting to a certain extent, these women had reached a point of “redefining their lives beyond which they would not be pushed.”²¹

Frank also addresses the participation of Socialists and men in the grassroots movement, noting that the goals and strategies of the Socialist organizers did not always match those of the community women engaged in the protest. While Socialist Party representatives focused on organized demonstrations, petitions to the local government, and the foundation of a formal protest organization—the Mothers’ Anti-High Price League—the local immigrant Jewish women engaged in mass actions, sometimes violent, organized by neighborhood networks, to express their anger and desperation. This dichotomy reflects the Socialist Party’s view that street demonstrations served primarily as political educational opportunities, a chance to politicize consumers who could then be directed to other issues, while housewives involved in the demonstrations viewed the consumer issues addressed by the protest as the most important ends.

Issues for Further Exploration

Both Hyman and Frank raise important questions for consideration about immigrant Jewish women’s engagement in food protests. While asserting that the experience of participating in the kosher meat boycotts of 1902 politicized the

neighborhood housewives, Hyman also notices that there is no correlation between the boycott leaders and later organizational activity in the community. This leads her to question whether the boycott was an isolated incident, or if the women were co-opted into established fraternal and political organizations. Or, more pointedly, Hyman wonders if the “politics of the crisis bring with it inertia once the crisis had passed?”²² Frank’s observations about the failure of Socialists to recognize the significance of the community women’s consumer consciousness also leads to questions about the efficacy of alliances between women’s neighborhood networks and established political parties with agendas that may differ from those of the local community. Both scholars address the relatively short-term nature of the organizations that developed to plan and run the boycotts, questioning the implications that this might hold for an understanding of the lasting effects of such protests on community networks.²³

Both of these studies provide a useful rubric for investigating the South Providence kosher meat boycott of 1910. The demographics of boycott participants, the strategies and tactics used to engineer the boycott, the participation of other organizations or groups, the proposed solutions, and the perceptions of the press will be taken into account in the study of the South Providence action. In particular, this study presents evidence of similar community networks and female political consciousness in the development and resolution of the conflict.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SOUTH PROVIDENCE KOSHER MEAT BOYCOTT OF 1910

South Providence: History and Community Life

As the pogroms in the Russian empire spurred massive waves of Eastern European Jews to emigrate to the United States after 1880, the Jewish population of Providence expanded to support several cohesive and relatively distinct communities. By 1911, there were 12,000 Jews residing in Providence. According to a 1978 Statewide Historical Preservation Report, a Jewish community started to form in South Providence in 1900, as Eastern European Jews began to move into the predominantly Irish neighborhood known as “Dogtown.” The first Jewish families settled on Robinson, Gay, and Hilton Streets, and before long a thriving Jewish commercial district had developed on Willard Avenue. By 1909, the neighborhood had its own large synagogue, Temple Beth El, as well as several Hebrew schools, a ritual bath house, and a local branch of the Workmen’s Circle, the fraternal organization of the Socialist Party.¹

The 1910 census records 1,396 residents of Russian origin in the Fifth Ward of Providence, which constituted the South Providence neighborhood. The majority of these Russian immigrants were likely to be Orthodox Jews. In her 1911 survey of the Providence Jewish community, sociologist Bessie Bloom asserts that the South Providence neighborhood presented “much better conditions” than the similar immigrant Jewish community in the North End. Observing that the rent on Robinson Street is “much higher, and rightly so, than that in Shawmut Street [in the North

End],” Bloom notes that in South Providence, “the houses have been built more recently, are larger, and are closer together.” While acknowledging that the close proximity of these double- and triple-decker house contributed to “conditions which, to the outward observer, stand for the entire Jewish problem,” Bloom emphasizes the modern conveniences of the South Providence residences. “On the whole, the tenements here are lighted by gas, sometimes by electricity; and practically all have bath-rooms, including hot and cold water.” Bloom also admits that in some areas of South Providence “the standard of living is somewhat lower and similar to that of the Shawmut Street district.”²

These observations are supported by a description of the Russian Jewish community in South Providence appearing in a *Providence Sunday Journal* article in 1901. Contemplating the changes that the settlement of Jews brought to the underdeveloped areas of rough-and-tumble “Dogtown,” the article observes that

The character of this Russian district is unlike that of its North End brother. . . . To begin with, most of the tenement houses are comparatively new, and the modern residences of this type, even that which is least costly to build, possesses ornamentation and a degree of sprightliness unknown to the tenement house erected a few years since. . . . Even in the least thrifty appearing sections of the colony one will look in vain for scenes of squalor and extreme congestion of humanity. Not a few of the houses have little yards in which the tenants take pride and pleasure, as shown by the well-kept flower gardens. Lace curtains adorn the front windows, and in various ways evidences of the desire to have pretty homes and more cheerful surroundings is apparent.³

This positive assessment was mitigated by the article’s depiction of the areas of the neighborhood inhabited by the junk dealers and rag collectors that comprised a large sector of the community’s economy. Though the *Journal* article worried about the transformation of “Dogtown,” into “Ragtown,” the junk business proved a fairly

lucrative endeavor for many members of the South Providence community, as evidenced by the rise of Abraham Bazar, a junk dealer who became one of the neighborhood's most prominent residents and founder of both Bazar's Bank and a community center, Bazar Hall. Peddling of all kinds was the predominant occupation for South Providence Jews, as enterprising residents took up pushcarts and opened small shops selling everything from collected junk to live chickens. Bessie Bloom credits this entrepreneurial character of the South Providence community with the slightly higher standard of living of Jewish families in this neighborhood. Household incomes in South Providence ranged between ten and fifteen dollars a week, with most families living on thirteen dollars a week, which was slightly higher than the incomes reported in the North End Jewish community.⁴

Bloom reports that between 60 and 66 percent of this household income was spent on food.⁵ Accounts of Jewish life in South Providence reflect the centrality of food to the community and depict the distinctive character of neighborhood food shopping. In an article about the history of South Providence, local archivist Eleanor Horvitz includes a number of interviews that convey a vivid sense of shopping in Jewish markets during the early decades of the twentieth century:

My earliest memories are of Friday shopping trips on Willard Avenue, the Jewish marketplace. The street, from Prairie Avenue to Plain Street, bustled with activity from early morning. I remember the bearded, long-froked rabbinical butchers hustling to their chicken stores, the windows of fish stores full of glassy-eyed mackerel, perch, and whitefish glistening on their beds of ices, and the proprietor of the egg store separating the brown shell from the white shell eggs, which for some unaccountable reason were priced differently. Willard Avenue was a street of smells, many of them unpleasant, but on Friday the air was rich with the hot, delicious odor of freshly-baked bread, the *challah* which every housewife carried home.⁶

As noted in previous chapters, kosher meat was a staple of Jewish food

shopping, and the presence of “rabbinical butchers” was an important neighborhood asset. Horvitz describes the evolution of kosher meat availability in Providence, noting the development of kosher butcher shops in the Willard Avenue shopping district.

The kosher butchers and poultry stores did a thriving business. One would pick a live chicken, and the *shohet* (ritual slaughterer) would kill it. There was Berman the butcher, whose wife delivered the meat orders on foot, Bloom the butcher, Spigel’s Butcher Shop, Berlinsky’s at 185 Willard Avenue, and Louis Fishman, located at 229 Willard Avenue. Yet there were earlier times when there were no kosher butchers in South Providence. Mrs. Abraham Zellermyer’s daughters recall their mother’s story of how Archibald Silverman drove her to the North End to buy chickens and meat before Willard Avenue had such stores.⁷

While Horvitz does not specify a time period for this description, it is interesting to note that several of the butchers she mentions were in business during the 1910 kosher meat conflict. [See Table 2]. At the time of the boycott, there were six kosher butcher shops in the Willard Avenue area. Horvitz’s oral history interviews provide vivid illustrations of the lives of kosher butchers and their positions within the Providence community during the early part of the twentieth century. Nathan Fishman, who assisted in his father’s butcher shop, recalled working in the winter with no heat, “plucking chickens by the dozens—full of lice and blood—and my hands were swollen.” Other residents remembered that butcher Benjamin Berman owned a horse and buggy and often took his family for Sunday drives through Roger Williams Park.⁸ In an article about Jewish family businesses in Providence, Horvitz interviewed the son of Joseph Mittleman, a butcher who opened shop in the North End in 1909, who recalled the long days his father spent catering to customers. “It was not unusual for customers to call any time up to midnight for orders they wished delivered

the next morning.” He also pointed out his father’s membership in Jewish charitable organizations, such as the Hebrew Free Loan Association.⁹

Such accounts suggest the ways in which the lives of ethnic retailers were interwoven with those of their neighbors. The butcher shops that came under attack from the housewives of South Providence were run by neighborhood families; the protesting housewives no doubt knew these families on a personal, day-to-day basis. As will be noted in the following examination of the South Providence kosher meat boycott, these neighborhood relationships often play a significant role in the development and resolution of community conflict.

The Boycott Against the Willard Avenue Butchers

The South Providence kosher meat boycott was neither as large nor apparently as violent as similar incidents in New York and Boston. Though the police were called out to keep order in the neighborhood, no arrests were made. There are no recorded accounts of butchers being threatened with their own cleavers or of housewives clobbering police officers with pieces of meat; the streets of South Providence did not fill with the smell of burning meat from piles of looted beef doused with kerosene and set afire by furious women protesters. According to the newspaper coverage of the boycott, the conflict was over within a week, resolved by heated but ultimately orderly discussions mediated by a mixed-gender committee of community members. As far as can be determined, no long-standing organizations or legislation resulted from the boycott, and life on Willard Avenue apparently returned to normal soon after the picketing stopped.

