
Fiction

The Ladies Anti-Beef Trust Association

Garth Wolkoff

How can we pay for this pound of meat? The butchers strike against the wholesalers. And then the wholesalers settle with the butchers. This is a strike? The prices go from 12 cents to 18. The butcher shops open again, along Market, along Cherry, along Ludlow, Mr. Epstein's new shop on Monroe. The prices don't change, nothing changes. Eighteen cents for a pound of meat.

Now, if we women make a strike, then it would be a strike.

Mrs. Kaplan hears that in Brooklyn it's the same. In Brooklyn, she says, in the Bronx, in Harlem. She reads English and says it's in Boston too, the prices, and in Paterson, in Philadelphia.

If the butchers are in with the suppliers, and the suppliers are in with the meat packers, and the meat packers are in with the rabbis, who is in with us?

How can we pay for this pound of meat?

You can see here, the arms of my young ones? Not only pale flesh, but meager flesh. In America, we should eat meat. We work, we live without windows. We live with soot in our homes, with boarders, thieves, and mice. We live with tenement fires. We deserve cheap kosher meat!

My eldest one, Fanny, who is working this very minute as a sales girl, has taken to feeling faint. I am a forgiving woman and my Fanny will have a baby. I have learned in this country that there are some questions which are not answered. My Fanny needs her strength, and not just for the baby, but for the appearances. My poor Fanny. There are those women who say I should throw her out of the house, but my eldest, my dear girl.

My poor husband, Samuel, who is working at Consolidated Gas,

has gone without meat for a two times on Shabbos. I see the lines in his nose, Samuel. His nose reddens with burdens, burdens at work, burdens at work, and I know it is not drink, not Samuel. He brings me eight dollars every Friday. Should I give it to the butcher? What would my landlord say? First Fanny, now this with the meat.

So it starts like this: Eighteen cents for a pound of meat. Mrs. Silver, Mrs. Kaplan and myself are passing an alley where little street arabs are playing a crap game. Mrs. Kaplan starts shooing them away like this and then we smell: for the first time in two weeks, meat we smell, meat cooking on a stove. The salt gets in our noses, the fat, it is pink, we can feel it, there is juice. We smell onions, a little garlic. We look up and see the blackened windows behind the fire escape on the second story, and we smell meat. Mrs. Kaplan shouts up to her, whoever she is, "No meat in the Tenth Ward!"

Mrs. Silver adjusts her shawl and she is determined. So is Mrs. Kaplan, her jaw is like so and she has a look, I've seen her with her own kids, she has a look. I start to hold us back, What are we doing? The lady cooking the meat, she is one of us. Perhaps we should not judge. But Mrs. Silver and Mrs. Kaplan charge up the stoop and so I follow, through the doors, up one flight, and into the first apartment—there is not even a proper door. Laundry is everywhere and the walls are black and we go through the hanging laundry, through the outer room to the black stove. She has metal pails all over the floor, who's to say why, seven or eight metal pails, an oven that is positively white from ash, a girl, the age of my Fanny, sleeping on the wooden floor.

And there is a fatty piece of meat on the skillet. There are cries, cries of shame from the woman there. Who knows her; cries from her heart as though we were ripping something from the very depth. She has small children around her skirt. And we are determined ladies. Only I wonder, are we taking food from a mouth? Is the girl on the floor sick, or like my Fanny? Mrs. Silver takes the pan from the stove and asks the woman, "How can you pay eighteen cents for this pound of meat?"

We are nice ladies but we are angry, sure. We don't run from the building. Mrs. Silver is too proud. We bring the pan through the doors down to the sidewalk where this person and that one stare as though we were lepers, as if we had killed for this meat. Mrs. Silver—ach! She is so strong—

she walks into the street, and right there, amid all the hat men and the second-hand coat men, and the vegetable peddlers, all the hawking *Come to my store*, she stomps on the meat with the heel of her boot like it was the meat itself, after all, that has raised the price to eighteen cents a pound.

Thou shalt say, I will eat flesh, because thy soul desireth to eat flesh; thou mayest eat flesh, for it is, after all, the desire of the soul.

We may eat cattle, sheep, goats. We may eat buffalo, yak, stag, moose, hart, elk, antelope, gazelle, eland.

We may not eat those animals with the distinguishing features of forked horns, or, horns that are circular in a cross-section, composed of layers of cartilage, rather than solid bone.

The Talmud says that we may not eat the meat slaughtered by a butcher who does not know the rules, who pauses while killing, who presses, who burrows, who tears.

The animal must be hoisted and shackled.

The knife must be perfectly sharp and smooth. The metal should have no dents or other blemishes, and the knife should be tested with the flesh of a finger and with the fingernail.

The knife should be twice as long as the neck of the animal.

How shall we defend the cheap price of meat?

We hear from Mrs. Singer that Mr. Epstein has returned from shul this night to open his shop, just next door to Mrs. Singer's little restaurant. We are a fistful of women: Mrs. Abel, her daughter Henny, and there is Mrs. Levy, Mrs. Edelson, Mrs. Portnoy, Mrs. Greiger, Mrs. Kahn, Mrs. Kupferman, Mrs. Schmalke, and the Goldfarb girl. It starts this way.

Mr. Epstein opens his butcher shop, it is early evening, the eve of the Pig Market, Thursday, and he stands against the doorway.

It's not summer just yet but it's already bad, the dust in the street, our children are already brown. Mr. Epstein stands in front of his shop, we arrive on the sidewalk, on the curb, in the street, and he crosses his arms. We say, Shut down the butcher shop, this is a strike. Mr. Epstein says no.

How shall we defend the cheap price of meat, fourteen cents, or better, twelve?

Mr. Epstein says he has the law on his side. This is America, he says, and the store will remain open. He wipes off his eyeglasses. He brushes the sweat from his forehead and his beard. I look into his black eyes and feelings start to come over me, feelings from I don't know where. I'm thinking as if I am dreaming, as though what or who that comes into my head—she is mysterious, she is a guide I cannot see.

I'm thinking about my sister Myla, with whom I sat on the roof all winter as we tended to her, until she died, leaving a baby, Rebecca. who is now my own. Tuberculosis: We came all the way to America so my beloved sister could die from tuberculosis. We made a tent, put up a cot, a cloth folding chair, a piece of wood for which the cot could rest on. I told Myla I would sit up with her all winter until she became well again, and I sat there with her until death, her face wan not like the snow, but like yellow like hide, her eyes hollow. I'm lucky, my husband tells me over and over, that I didn't die up there with her.

The crowd in front of the butcher shop grows. We gather as if from out of the dust. I do not know how we arrive at the same point at the same time, as though we feel some silent and internal alarm, bunching up in front of the hat stores and Mrs. Singer's restaurant, the cobble stones are loose there, some shade from the building behind us.

I look behind me. I have never seen so many ladies together, rows and rows of faded dresses, perspiration on the upper lips of people who look like me, scarves and without, the religious and free thinkers, hennaed hair and slit lips. Some are from Vilna, I know them, and some I have never seen before. I feel like sobbing, I don't know why, a feeling like a gust of wind comes from the invisible. I'm not someone who cries for such a nothing. This is not the loss of a loved one, God forbid, like my Myla, a girl like a rose bud; this is not the anniversary of my mother's death; this is not one of my children being born. This is a pregnant crowd of people; we are angry neighbors and, okay, I feel like crying.

The other ladies, they are pressing into me where I am at the front, at my thighs, and the small of my back, and the acme of my shoulders, and words come that I have never known before.

Mr. Epstein, I say, we are going to wreck your shop if you do not close down. I am shouting. From where *does* this voice come? I am a mother of

five, I can say, six since the winter, my Myla, my Rebecca. I am not a crusader.