But considering the relatively small size of the Jewish community of Providence, the boycott did represent a significant event. The Yankee-run mainstream press rarely reported on Jewish issues; yet both the *Providence Daily Journal* and the *Evening Bulletin* featured front-page stories about the boycott and continued coverage of the conflict until its resolution. The boycott was also covered by the primary English-language Jewish newspaper in New England, Boston's *Jewish Advocate*, and received notice in the "List of Events in 5670" in the *American Jewish Year Book*.¹⁰ While this press coverage provides only limited access to the personal motives and experiences of the boycotters and the butchers who were the objects of the protest, it does reveal the ways in which this particular community engaged in the larger discourses and strategies that preoccupied the nation as a whole. The same economic, political, and public health concerns that comprised the agenda of Progressive era reformers, from Socialists to settlement house workers, can be traced in the South Providence women's complaints against the kosher meat markets in their neighborhood. As in the previously described examples of Jewish women's consumer activism, the 1910 protest in South Providence revealed the ways in which Progressive reform movements both merged with and diverged from the interests of immigrant women. At the same time, the South Providence kosher meat boycott also differed in significant ways from food protests in other communities, both Jewish and otherwise, suggesting important questions for consideration in the study of consumer activism as a communal strategy.

The decision to take action against the kosher butchers in South Providence was made on June 21, at a mass meeting in Bazar Hall, the neighborhood community

center located, like most of the butcher shops, on Willard Avenue. Though it is unclear who organized the meeting, an article in the *Providence Daily Journal* the following day noted that the “hall was packed to the doors” with seven hundred housewives in attendance, and that the “declaration of war—or rather, the order to strike—was carried with a shout that could be heard several blocks away.”¹¹

This declaration included the vow that “no orthodox Jewish woman will buy an ounce of meat from a Jewish market, and the regular diet in Hebrew families until further order will be fish, vegetables and cheese.” As in the general meat boycotts that had swept the nation earlier in the year, the women urged one another to go without meat, rallying support with cries of “Boycott the butchers! . . . Ask your friends to live on fish and vegetables!” The boycott strategy was unanimously approved by all present at the meeting, and a committee was appointed to oversee the organization of the strike. A second meeting took place later that night in the smaller rooms of the Workmen’s Circle library, “where stirring addresses were delivered by some of those present.”¹²

A delegation selected by the boycott committee issued the community’s demands to the six kosher butchers in the neighborhood. These demands included “fresh and healthy meat, wrapped in clean paper and not in newspaper, as has been the custom in some of the shops, respectable treatment to the customers and a reduction in the price of all kinds of meat.” Though three of the butchers agreed to consider the petition, three others “not only refused to receive the delegates but defied them.” “In one case,” the *Journal* reported, “the butcher’s wife pitched into the delegate and hustled her out of the shop.”¹³

This resistance on the part of the butchers strengthened the resolve of the boycotters, though the ensuing “war” against the South Providence shops seems to have proceeded in an extraordinarily orderly manner, especially in comparison to the violence that characterized the New York kosher meat protests in 1902 and just months before the Willard Avenue action. Neighborhood women took up picket positions on Willard Avenue as early as 5:30 a.m. on June 22, entreating all who approached the shops not to buy meat and at times convincing customers to return meat already purchased. The *Evening Bulletin* noted that the “morning passed quietly, no attempts being made to disturb any of the shopkeepers.” Police were called in toward the evening, as a crowd of “fully 500 ‘strike’ sympathizers, pickets and curiosity seekers gathered along Willard Avenue, between Gay and Hilton streets” and it seemed that the three kosher shops in the vicinity might be “rushed.” Despite these concerns, five policemen were able to clear the streets with relative ease, and “matters after a time took on their wonted aspect, although many of the ‘strikers,’ their pickets and sympathizers lingered in the vicinity.”¹⁴

In fact, most of the vitriol in the conflict seems to have come from the butchers and their families. The *Journal* noted that the butchers heaped insults upon the strikers and recorded that one boycotter reported being “held up” and assaulted by the female family members of one of the butchers. Another woman declared that a butcher had told her that the butchers planned to keep the meat “for a month if necessary,” and force the community to buy it, no matter how decayed it was. In addition to these aggressive encounters, the butchers reportedly employed both trickery and trade solidarity to circumvent the boycott measures. During the first day

of the boycott, reports were made that the butchers had gone from house to house delivering meat that in many instances had not been ordered. Members of the boycott committee went to these homes and urged the families to return the meat. In addition, the South Providence butchers sent representatives to shops in the North End to prevent the sale of meat to women participating in the boycott.¹⁵

Community solidarity, however, seems to have been largely on the side of the boycotters. In one interesting incident, two peddlers came into the neighborhood selling live chickens for twenty-two cents a pound. Though the butchers reportedly offered to purchase the fowls for considerably higher prices, the peddlers refused to sell to them—saying that they were “looking for the custom of the women and not the butchers, and that the latter could not have the chickens at any price.” When the butchers forced the peddlers to move away from Willard Avenue, they went to nearby Staniford Street, where the striking women purchased all of the chickens and took them to the kosher slaughterer.¹⁶

The South Providence butchers seemed unmoved by the demands of the protesters. The *Evening Bulletin* noted that the butchers considered the boycott a “huge joke,” and quoted one of the butchers as mocking the mass organizational meeting at Bazar Hall, saying, “Why, there were nothing but Socialists and boys at that meeting last night.” According to the *Journal*, a meeting between the boycott committee and the butchers brought no agreement, aside from a concession from three butchers to comply with the requests for cleaner conditions. Even so, a resolution was reached by the end of the week, the seeds of which could be found as early as the second day of the strike. On June 23, the *Journal* reported that “two residents of the

district who have been in the [meat] business in times past but who are not now engaged in it, had agreed to open markets and sell meats at reasonable figures under clean conditions if guaranteed from 150 to 200 customers.” On June 27, both the *Journal* and the *Evening Bulletin* ran stories proclaiming the “Kosher Butcher War Near End,” reporting that “arrangements had been made with three Jewish butchers to open [new] kosher shops in the vicinity of Willard Avenue, and that as soon as the services of two more butchers were obtained the shops would be opened and meat could be obtained.”¹⁷

The strike committee expressed certainty that the new shops would put the six offending butchers out of business, “since their patronage has fallen off to almost nothing the past week.” The new butchers agreed to sell locally slaughtered meat at eighteen cents a pound and meat from “the West” at fifteen cents a pound—a considerable reduction from the twenty-four cents a pound charged by the kosher butchers before the boycott. The new butchers also agreed to comply with the other requests of the protesters, including wrapping the meat in clean white paper, not newspaper, and treating their “women customers in a fair manner.”¹⁸

After reporting on this proposed resolution to the conflict, the mainstream press apparently lost interest in the South Providence kosher meat conflict. The lack of further press coverage, as well as a dearth of primary sources for the South Providence Jewish community, complicates the determination of the actual outcomes and long-term effects of the boycott. A close analysis of the press coverage of the boycott, as well as a tracing of neighborhood business and social developments through the few available resources for the time, provides insight into the sources and

results of the conflict, revealing significant information about the social and political structures of the South Providence Jewish community. Most notably, the kosher meat boycott in South Providence provides an entry point into an examination of social and cultural patterns within the Providence Jewish community, particularly the roles of both women and Socialist activists.

According to the newspaper accounts, the primary motivation for the action against the kosher butchers of South Providence was the high cost of kosher meat. The *Journal* noted that speakers at the first mass organizational meeting asserted that the price of kosher meat had tripled over the past three or four years, increasing from eight to twenty-four cents a pound. Both the butchers and the rabbi responsible for supervising the quality of kosher meat in Providence asserted that this increase in price reflected general trends in the cost of meat across the country, a position supported by the massive meat protests that swept the nation some months earlier. Rabbi Israel S. Rubinstein, the leader of several Orthodox Jewish congregations in Providence, held jurisdiction over the city's nine *shohatim* and seventeen kosher butcher shops.¹⁹ In an interview with the *Evening Bulletin*, Rabbi Rubinstein admitted that "the prices are without question high, but the general increase among Gentiles as well as Jews is explanation enough for this." Rabbi Rubinstein also stated that the Jewish community was accustomed to paying higher prices for kosher meat, asserting that "this is one place where a Jew's religion costs him considerably, but the rule is iron-clad and no one would think of breaking it."²⁰

But while exorbitant prices may have been the most obvious motivation for community protest, another issue seems to have provided the flashpoint for the South

Providence boycott. At the first organizational meeting at Bazar Hall, speakers asserted that one of the Willard Avenue butchers had been selling meat from a cow that was infected with tuberculosis. The *Journal* reported that the butcher had purchased a “broken-down, tuberculous cow” which he cut up and sold to his customers at twenty-four cents a pound. When the farmer tried to collect payment for the cow, the butcher refused to pay, on the grounds that the animal had been diseased. The conflict went to civil court, and though the case was eventually settled in favor of the butcher, public outrage at the suggestion of the butcher’s guilt fanned the flames of protest.²¹

It would be difficult to construct a more inflammatory scenario for this particular time period and this specific community. Spreading rapidly through the densely populated tenement neighborhoods where many immigrants settled, tuberculosis presented one of the greatest public health problems of the early decades of the century, addressed by numerous charitable organizations and medical institutions developed to combat “the white plague.” The very mention of tuberculosis had the potential to incite panic in the overcrowded triple-decker neighborhoods of South Providence. In addition, as noted in previous chapters, the quality of meat had become a matter of national concern. Anxiety about urban conditions and the “cleanliness” of all manner of foodstuffs permeated the public consciousness.

As well as igniting common concerns about disease and food quality, the sale of contaminated meat would have held particular significance for the primarily Orthodox Jewish community in South Providence. Kosher slaughtering practices, if properly enforced, should have made the sale of tainted meat impossible. As Berman

describes in his exhaustive study of the topic, the laws of *shehitah* specifically require the *shohet* to inspect the lungs of a slaughtered mammal; even the slightest indication of disease would make the meat ritually unfit.²² The sale of an animal with obvious lung disease in a kosher butcher shop would suggest either corruption or incompetence in the inspection process.

Both the neighborhood butchers and Rabbi Rubinstein made strong statements in the press rejecting the allegation that infected meat had been sold in South Providence shops. The butchers blamed the criticism of the quality of the meat on a misunderstanding of kosher butchering practices. In one *Evening Bulletin* article, the butchers claimed that, according to kosher restrictions, “only certain parts of the cow can be sold to the faithful, and that these parts are not the best by any means.” Therefore “the quality of the meat sold is the result rather of the restriction of their religion, rather than of any intention on their part to purchase the cheapest and poorest parts.”²³

This explanation contradicts Rabbi Rubinstein’s statements in a later *Bulletin* article, asserting that kosher slaughtering practices actually ensure that Jews eat the highest quality of meat. Rubinstein upheld the benefits of kosher dietary regulations, stating that “we Jews attribute much of our longevity and our ability to stand persecution to the care with which our food has been prepared throughout the ages.” Like other Jewish religious officials and scientific experts during the Progressive Era, Rubinstein used evidence from modern studies and secular authorities to justify kosher practices, Rabbi Rubinstein asserted that “our belief that pain which is suffered by an animal makes it unfit for meat is supported by many scientists,” and that the

“inspection of meat by the Jews is so perfect that in 1900 the military department of the English Government advised that kosher meat be bought whenever possible.”

Rabbi Rubinstein defended the kosher inspection process in Providence by affirming the superiority of the traditional religious practices of *shehitah* while acknowledging the incorporation of modern methods of sanitation and inspection:

“The whole Jewish system of slaughtering has been built up with these two objects in mind—to prevent the use of diseased meat, or meat of animals who have suffered. The origin of the system dates back for more than 3200 years, but the rules which applied in those early days do not apply to-day. As modern methods of inspection have been adopted, we have absorbed them, and to-day our methods are as modern and as rigid as any in the world.”²⁴

This combination of traditional and modern defenses of kosher slaughtering and inspection procedures failed to reassure the South Providence boycotters of the rigorousness of the kosher meat inspection in their neighborhood. One man involved in the boycott leveled several critiques of the rabbi’s statements, citing recent incidents in other cities as proof of a crisis both in the quality of kosher meat and in Jewish leadership in general.

“Rabbi Rubinstein admits that the same meat for which the Jews pay from 6 to 24 cents a pound can be bought in other shops at six cents a pound and asserts that the Jews get the healthier meat and consequently are better off physically. The negative can be proven, insasmuch as 150 young Jewish men were recently rejected on account of physical deficiency when they tried to become teachers in New York city.”²⁵

Whether or not the quality of kosher meat had anything to do with New York’s Jewish men being judged physically deficient, the protester’s statements reveal a marked willingness to question the very basis of rabbinical authority in the inspection of kosher meat. The unnamed protester went on to turn Rabbi Rubinstein’s assertion that the Willard Avenue protest was the result of “agitation by persons who are not

conversant with the Jewish laws in regard to slaughter houses,” back upon the community’s religious authority structure itself. Stating that “a man [the *shohet*] who has spent three years in learning how to kill an animal is not then fit to say whether the animal has tuberculosis or not, and that the representatives of the congregation know less about it,” the protester asserted that religious training in ritual slaughtering techniques did not convey professional expertise in recognizing diseases.²⁶

This critique not only questioned the qualifications of the religious authorities in the community, but also alleged that these authorities were lax in their duties. “The rabbi just puts his head inside the shop and doesn’t even look inside the ice box. Then he says everything is all right and go ahead and sell the meat. The meat is supposed to be protected by the rabbi, but is it?” Most importantly, the protester accused the rabbi of protecting the interests of the *shohatim*, the butchers, and congregation representatives (the leaders of the community), at the expense of the rest of the Jewish community. His criticism ended with a call for popular action that linked the economic and health interests that formed the basis of the boycott: “I would suggest that the Jews of this city take the power from the ignorant *shoktim* and congregation representatives and place it in the hands of the Board of Health under a doctor’s supervision. Then they will probably get their meat at seven cents a pound.”²⁷

Such criticism of community authorities was not new to Jewish social and political discourse; as mentioned in previous chapters, boycotts and other collective strategies historically had expressed tensions between the people and the authority structures of the shtetl. Kosher law and the supervision of meat formed a frequent point of contention—both between the community and the congregational authorities

and among various rabbis vying for control and influence. A few months before the Providence boycott, the *Jewish Advocate* ran an editorial deploring the “incessant kosher meat wars” plaguing the Boston area. In this context, the term referred not to conflicts between housewives and butchers, but to struggles among various rabbis over the control of the city’s kosher butcher shops. The *Advocate* implied that money, not religion, was at the heart of the matter, as rabbis competed for the right to collect inspection fees. The *Advocate* blamed the ongoing trouble on a lack of “efficiency” in Boston’s Jewish community, suggesting that “really organized communities” had resolved such conflicts by removing the control of the slaughter houses from religious authorities and limiting the rabbis’ role to the certification of the *shohatim*.²⁸

Though the *Advocate* recommended transferring the supervision of kosher meat to secular authorities, the newspaper stopped short of calling for the involvement of institutions outside of the Jewish community. It is remarkable, then, that one of the protesters in the South Providence boycott called for the Board of Health to take over the supervision of the kosher meat markets. Such a proposal suggests that some members of the South Providence Jewish community did not feel represented or protected by the local authorities and indicates a growing interest within the Jewish community in the new governmental institutions and processes for regulating areas of public health and economy. The effects of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Meat Inspection Act of 1906 were only starting to be felt in state and local government institutions. Rhode Island had just instituted a state Board of Food and Drug Inspectors in 1908.²⁹ Like Rabbi Rubinstein’s invocation of scientific evidence and modern techniques of meat inspection to defend the traditional system of kosher

regulation, the statements of the protesters reveal how contemporary discourses of economics and public health were affecting attitudes within the Orthodox Jewish community towards traditional practices and structures.

Underpinning the economic and public health concerns expressed by the South Providence boycotters was the critique of corrupt corporations and “trusts” that characterized much of Progressive Era reform rhetoric. The *Journal* attributed the birth of the boycott to the community’s resentment of perceived “exaction” from the South Providence butchers. Speakers at the Bazar Hall meeting complained that the kosher butchers were “banded in an association which controls all the prices, and which meets at 9 a. m. daily at the slaughter houses to discuss conditions and decide upon a price.” Such allegations echoed nationwide concerns about price-fixing and the growth of monopolies controlling essential products that had provoked the general meat boycotts and federal investigation into the Chicago-based beef trust several months earlier.³⁰

It is difficult to ascertain the exact nature of this alleged league of kosher butchers in South Providence. A beneficial organization for Jewish butchers—the Providence Hebrew Butchers Association—had been chartered in 1909; however, the founding members did not include any of the South Providence butchers listed in the *Providence Business Directory*, and no records survive to show whether this association extended its interest beyond providing insurance and social benefits to its members.³¹ It is reasonable to assume that the South Providence butchers were at least loosely associated with kosher butchers in other parts of the city, as all would have received their inventory from the four kosher slaughterhouses in Providence and all

were under the supervision of Rabbi Rubinstein. This contact enabled the South Providence butchers to prevent the women boycotters from purchasing meat from butchers in the North End.

Whether or not the association of the kosher butchers constituted a local “meat trust,” it seems to have been configured as such by the South Providence protesters. This reflected a combination of public resentment of local congregational leaders, expressed in the protester’s comments above, with a nationwide suspicion of the meat industry as a vast conspiracy of corrupt corporate interests. A contemporaneous editorial in the *Jewish Advocate* entitled “Wine, Women, and Meat,” articulated these concerns, noting that, though many supposed that Jewish butchers were independent of the Chicago beef trust, “it is ordained by the sacred and inviolable law of rebate transactions that no man shall be able to send a cow, nor a sheep nor yet an ox, to any of his needy brethren, except as they be collected from him and for him by the economic concentration of trust operations.” Though the author gently mocked the kosher meat boycotts as the folly of “saucy women,” he reserved his rancor for the ability of the trusts to flaunt the “pliability of the law,” noting that “the public always gets it in the neck.”³²

Kosher butchers, though not religious figures like the *shohatim*, were still supposed to be above such profiteering influences as corporate trusts. The *Advocate* article and the community’s suspicion of the butchers’ association reveal how deeply these broader concerns penetrated relationships within the Jewish community. It is significant that the neighborhood women chose the boycott strategy to deal with the resulting conflict with the butchers. As noted in previous chapters, the boycott is a

tactic grounded in both traditional modes of communal regulation and modern strategies of protest. In conducting a boycott of their neighborhood kosher butchers, the Jewish women of South Providence engaged in an action that combined efforts to conserve community traditions—a safe and affordable supply of kosher meat—with challenges to traditional authorities and an appeal to outside professionalism.

“Primarily a woman’s strike”

Though the South Providence kosher meat boycott incorporated issues of national interest, and though simultaneous kosher boycotts were taking place in both Brockton and New Bedford, Massachusetts, the action on Willard Avenue was still a very localized protest. As such, the characteristics and relationships of the participants take on particular significance. An analysis of who was involved in the boycott can illuminate neighborhood interactions that may provide potential explanations for the causes and significance of the protest. Fortunately, several of the newspaper accounts include the names (or at least the married names) of many boycott participants and organizers, who can be traced through the city directories and census schedules to obtain addresses and occupations.

The entire drama of the boycott was confined to the space of a few city blocks—the section of Willard Avenue intersected by Hilton, Gay, and Staniford Streets. All but one of the kosher butcher shops in the neighborhood were located on Willard Avenue. Bazar Hall and the Workmen’s Circle Library, which served as the rallying point and organizational headquarters for the protest, were also situated in the heart of the Willard Avenue commercial district. Most of the known boycott

participants as well as the butchers lived within a few blocks of each other; some in the same buildings or only one or two doors away.

In such closely-knit immigrant neighborhoods, *landmanschaft* loyalty permeated day to day interactions, and problems arising from business or social transactions could be perceived as personal injuries and betrayals of the community. As Smith points out in her study of immigrant families in Providence, “when ethnic retailers raised their prices, immigrants viewed such acts as an abandonment of the principles of community justice and particularly as a breach of reciprocity. An increase in the price of necessary commodities was an injury to a customer loyally patronizing a *paesano* or *landsman*.”³³

In the production and consumption of kosher foods, these conceptions of reciprocity and community justice took on religious as well as communal significance. The Jews of South Providence had no choice but to patronize kosher butchers if they wished to adhere to the practices of their faith. Kosher butchers who made life difficult for their fellow Jews by charging higher prices or who jeopardized the religious practices of the community by selling *treyf* meat violated the principles of *tzedekah* (communal obligation) and *kashrut*. Women’s neighborhood networks—formed through the everyday activities of supporting their families—could be mobilized to enforce religious communal values in the commercial life of the neighborhood.

As in the consumer actions described by Hyman and Frank, the majority of the participants in the South Providence kosher meat boycott were married women with children who did not work (at least officially) outside of their homes. The *Providence*

Daily Journal called the boycott “primarily a woman’s strike,” and noted that the boycott committee and the picketers were comprised entirely of women. However, the newspaper downplayed the women’s role in the boycott, emphasizing the male leadership of the organizational meetings. Indeed, much of the coverage of the strike reveals a rather condescending attitude toward the women participants, depicting them as so unruly and hysterical that the men presiding over the meetings could hardly conduct business. When the decision to launch the boycott was passed at the first Bazar Hall meeting, “Women cheered, shouted and cried until the chairman in despair of being heard—he was only a mere man—threw his gavel down in disgust and declared the meeting adjourned—not before he had appointed a committee to conduct the strike, however.”

This slightly amused, patronizing tone often characterized press coverage of female-dominated Progressive reform movements, defusing masculine anxiety about “disorderly women” through belittling humor. The description of the boycott meetings may also represent an intentional slight to Jewish masculinity, as several newspaper accounts repeatedly include vaguely sexualized references to the chairman wielding a “big gavel” in largely ineffectual attempts to control the community’s womenfolk. In a time when consumer activism was largely a female protest strategy and when Jews were often excluded from “manly” organizations such as labor unions, it is likely that the men involved in the boycott would be feminized by the mainstream press.³⁴

But despite this condescending tone, the local newspaper accounts provide considerable evidence of impressive grassroots organizing undertaken by the Jewish

women of South Providence. Revealing the same “neighborhood network” mobilization discussed in studies of the New York food protests and the Lawrence textile strike, the women enforced community unity from the first meeting at Bazar Hall, deciding “that there could be no support of the strikers or of their friends until every person present at the meeting had pledged herself to purchase no meat until it had come down to prices which the people could afford.”³⁵ The boycott itself chiefly involved women picketers speaking with other women in the neighborhood—mostly without resorting to violence. The large size of the crowds attending the boycott seems to testify to the effectiveness of this networking strategy, with gatherings of up to 500 people recorded on the second day of the strike. And while the press focused on the activities and statements of male protesters, there are indications of women’s leadership in the strike. Annie Weinbaum, the wife of a prominent seltzer manufacturer, is listed as the chair of one of the first boycott committees, and a “Mrs. Zalzman” was listed among those who delivered “fiery and excited” speeches at the last, “most largely attended” meeting of the boycott reported in the press.³⁶

“Socialists and boys”

Given the prominent role of women in the boycott, it is interesting that the *Journal* and the *Evening Bulletin* placed such emphasis on male participation. Beyond the obvious gender bias of the period, this focus may also reflect concern about or interest in the kind of men involved in the protest. The comment of the butcher quoted in the *Evening Bulletin* that the boycott had been organized by “Socialists and boys” not only discounted the significance of the neighborhood women’s participation, but also implied that the protest had an explicit (and dismissible) political orientation.

Though the press generally stopped short of describing the boycott as a Socialist action, the organizational centers of the protest strongly suggest Socialist involvement. The boycott organizers held their meetings in the library of the Willard Avenue branch of the Workmen's Circle, considered the "center for active Jews, including the radicals and socialists of the day." Hyman Haimsohn, one of the committee members, had been a founding member of the local Circle in 1909. Described by historian Paul Buhle as the "unquestioned center of Jewish working-class life," the Workmen's Circle provided educational and cultural programs, served as a mutual benefit society, and presented a forum for community discussion on a wide range of political, economic, and social issues. It was the "gathering place to which every young man with progressive ideas belonged."³⁷

Unfortunately, the records of the Providence branches of the Workmen's Circle have been lost, making a definitive count of Circle members participating in the kosher meat boycott impossible. However, there are other traces of Socialist and labor activist involvement with the boycott. The first organizational meeting at Bazar Hall was chaired by Wolf Semonoff, a 46-year-old tailor. A number of men participating in the boycott were involved in the garment trade, one of the industries noted for early labor activism in Rhode Island. In his "introductory investigation" of Jewish involvement in the Rhode Island labor movement, Buhle notes that Jewish tailors became part of "the solid center of the Rhode Island Socialist Party."³⁸ Jake Pavlow, the founder of a Yiddish branch of the Socialist Party, lived in South Providence at the time, and it appears that his wife was a member of the boycott committee.³⁹

Though the organizational assistance and support of the Workmen's Circle was no doubt important to the efficacy of the South Providence boycott, the Circle's involvement also may have constrained the participation of the neighborhood women. As noted in the New York protests described in previous chapters, the involvement of the Socialist Party usually resulted in reduced opportunities for women's leadership and, quite often, a distancing of the protest aims and strategies from the interests of the housewives who had instigated the action. While the Workmen's Circle may not have included the same kinds of formal leadership and bureaucracy as the Socialist Party, it was a male-dominated institution with a specific political agenda. In his glowing account of the Circle's place in Jewish community life, Samuel Altman notes that as men took part in the well-attended meetings and debates, "below, on the sidewalk in front of the library, the wives would wait with their little children or babies in carriages, for their husbands to go home with them together, at the end of the meeting."⁴⁰ Though this presents a positive view of family commitment to the Circles, it clearly places women in a subordinate position in Circle affairs.

This is not to imply, however, that the participation of the Socialist Party or male labor activists would necessarily have removed the kosher meat protest from the interests of the women in the community. Though the scarcity of records prevents definitive analysis, it is possible that many of the women participants in the boycott were Socialists themselves. In his brief history of the development of socialism in Rhode Island, Robert Grieve mentions the activities of women in the party, though none of them were Jewish.⁴¹ Studies of Providence Jewish history have not provided much information about the level of Socialist organization in local Jewish

communities in the early twentieth century. Despite outside perceptions of immigrant neighborhoods as breeding grounds for Socialist revolutionaries, leftist movements within these communities seem fairly localized and neighborhood-oriented. In 1910, large, formalized Socialist organizations were only just beginning to devise strategies for organizing the increasingly foreign-born, non-English-speaking industrial working class. The need to directly address the needs of Jewish immigrants had been expressed by one of the attendees of a conference of New England Jewish Socialists held in Providence in 1903, who asserted, “we’d be more successful in our propaganda if we took some real interest in the problems of our fellow Jews and did so as socialists.”⁴² Local Socialists, such as those involved with the Workmen’s Circle, may have been close enough to members of the community to align their political agenda with the practical, bread-and-butter needs of the neighborhood housewives.

The relationship between local housewives and community activists may offer clues as to why the South Providence kosher meat boycott did not entirely follow the pattern of many other food protests. In contrast to kosher meat boycotts in other cities, the Willard Avenue action did not escalate into a riot. Even when Irish-American police officers were sent into the neighborhood, the strike remained relatively peaceful. Nor did the boycott spread to other Providence Jewish communities, despite commercial and social similarities to the North End Jewish neighborhood. Though collective measures were offered as solutions to the boycott—at one point, the committee discussed plans to open a cooperative kosher meat market—the resolution selected was decidedly capitalistic, promoting competition from new businesses to lower prices and increase the quality of service. Despite statements challenging

religious and communal authorities and calling for governmental intervention in a traditionally Jewish-controlled issue, the supervision of kosher meat remained in the hands of the Jewish community.

In one view, these characteristics could suggest that the South Providence boycott had a less “radical” or less political orientation than other food actions in similar immigrant communities. However, it may be more illuminating to consider what these outcomes reveal about the complex and often unique relationships that drive and shape any particular example of community action. Regardless of the level of participation by activists with specific political goals, the protest against the Willard Avenue butchers was based in the struggles of neighborhood women to solve immediate, practical problems in their community. In the debate over the cost and regulation of kosher meat, conceptions of community and religious reform vied with pragmatic assessments of economic relationships. The specific outcomes of the boycott reveal the degree to which this protest was grounded in the particular characteristics of the South Providence community and in accepted notions of neighborhood interaction.

As noted above, the kosher meat boycott was a localized protest. There is no indication that the boycott was linked to the non-kosher meat boycott occurring earlier in the year or to kosher meat boycotts occurring simultaneously in nearby New Bedford or Brockton, though these actions may have provided inspiration for the chosen strategy. More curious, however, is the apparent lack of connection to other Jewish communities in Providence. While kosher meat protests in New York and Boston spread throughout the cities’ Jewish neighborhoods, the action in Providence

seemed confined to Willard Avenue. Indeed, the only recorded collaboration with the Jewish community of the North End occurred on the part of the boycotted butchers, who enjoined the North End shops from selling meat to the women of South Providence.

A number of factors may have contributed to the single-community concentration of the protest, many of which reflect the ideological and practical tensions noted above. If the boycott is to be considered a movement for political and community reform, the lack of participation by other communities may indicate a less organized Socialist or radical contingent in those neighborhoods. As little study has been made of Socialist organization or radicalism within the Providence Jewish community, it is difficult to ascertain if South Providence had a higher concentration of radicals in 1910. This might not seem likely, as the North End was a larger community, and had a greater influx of recently arrived immigrants from Russia and Eastern Europe. However, the slightly higher economic status of South Providence Jews, noted in Bloom's study, may have contributed to the neighborhood's willingness to protest economic conditions that threatened their standard of living. As Frank notes in her study of the 1917 cost of living protests in New York, the women who engaged in food activism were generally not the "poorest of the poor," but rather housewives of some means struggling to maintain a certain quality of life.⁴³ If the Willard Avenue boycott is seen as a practical means for combating an economic problem, the fact that it did not spread may suggest that the North End did not have similar problems with their butchers or had found different, community-specific means of dealing with them.

The localized nature of the South Providence boycott also may have contributed to relatively nonviolent character of the protest. The close proximity of the butcher shops to the protesters' homes and the predominance of women and families in the demonstrations may have discouraged the outbreak of havoc and destruction. [See Figure 1 and Table 1]. But these factors of gender and proximity do not necessarily preclude violent actions, as evidenced by the considerable damage inflicted upon neighborhood butchers and their customers by Jewish housewives and mothers in the New York and Boston meat riots. It is possible that the lack of mayhem in the South Providence protest reflected community characteristics—neighborhood relationships and accepted modes of behavior—that enabled the housewives and their allies to resolve the conflict with the kosher butchers without resorting to violence.

This ability to resolve conflicts peacefully contrasted sharply with similar incidences of immigrant food activism in Providence's other ethnic neighborhoods. The South Providence kosher meat boycott has been compared by several scholars to the violent "Macaroni Riots" that wreaked havoc in the Italian community of Federal Hill in 1914. Like the Jewish housewives' protest, the Macaroni Riots expressed community outrage against ethnic business owners who charged too much for the traditional foods needed by the fellow immigrants who patronized their stores. But while the South Providence kosher meat boycott followed a model of organized grassroots protest, the Federal Hill action was marked by spontaneous street action, several days of violence, and the destruction of the offending businesses. The violence of this uprising may have reflected the composition of the participants—as

Evelyn Sterne points out, the Macaroni Riots contrasted with the kosher meat boycotts in that it was not a female-dominated protest, but drew in a mixed crowd of frustrated community members and activists.⁴⁴ But the differing levels of violence shown in these two incidents may also reflect the different extent of militant organization in the two neighborhoods. While South Providence Socialists in 1910 did not yet have strong connections to militant organizations like the I.W.W., the traditions of labor radicalism within the Italian immigrant community in Providence have been well-documented by several historians. These connections to militant labor groups may have fanned the violence of the Macaroni Riots, while the lack of militant influences may have resulted in the South Providence community's rejection of a more radical solution to the conflict over kosher meat.

The protesters' decision to dismiss the proposal of a cooperative kosher meat market reflected this potential lack of militancy, revealing a rejection of radical solutions to the economic problems of the community for more familiar systems of neighborhood commerce. Collective meat markets had been formed during the 1902 and 1917 food protests in New York and the Boston kosher meat boycott of 1912, and they became an important community strategy during the Depression of the 1930s. The Jewish community of Brockton, where a kosher meat boycott was in force at the same time as the Providence action, opted to establish a cooperative butcher shop.⁴⁵ Though the issue seems to have provoked significant debate among the Providence boycotters, the decision was made to encourage new butchers to open under the condition that they concede to the protesters' demands.

The choice of this solution reflects the boycotters' decision to maintain traditional patterns of community commerce rather than attempt a radical restructuring of the neighborhood's economic landscape. The new butchers were familiar to members of the community—as the *Journal* noted, some of them had previously been in the kosher meat business. The new shops encouraged by the strike committee would ostensibly operate under community control, as the butchers had been selected by the boycott committee, and had promised to meet the price and sanitation requirements laid out by the protesters. Plans were made for the creation of a standing committee to oversee the new shops and to ensure the new butchers' adherence to their agreement. Each of the community-approved shops would be given placards, “showing that the shop is a clean one and that the Jews need not be afraid to trade there.”⁴⁶ Stepping back from promoting total communal control over the kosher meat supply by establishing cooperative kosher meat markets, the organizers of the boycott sought a less radical way that left neighborhood trade relations relatively intact while reforming the system seen as the source of the conflict.

It is interesting to note, however, that the actual results of this proposal do not bear out the committee's hopes that the boycotted butchers would be driven out of business by the community-approved shops. While the dearth of reliable municipal records for this time period creates difficulty in tracing the opening or closing of small local shops, a survey of the *Providence Business Directory* for the years 1909 to 1915 does not support the prediction that the new kosher butcher shops would force the boycotted butchers to close. Though four new “provisions dealers” did open in the neighborhood in 1911, the only butcher from the 1910 incident to not be listed in the

directory was Louis Fishman, who apparently closed shop to work as a clerk for his brother Morris, also a butcher. In fact, four of the butchers operating during the 1910 boycott were still in business by 1915. The only other significant change in the directory listings was that after 1910, Barnet (also called Benjamin) Berman's shop was listed under the name of his wife, Annie—who had once managed a grocery store in her own name. Berman appears to have been the butcher who had been involved in the case of the tubercular cow. Though the civil case brought by the farmer was decided in Berman's favor, it is possible that the negative publicity caused Berman to take on a lower profile in the family business. He is listed as a clerk in the city directory for 1911 and 1912, and as a butcher again in 1913 through 1915. [See Table 2.]

In addition to this contradiction of the boycott committee's intentions, it is difficult to ascertain whether the plans to institute a committee to oversee the butcher shops were successful. An official body for the supervision of *kashrut* was not instituted in Providence until 1920, with the establishment of the *Vaad Hakashruth*. With its fairly extensive membership, including Orthodox rabbis, *shohatim*, and delegates from every Orthodox synagogue in Providence, the *Vaad* board represented a significant change in the supervision of kosher meat in Providence. It is difficult to establish a clear connection between the development of the *Vaad* and committee proposed by the leaders of the 1910 boycott, although a definite tie to the South Providence community is suggested by the presence of Abraham Bazar in the *Vaad's* charter. There is also some indication that an earlier association was founded in 1916, "to aid and assist in the enforcement of the pure food laws, education, charity, and

benevolence”—but again, little evidence to connect this organization with the kosher meat boycott.⁴⁷

The perseverance of the boycotted butchers could suggest that pragmatic economic relationships may have outweighed political ideals or communal desires to “punish” the transgressors. Patterns of behavior—where people are accustomed to shop, knowledge of who offers the best deals—can be strong motivators, and once the public furor over tainted meat and high prices subsided, long-standing relationships may have reasserted themselves. Both the lack of militant violence and the capitalistic approach to the boycott solution may reflect the economic structure and the employment patterns of the Providence Jewish community. Unlike the large numbers of Jewish industrial workers in New York, the majority of Jews in Providence worked in small shops and family businesses. As Smith notes, 46 percent of Jewish immigrants in Providence worked as peddlers and shop assistants. By 1915, 30 percent of Jewish men were self-employed retailers.⁴⁸ These factors may have contributed to a comfort with traditional retail relationships rather than an impulse for radical restructuring of the local economy.

The shops’ survival may also attest to the efficacy of economic competition—the boycotted butchers may have been forced to lower their prices and raise their standards to stay in business. As the existing sources do not reveal the costs of kosher meat in South Providence after the boycott, it is difficult to make definitive statements about these outcomes. However, in terms of community development, the near-doubling of the kosher meat markets in the neighborhood and the eventual expansion

of the kosher inspection system suggests tangible benefits for the housewives who for a short time took to the streets to demand better conditions.

Legacies of the Protest

Both Hyman and Frank assert that participation in collective actions like food boycotts politicized the housewives who took part. A sense of efficacy and communal solidarity developed during the boycotts made these women, their daughters, and granddaughters more likely to participate in other political and community actions. In the case of the South Providence kosher meat boycott, it is somewhat difficult to trace this female political legacy. As mentioned above, records for the Jewish community are scarce, especially for women's activities. The few records that do exist indicate that, even before the boycott, a strong tradition of charity and community service had already accustomed Jewish immigrant women to organizational life. Several of the boycott participants were active in women's organizations before the protest. Bessie Semonoff, the wife of boycott officer Wolf Semonoff, was a founding member of the South Providence Ladies' Aid Association as well as a member of the Providence chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women. Other women who participated in the boycott—Annie Shore, Soffie Shaw, Katie Barash, and Mrs. Zalzman—are also listed among the Ladies' Aid Association members. The 1905-1906 year book of the Council of Jewish Women lists the names and addresses of several women from South Providence, though the only names mentioned in the boycott coverage are that of Mrs. Semonoff and, interestingly enough, Annie Berman, the wife of boycotted butcher Benjamin Berman and eventual proprietor of a market in her own right.⁴⁹ The only sign of continued political involvement among the female boycott participants is that

of Annie Weinbaum, the wife of seltzer manufacturer Barnet Weinbaum, who later ran (unsuccessfully) for school board office on the Socialist ticket.⁵⁰ While it is difficult to determine if the kosher meat boycott increased Jewish women's activism in Providence, these indications of an activist consciousness rooted in women's traditional community work present intriguing possibilities for further research.

The question of the boycott's lasting effect on community organizations also remains unanswered. As Hyman observes, even in the larger, more elaborate protests described in Boston and New York, the organizational structures devised to run the boycotts and lobby for the community interests generally did not survive long after the immediate conflict subsided.⁵¹ As noted above, the South Providence boycott did not seem to give rise to any long-standing organization, and the committee appointed to ensure that the butchers adhered to community standards would most likely have been closed to women, being concerned with religious matters. Even after the institution of the *Vaad*, the supervision of kosher food in Providence was not without controversy, as evidenced by a series of editorials in the *Providence Jewish Herald* in the 1950s.⁵² It would be interesting to trace the issue of organized kosher supervision in Providence after the conclusion of the boycott, particularly in regards to women's involvement.

Rather than producing definitive answers, these observations about the South Providence kosher meat boycott suggest topics for further study of women's community activism within Jewish immigrant neighborhoods. The participation of the Workmen's Circle in the boycott raises questions about the activity of Jewish Socialists in Providence during the early part of the twentieth century. The lack of information about radical labor activism in the Jewish community also suggests a

topic for further research. And finally, further investigation should be made into women's community networks in South Providence. While a cursory survey has been made of the charitable and cultural organizations of the time period, more studies should examine Jewish women's organizational behavior outside of these clubs and charitable institutions. The kosher meat boycott of 1910 indicates that, in addition to their participation in traditional associational life, Jewish women engaged in subversive street demonstrations. This deserves further consideration, and could affect our understanding of Jewish women's experiences in Progressive Era Providence.

Perhaps further investigation will help determine whether the kosher meat boycott was a singular incidence of protest or part of a pattern of strategic efforts in community self-regulation. But even if the Willard Avenue protest was an isolated incident, it still offers significant insight into Jewish community interactions. In particular, it highlights the tensions created within the community as it grappled with many of the most important issues of the era—economic regulation, public health, the role of women, the potential corruption of community authorities, and changes in religious and cultural values. The resolution of the boycott—even in its apparent contradictions—reveals a complex negotiation of political, social, commercial and religious interests of a community undergoing change. The debate over the supervision and cost of kosher meat in South Providence incorporated a *shtetl*-oriented conception of the communal right to earn a living (though not from the blood of one's fellow Jews), Socialist visions of economic and social reform, and capitalist values of competition and self-help. This negotiation took place within a localized conception

of the community—the boycotters protested as citizens, but also as Jews. Despite calls for outside intervention, control of the kosher meat supply remained within the Jewish community. The rabbi and the butchers were criticized, but no great upheaval took place. And though women played a prominent part in the boycott's critique of community authorities, they did so in defense of their place within the traditional conception of Jewish womanhood. While the South Providence kosher meat boycott reflects many aspects of similar incidences of immigrant women's food activism, it also provides a fascinating example of a particular community struggling with both internal and external pressures and influences, and constructing a framework of its own.

FIGURE 1: Map of South Providence, Willard Avenue area

"New Map of the City of Providence, Compiled From the Latest Official Authorities."
 C. A. Pabodie & Son, 139 Mathewson Street. ca. 1911. Rhode Island
 Historical Society, Providence, Rhode Island.

TABLE 1: South Providence Butchers and Selected Boycott Participants

Butchers:

	Home	Shop
Abraham Berlinsky	81 Gay	185 Willard
Barnet Berman	209 Willard	209 Willard
Jacob Diwinsky	Hartford, Connecticut	161 Willard
(Jeanette and Louis Diwinsky, clerk and driver)	282 Blackstone	
Barnet Feldman	218 Willard	210 Willard
Louis Fishman	35 Hilton	229 Willard
Morris Fishman	44 Robinson	44 Robinson
Isaac Forman	210 Willard	184 Willard
Simon Friedman	168 Willard	219 Willard

Boycott Participants (Sample identified in City Directory):

	Home
Mrs. Bertha Barasch	22 ½ Robinson
Anne Drankoff, widow	62 Gay
Samuel H. Ernstof	34 Bogman
Benjamin Fine, shirtmaker	7 Robinson
Hyman Haimsohn, tailor	62 Gay
Solomon Mendelson, tailor	180 Willard
Aaron R. Rosenthal, peddler	66 Bogman
Wolf Semonoff, tailor	21 Robinson
Barnet Weinbaum, bottler	10 ½ Paca Place

TABLE 2: Jewish Provisions Dealers in South Providence, 1909-1915

1909

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Barnet	209 Willard
Diwinsky, Jacob	161 Willard
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Friedman, S.	196 Willard

1910

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Barnet	209 Willard
Diwinsky, Jacob	161 Willard
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Louis	229 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Forman, Isaac	184 Willard
Friedman, Simon	196 Willard

1911

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Annie	209 Willard
Diwinsky, Jacob	83 Gay
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Forman, Isaac	182 Willard
Friedman, Simon	196 Willard
Goldsman, Barnet	71 Gay
Hoffman, Samuel	174 Willard
Ostrow, William	35 Robinson

1912

Astrov, William (Ostrow)	35 Robinson
Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Annie	209 Willard
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Forman, Isaac	182 Willard
Friedman, Simon	219 Willard
Goldsman, Barnet	71 Gay
Hoffman, Samuel	174 Willard

1913

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Annie	209 Willard
Bernstein, Samuel	73 Gay
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Forman, Isaac	182 Willard
Rosen, Sam	191 Willard

1914

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Annie	209 Willard
Bernstein, Samuel	204 Willard
Borenstein, Simon	204 Willard
Feldman, Barnet	210 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Forman, Isaac	182 Willard
Friedman, Simon	148 Willard
Goldsman, Barnet	84 Gay
Rosen, Sam	130 Chester

1915

Berlinsky, Abraham	185 Willard
Berman, Annie	209 Willard
Bernstein, Samuel	204 Willard
Borenstein, Simon	204 Willard
Feldman, Barnet	245 Willard
Fishman, Morris	44 Robinson
Goldsman, Barnet	73 Gay
Rosen, Sam	130 Chester

CONCLUSION

At first glance, the phenomenon of kosher meat boycotts appears to be a minor, somewhat unusual footnote to larger historical narratives of early twentieth-century America. The spectacle of angry Jewish housewives, generally thought of as conservative and apolitical, taking to the streets, terrorizing local butchers, and fighting with police offers a colorful anecdote to studies of women's history, the Jewish immigration experience, and consumer activism. A kosher meat boycott in a small Jewish community in New England fairly removed from the political, cultural, and religious center of Jewish life in the United States seems to present an even more obscure topic of historical focus.

But as the preceding chapters show, kosher meat boycotts provide a unique opportunity to examine the intersection of important cultural, religious, economic, and political struggles within American Jewish communities. Because of the complicated mix of conservative and radical impulses inherent in such protests, the study of kosher meat boycotts offers insight into the use of collective action to both effect community change and preserve cultural traditions. And it may be precisely its smallness that makes the immigrant Jewish community of South Providence particularly worth studying. Ardis Cameron suggests that one of the benefits of local history is that it permits the "the careful examination of grand and sweeping hypotheses" while allowing for "a notion of community more sensitive to the ways in which different groups, including women, have understood themselves as members of particular communities."¹ The great concerns that absorbed the nation during the Progressive

Era—the high cost of living, threats to public health, corrupt government, and the bewildering transformations caused by influxes of new peoples and applications of new technologies—were addressed in microcosm by the actions of Jewish women on Willard Avenue. Little historical documentation survives of the personal thoughts, experiences, and motivations of immigrant Jewish women in Progressive Era Providence. But in taking to the streets of their neighborhood, the South Providence housewives revealed how they felt about the religious and cultural debates over *kashrut*, the proper role of both external and communal authorities, and the most appropriate way to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers. By doing so, they also articulated a clear sense of their identity within their community—as the protectors of physical and spiritual sustenance and the arbitrators between the market and the home.

The boycott orchestrated by Jewish women in South Providence differed from similar incidents in New York, Boston, and various other American cities in ways that caution against grand generalizations about Jewish women's responses to cultural and economic pressures. Not all Jewish communities engaged in kosher boycotts when prices rose, and not all kosher boycotts resulted in riots or a radical restructuring of the communal economy. Unlike the extreme measures required to effect change in large communities like New York, the South Providence boycott suggests that neighborhood relationships and accepted patterns of behavior may enable smaller communities to resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

In seeking to situate the South Providence kosher meat boycott within the larger context of Progressive Era consumer activism and similar food protests, this study has generated more questions for exploration than definitive conclusions about

Jewish and other immigrant women's collective actions. While the South Providence protest was resolved peaceably, there is little evidence of the long-term effects of this resolution, either in terms of kosher meat prices or in the politicization of the women protesters. Further research into South Providence women's neighborhood networks and community organizations must be undertaken before a more thorough knowledge of the elusive experiences of Jewish housewives in South Providence can be added to the present understanding of working-class and immigrant women's political and social consciousness.

The examination of food protests like kosher meat boycotts has relevance beyond historical study. As John Walton and David Seddon show in their study of modern-day food riots in Latin America and other regions affected by the economic and social transformations of globalization, food continues to be a focal point of community organization, particularly in times of great transition. Just as these scholars apply the classic theories of food riots developed by Thompson and other historians of early European history to their analysis of austerity protests in Haiti and Zambia, those interested in the ongoing debates of American ethnic identity and community organization can benefit from the examination of the kosher meat boycotts of the Progressive Era.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

¹ Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860-1912* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993). Paula Hyman's work on the different experiences of Jewish immigrant women and men includes *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History: the Roles and Representation of Women* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995), and "Gender and the Immigrant Jewish Experience in the United States" in *Jewish Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Judith R. Baskin (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1991), 222-242.

² E. P. Thompson, "The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century," *Past and Present* 50, (February 1971): 76-136.

³ Herbert G. Gutman, "Work, Culture, and Society in Industrializing America, 1815-1919," *American Historical Review* 78, no. 3 (June 1973): 531-588.

⁴ Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 545-566. Thompson observes that the assumptions of the moral economy so vehemently defended in eighteenth century food riots originate in an acceptance of the traditional, paternalistic order, referring to "this nascent political consciousness of the working-class notions which, indeed, found some support in the paternalist tradition of the authorities; notions which the people re-echoed so loudly in their turn that the authorities were, in some measure, the prisoners of the people." Thompson, 79.

⁵ Mari Jo Buhle, *Women in American Socialism, 1870-1920* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1981). While Buhle points out the difficulties that women encountered within the Socialist Party, her work also points out the significant role that women played in party activities, particularly through the work of the Women's National Committee, which the Party abolished in 1915.

⁶ Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort*, 5. Also, "Landscapes of Subterfuge: Working-Class Neighborhoods and Immigrant Women," in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, edited by Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 56-72.

⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "Disorderly Women: Gender and Labor in the Appalachian South," *The Journal of American History* 73, issue 2 (September 1986): 354-382.

⁸ Women's Progressive Era consumer activism will be treated more thoroughly in Chapter One.

⁹ Annelise Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire: Women and Working-class Politics in the United States, 1900-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 25-26.

¹⁰ The "kosher meat riots" in New York are mentioned in Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1890-1925* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1985), Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Harold P. Gastwirt, *Fraud, Corruption, and Holiness: The Controversy Over the Supervision of the Jewish Dietary Practice in New York, 1881-1940* (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat Press, 1974), Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1976), and Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*.

¹¹ Paula E Hyman, "Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: the New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902," *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (September 1980): 91-105.

¹² Dana Frank, "Housewives, Socialists, and the Politics of Food: the 1917 New York Cost-of-Living Protests," *Feminist Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 255-285.

¹³ Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 28, 235-236. Clara Lemlich Shavelson is one of the women featured in this "collective biography" of four prominent Jewish activists. Also Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort*, 112.

¹⁴ Hyman, *Gender and Assimilation in Modern Jewish History*.

¹⁵Susan A. Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl: Life and Labor in the Immigrant Generation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990). The term *baleboste* is described in Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 5.

¹⁶Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance: Jewish Immigrants, Mass Consumption, and the Search for American Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990); Jenna Weissman Joselit, *The Wonders of America: Reinventing Jewish Culture, 1880-1950* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994).

¹⁷Laura Grossfield, "A Theory of American Life: Formation of Secular Identity and Community Among Providence Jews," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 10, no. 4 (November 1990), 411.

¹⁸Patrick Janson, "Organized Impulses of Resistance and Assimilation within the Providence Jewish Community, 1880-1921," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 9, no. 2 (November 1984): 141-154.

¹⁹Judith E. Smith, *Family Connections: a History of Italian and Jewish Immigrant Lives in Providence, Rhode Island, 1900-1940* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985).

²⁰For a description of the 1912 kosher meat boycotts in Boston, see Marlene Rockmore, "The Kosher Meat Riots: A Study in the Process of Adaptation Among Jewish Immigrant Housewives to Urban America, 1902-1917" (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts, Boston, 1980).

CHAPTER ONE

¹Nancy S. Dye, "Introduction," in *Gender, Class, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era*, Noralee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye, eds. (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 1. The articles in this collection present a broad range of examples of women's participation in Progressive Era reform movements. Classic texts describing the origins, influences, and tactics of Progressive Era reformers include Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) and Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1967). A more recent rethinking of the interpretations provided by these earlier historians is offered in Richard McCormick, "The Discovery that Business Corrupts Politics: A Reassessment of the Origins of Progressivism" in *The Party Period and Public Policy: American Politics from the Age of Jackson to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 311-356 and in the collection of articles edited by Sidney M. Milkis and Jerome M. Mileur, *Progressivism and the New Democracy* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999). An explanation of the economic changes and regulations pertinent to Progressive Era reform can be found in Morton Keller, *Regulating a New Economy: Public Policy and Economic Change in America, 1900-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

²Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 43. For a more thorough description of "municipal housekeeping" and its translation into women's political action, see Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *The American Historical Review* 89, issue 3 (June 1984): 620-647. The development and activities of the Women's Trade Union League is described in Orleck, and in Nancy Schrom Dye, *As Equals and as Sisters: Feminism, the Labor Movement, and the Women's Trade Union League of New York* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980). Meredith Tax's *The Rising of the Women: Feminist Solidarity and Class Conflict, 1880-1917* (New York: Monthly Review, 1980) provides an explication of women's involvement in socialism and the labor movement, including a discussion of the 1909 New York shirtwaist makers' strike and the Lawrence textile worker strikes in 1912.

³Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort* and Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*. Maurine Weiner Greenwald, "Working-Class Feminism and the Family Wage Ideal: The Seattle Debate on Married Women's Right to Work, 1914-1920," *The Journal of American History* 76, issue 1 (June 1989): 118-149.

⁴Dye, "Introduction," 2.

⁵Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: the Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 21.

⁶Hofstadter, 172. Lawrence Glickman describes how this "consumerist turn" developed within the labor movement, in tandem with the producer-oriented "living wage" struggle. In Lawrence B.

Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

⁷ Lorine Swainston Goodwin, *The Pure Food, Drink, and Drug Crusaders, 1879-1914*, (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co., 1999), 152. Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic*. For a discussion of the White Label campaign and role of gender in the politics of the NCL, see Alice Kessler-Harris, "Two Political Cultures in the Progressive Era: the National Consumers' League and the American Association for Labor Legislation," in *U. S. History as Women's History*, edited by Linda Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathleen Kish Sklar, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 34-62 and Kathryn Kish Sklar, "The Consumers' White Label Campaign of the National Consumers' League, 1898-1918," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judd (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 17-36. See also Landon R. Y. Storrs, *Civilizing Capitalism: The National Consumers' League, Women's Activism, and Labor Standards in the New Deal Era*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

⁸ From Louise Tilley, "Food Entitlement, Famine, and Conflict," quoted in John Walton and David Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 35.

⁹ Eric Rauchway, "The High Cost of Living in the Progressives' Economy," *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 3 (December 2001). Online. The History Cooperative. <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/88.3/rauchway.html>> (29 January 2003).

¹⁰ "The Soaring Cost of Life in America," *New York Times*, 2 January 1910, p. SM1.

¹¹ For a description of the development and regulation of the meat industry, see Gary D. Libecap, "The Rise of the Chicago Packers and the Origins of Meat Inspection and Antitrust," in *Growth of the Regulatory State, 1900-1917: State and Federal Regulation of Railroads and Other Enterprises*. Business and Government in America Since 1870, vol. 3. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1994, 202-222.

¹² "League to Boycott Trusts," *New York Times*, 15 January 1910, p. 2.

¹³ "200,000 To Fight Food Prices," *New York Times*, 19 January 1910, p. 4.

¹⁴ "Boycott on Meat Forces Prices Down," *New York Times*, 19 January 1910, p. 4. "Boycott of Meat Spreads in West," *New York Times*, 20 January 1910, p. 2. "25,000 Signed in Cleveland," "St. Louis Joins Boycott," "Pittsburgh Raises Board Rate," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 1-2. "Meat Boycott Hits Boston," "South Takes Up Movement," "Pacific Meat Boycott Young Yet," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2. "Ball Team Quits Meat," *New York Times*, 23 March 1910, p. 7.

¹⁵ *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 2. "Badges Aid the Cause," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2.

¹⁶ "Missouri Gives Aid: Unions Join Boycott—Restaurants Offer Vegetarian Meals," and "To List Food Substitutes, Anti-Food Trust League Hires Corps of Experts to Choose Them," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

¹⁷ "75,000 in Pittsburgh Join," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 1.

¹⁸ "End of Meat Eating," *New York Times*, 3 February 1910, p. 4.

¹⁹ "What to Eat—and Why—By Dr. H. Wiley," *New York Times*, 30 January 1910, SM4.

²⁰ "Boycotting in a New Form," *New York Times*, 19 January 1910, p. 8.

²¹ "Ate Meat and Died," *New York Times*, 3 February 1910; Chokes to Death Eating Meat," *New York Times*, 31 January 1910. An alternate interpretation of these stories would be as criticisms of workers who broke their anti-meat pledges. The January 31 article recounts how a "dozen foreigners" discussing the meat boycott decided to pledge to eat no meat, except for "Mic" Skovlac, who then choked while devouring a steak. While this reading would imply a more supportive view of the boycott, it still reflects a condescending view of ignorant, weak-willed workers.

²² "Boycott Lowers Prices," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2. "More Cities Join in Meat Boycott," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 1.

²³ "25,000 Signed On in Cleveland," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 1. "Toledo, Ohio," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 1. "Meat Boycott Hits Boston," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2. "Dealers Ridicule Boycott Here," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

²⁴ "Baltimore—special to the NY Times" and "Milwaukee Joins Boycott," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 2. "Club Women Take It Up," "Consumers' League and National Progressive Suffrage

Union Plan Mass Meetings Next Week," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2. "Women to Join Boycott," *New York Times*, 28 January 1910, p. 3. "Boycott Discouraged Here," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2. "Postcard Crusade for Cheaper Meat," *New York Times*, 31 January 1910, p. 3.

²⁵ "Club Women Take It Up," "Consumers' League and National Progressive Suffrage Union Plan Mass Meetings Next Week," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2. "Boycott Discouraged Here," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

²⁶ "Clubwomen Take it Up, Consumers' League and National Progressive Suffrage Union Plan Mass Meetings for Next Week," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2. "Boycott Discouraged Here," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

²⁷ "Suffragettes in Boycott," *New York Times*, 1 February 1910, p. 18.

²⁸ "St. Louis, Men Won't Join," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 4.

²⁹ "Suffragettes See Aldermen," *New York Times*, 2 February 1910, p. 6.

³⁰ *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

³¹ "Boycotters Warned," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 2.

³² *New York Times*, 29 January 1910, p. 2.

³³ "Meat Prices Higher and Still Going Up," *New York Times*, 23 March 1910, p. 7.

³⁴ "Grand Jury to Begin Meat Inquiry Today," *New York Times*, 24 January 1910, p. 7. "Meat Trust Sued, Companies Indicted," *New York Times*, 22 March 1910, p. 7.

³⁵ "St. Louis Joins Boycott," *New York Times*, 21 January 1910, p. 1-2.

³⁶ "The Organized Consumer," *New York Times*, 22 January 1910, p. 8.

³⁷ "Clubwomen Take it Up, Consumers' League and National Progressive Suffrage Union Plan Mass Meetings for Next Week," *New York Times*, 23 January 1910, p. 2.

³⁸ "A New Kind of Class Consciousness," *New York Times*, 24 January 1910, p. 7.

CHAPTER TWO

¹ Donna Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Hasia Diner, *Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Folkways in the Age of Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 206.

² For statistics on Jewish immigration, see Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 58; and Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel, *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: Dial Press, 1976), 94-95. Helpful discussions of the situation of Jews within the Russian Empire in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries appear in Howe; Baum et. al.; Glenn's *Daughters of the Shtetl*; and Smith's *Family Connections*.

³ Jewish immigrant associational life is well-described by several scholars. My understanding of the topic has particularly benefited from the work of Annelise Orleck, Charlotte Baum, et al. al., Susan Glenn, and Judith Smith. Howe provides a discussion of charitable efforts of the American Jewish community in *World of Our Fathers*. Laura Grossfield describes the differences between German Reform communities and Eastern European immigrant communities and the rise of separate institutions in "A Theory of American Life."

⁴ For a discussion of ethnic food entrepreneurs, see Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, Chapter 3.

⁵ Diner, 196-197.

⁶ For a discussion of immigrants' reactions to "abundance," see Diner, and Andrew Heinze, *Adapting to Abundance*.

⁷ Gastwirt, 3-4. Gastwirt also provides interesting insight on controversies over the supervision of kosher meat within Jewish communities in early Eastern Europe. The difficulty of establishing communal authority over *kashrui* is also mentioned by Diner, and is substantially discussed in Jeremiah J. Berman, *Shehitah: A Study in the Cultural and Social Life of the Jewish People* (New York: Bloch Publishing Company, 1941).

⁸ Diner, 184. Diner finds this yearning to partake of "American abundance" among Jewish immigrants stronger than their nostalgia for traditional food practices, which conflicts with Gabaccia's assessment of "culinary conservatism" within immigrant Jewish communities. Gabaccia points out that many immigrants could not afford to take advantage of the abundant American food marketplace.

⁹ Joselit, 172; Diner, 181.

¹⁰ Joselit, 175.

¹¹ Joselit describes the development of a new American Jewish identity based on Jewish-identified (but not necessarily kosher) foods, called “kitchen Judaism” or “bagel and lox Judaism.” See Joselit, 171.

¹² Gabaccia, 128; Joselit, 181; Diner, 215. Joselit includes a thorough discussion of the rise of professional home economics and its impact on reform movements directed at immigrant communities.

¹³ Joselit, 180.

¹⁴ Ibid., 177-78.

¹⁵ Berman, 1-2, 133.

¹⁶ Gastwirt, 17-18.

¹⁷ Berman, 3.

¹⁸ Diner, 181.

¹⁹ Berman. Also, Gastwirt includes substantial discussion of the difficulties of establishing a supervisory system for kosher meat in New York City.

²⁰ Gabaccia, *We Are What We Eat*, 57-58.

²¹ Ibid., 69.

²² Joselit, 198-99.

²³ Diner, 207.

CHAPTER THREE

¹ While it is difficult to ascertain how many Jewish women participated in the Anti-Food Trust League’s nationwide boycott of the Meat Trust in 1910, it is interesting to note that two prominent Jewish activists spoke about the League’s protest at the annual meetings of their respective institutions: Maud Nathan, president of the National Consumers’ League and Rose Schneiderman, vice president of the Women’s Trade Union League. Though both women worked to better the conditions of laboring women, Nathan was from one of New York’s most prominent Jewish families and had married a successful broker, while Schneiderman had grown up the daughter of a single mother in the immigrant community of the Lower East Side and had worked in factories since the age of thirteen.

² “Meat Shops Closed by Women Raiders,” *New York Times*, 10 April 1910, p. 1; “Kosher Butchers Now Refuse to Buy,” *New York Times*, 11 April 1910, p. 18; “Women Still Bait Butchers,” *New York Times*, 12 April 1910, p. 3; “Jews Getting Ready for Passover,” *New York Times*, 18 April 1910, p. 6.

³ Discussions of *shtetl* life appear in Howe, Baum et. al., Smith, Glenn, and the now classic, if somewhat sentimentalized, anthropological study, *Life is With People*, by Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog (New York: Schocken Books, 1952). Glenn discusses the “breadwinning partnership” in *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 10-13.

⁴ Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 19.

⁵ Glenn, 30-33.

⁶ Glenn, 33-42. Paula Hyman also discusses the impact of *Haskalah* on Jewish women’s status and political activity in her article, “Gender and the Immigrant Jewish Experience in the United States.”

⁷ Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 26-27.

⁸ Zborowski and Herzog, 219. Orleck, *Common Sense and a Little Fire*, 28.

⁹ Paula E. Hyman, “Immigrant Women and Consumer Protest: the New York City Kosher Meat Boycott of 1902,” *American Jewish History* 70, no. 1 (September 1980), 93-94.

¹⁰ Hyman, “Immigrant Women,” 97-98.

¹¹ Ibid., 99.

¹² Ibid., 102.

¹³ Ibid., 97-98.

¹⁴ Ibid., 95-96.

¹⁵ Ibid., 100-102.

¹⁶ “Prospects of the East Side’s Co-operative Shop,” *New York Times*, 22 June 1910, p. 29.

¹⁷ Frank, 259.

¹⁸ Ibid., 255.

¹⁹ Ibid., 264-265.

²⁰ Ibid., 265.

²¹ Ibid., 263.

²² Hyman, 105.

²³ In her thesis on the kosher meat boycotts in Boston in 1912, Marlene Rockmore notes that the organization formed during these actions, the West End Mother's Club, did serve as a long-standing lobbying group for the community after the strike had ended.

CHAPTER FOUR

¹ South Providence, Providence: Statewide Historical Preservation Report P-P-2, Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission, September 1978.

² Bessie Edith Bloom, "Jewish Life in South Providence," Student paper written for Brown University in 1910. Published in *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* vol. 5, no. 4 (November, 1970), 393.

³ "The Invasion of the Fifth Ward by Junkmen and Ragpickers," *The Providence Sunday Journal*, 24 August 1901, p. 17. This article records an interesting incident in which South Providence peddlers and their supporters organized a meeting and a petition against the ward alderman, John Nelson, who was accused of delaying the processing of peddling licenses and raising license fees.

⁴ Bloom, 391-393.

⁵ Bloom, 393.

⁶ From an article entitled, "The Old Neighborhood," by Beatrice Levin in the *Providence Sunday Journal* 25 January 1948, quoted in Eleanor F. Horvitz, "Old Bottles, Rags, Junk! the Story of the Jews of South Providence," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 7, no. 2 (1976), 248.

⁷ Horvitz, "Old Bottles," 247-48.

⁸ Ibid., 248.

⁹ Eleanor F. Horvitz, "Family Stores," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 11, no. 4 (November 1994), 445.

¹⁰ "Kosher Meat Strikes in Three New England Cities," *The Boston Jewish Advocate*, 30 June 1910. Herbert Friedenwald, ed., *The American Jewish Yearbook*, 5671 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1910), 108. While these articles reveal the general interest of the national Jewish press in the Providence incident, it should be noted that only English-language Jewish papers were used for this study. A survey of the Yiddish press, particularly the *New York Forward* and the publications of the Workmen's Circle, would add to the media evaluation of the Providence kosher meat boycott.

¹¹ "Jewish Women Put Ban on Kosher Meat," *Providence Daily Journal*, 22 June 1910.

¹² "Providence Daily Journal, 22 June 1910.

¹³ "Jewish Women Here Picket Kosher Shops," *Providence Daily Journal*, 23 June 1910.

¹⁴ *Providence Daily Journal*, 23 June 1910. "Kosher Shop Pickets Still Stick to Jobs; Police Drive Crowd," *Evening Bulletin*, 24 June 1910.

¹⁵ *Providence Daily Journal*, 23 June 1910. "Kosher Butcher War Near End," *Providence Daily Journal*, 27 June 1910.

¹⁶ "Jewish Women Push Kosher Butcher War," *Providence Daily Journal*, 24 June 1910.

¹⁷ *Evening Bulletin*, 22 June 1910; *Providence Daily Journal*, 23, 27 June 1910.

¹⁸ *Providence Daily Journal*, 27 June 1910.

¹⁹ Molly Nyma Genensky, "Rabbi Israel Sesil Rubinstein," biography written by the rabbi's granddaughter, n.d., Papers of Rabbi Israel S. Rubinstein, Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association Archives, Providence, Rhode Island.

²⁰ *Evening Bulletin*, 24 June 1910.

²¹ *Providence Daily Journal*, 22 June 1910. *Harrington v. Bearman* (1910), RI Sixth District Court. *Rhode Island State System, Sixth District Court Civil Docket*, no. 17 April 1910. 55311.

²² Berman, 8.

²³ *Evening Bulletin*, 22 June 1910.

²⁴ "Pickets Employed by Jewish Women at Kosher Markets," *Evening Bulletin*, 23 June 1910.

- ²⁵ *Providence Daily Journal*, 24 June 1910.
- ²⁶ *Providence Daily Journal*, 24 June 1910.
- ²⁷ *Providence Daily Journal*, 24 June 1910.
- ²⁸ "Kosher Meat War," *Boston Jewish Advocate*, 4 March 1910.
- ²⁹ The Report of the Superintendent of Health for 1908 reported 564 inspection visits to the forty-eight provisions dealers in the Fifth Ward for the year 1907, perhaps indicating an increase in municipal supervision of meat supplies.
- ³⁰ *Providence Daily Journal*, 22 June 1910.
- ³¹ Edwin C. Brown, "Workmen's Circles and Jewish Labor Unions," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 10, no. 2 (November 1988), 161.
- ³² Ben Rabi, "Wine, Women, and Meat," *Jewish Advocate*, 28 January 1910.
- ³³ Smith, 156.
- ³⁴ *Providence Daily Journal*, 22-24 June 1910.
- ³⁵ *Providence Daily Journal*, 22 June 1910.
- ³⁶ *Providence Daily Journal*, 22, 27 June 1910.
- ³⁷ Brown, 159. Paul M. Buhle, "Jews in Rhode Island Labor: an Introductory Investigation," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 10, no. 2 (November 1988): 149. A thorough discussion of the Workmen's Circle and its role in developing a concept of secular, left-wing Judaism can be found in Judah Shapiro, *The Friendly Society: a History of the Workmen's Circle* (New York: Media Judaica, 1970).
- ³⁸ Buhle, "Jews in Rhode Island Labor," 148-49.
- ³⁹ Census data., *The Thirteenth Census of the United States, Taken in the Year 1910*. Information about Pavlow's involvement with the Socialist Party is from Horvitz, 258.
- ⁴⁰ Samuel Altman, "Fifty Years in South Providence." Quoted in Horvitz, 233.
- ⁴¹ Robert Grieve, "Growth and Present Status of Socialism in Rhode Island," *Providence Sunday Journal* 22 April 1906, p. 3.
- ⁴² Howe, 288.
- ⁴³ Hyman, 263.
- ⁴⁴ Evelyn Savidge Sterne, *Ballots and Bibles: Ethnic Politics and the Catholic Church in Providence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003, forthcoming), Chapter 4.
- ⁴⁵ *Jewish Advocate*, 1 July 1910.
- ⁴⁶ *Providence Daily Journal*, 27 June 1910.
- ⁴⁷ Beryl Segal, "Vaad Hakashruth of Providence, Rhode Island: Text of the Constitution and Bylaws with Annotations," *Rhode Island Jewish Historical Notes* 6, no. 3 (1973): 464.
- ⁴⁸ Smith, 35-37.
- ⁴⁹ Minute book, 1902-1906, South Providence Ladies' Aid Association, Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association. Yearbook, 1905-1906, Providence Council of Jewish Women, Rhode Island Jewish Historical Association.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Joseph Sullivan, 17 April 2003.
- ⁵¹ Hyman, 105.
- ⁵² *Providence Jewish Herald*, 30 May 1958, p. 9; 4 December 1959, p. 9; 18 December 1959, p. 9.

CONCLUSION

- ¹ Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort*, 3.

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