We tell him to close his shop and lock his door. Blood races through my body. It is blood, it must be. It is as though I can feel my muscles for the first time, my veins, the tips of my fingers, the hair on my arms. It is a *mecheieh*, the greatest pleasure, all though my body. This is not the feeling I had on my wedding day, but this is the feeling from which I have to compare.

We stare at Mr. Epstein, a row of sixteen in front, together, a crowd deep into the middle of Monroe. For a while we are silent and yes, you can hear the horses not far away on Division Street. He must sense the eyes of the neighborhood staring into him.

And then our voices are ringing like a field of crows—*How Much Is Too Much For a Pound of Meat*—and I think anything can set us off, the call of rag pickers, an evil glint of light, a drop from the sky.

The animal is cut at the neck below the larynx; it is wise to cut below the first ring of the tracheae up to where the tracheae divides into branches, or up to the upper side of the lung.

The cuts should be made across the throat, severing the trachea and esophagus.

The blood from the slaughter that falls to the earth must be covered with the earth.

Leviticus says that there is no clearer symbol of life.

How shall we fight for this pound of meat?

Some women throw a pail of ashes through a plate glass and, just like that, we begin. "Eat No Meat While The Trust Takes From The Bones Of Our Children!" We throw rocks, sure we do, rocks and bad fruit. From behind us, they are throwing apples and peaches and pears and plums—it is the end of Spring and we are alive, we have our kitchens with us, our kitchens and the vegetable peddler from Mott Street, Mr. Shirtz.

A fish peddler's wagon takes up next to the hat store, and some of the ladies push the fish man into the cobble stones and run the wagon through the front of the shop. There is a great crash. We throw fish as ammunition, mackerel and carp and salmon and whitefish, we throw them through the broken glass, cutting our hands on the scales, one fish by one, as

though they were jumping through the air.

A man hurries out of the shop and Mrs. Bernachevski walks right up, reaches into his packet for his ruby red liver, and slaps him with it across the face. You can hear the smack of wet liver against the shaved face of a man. It is like the open hand on the baby's backside.

He yells back, *Ladies, ladies, go back to your kitchens, go back to your homes. The goyim are watching us, they look at us in the newspapers and shake their heads tsk, tsk. It is a shame that they will use against us. Ladies, ladies, this is a shandah far di goyim.*

He is beaten, this man, beaten with hands and arms and sacks full of whatnot. If we should remain at home, who would notice our suffering? He is the man with the shaven face, not us ladies, and we let him know that.

Two police run up and we say to them, No, we will not leave, we will not go home. Home is five flights up where we cannot feed our families, the boarders, the cousins who just arrived from the Pale, from Riga, from Vilna, from Kiev.

I myself, I am not a big woman. But when I see the police take hold of Minnie Bernachevski by the wrist and pull her—like this—I walk right up to the scoundrel and tear his shield from his coat, and the buttons too.

The animal is cut open and a hand is inserted, and the lung is examined manually for possible adhesions. The lung is inspected again upon removal from the body cavity. If it is smooth to the touch, the animal is kosher.

If the skull is broken, the animal could be *terefah*. If a small portion of the brain is liquefied like water, or softened like wax, the animal is *terefah*. However, if the portion of the brain is only soft or decayed, the animal is kosher.

If the skin that envelopes the spinal chord is cut in most of its circumference, the animal is *terefah*. If the cord itself has become fluid like water or melted wax, it is tested by holding the cord underneath the injured part; if the chord cannot stand upright, the animal is *terefah*.

If more than half of the animal's twenty-two ribs are broken, the animal is *terefah*.

There is a great difference between rules for the hind legs and rules for the forelegs.

If the heart is perforated through the wall and into the chambers, the animal is *terefah*.

An animal may not be flayed. The animal is kosher only if some parts of the skin remain as though the skin might heal.

How far will we go to defend our meat?

We go as far as necessary, I say now. Maybe I did not think this before. Maybe I am not like Mrs. Kaplan or Mrs. Silver, who says that the butchers will murder us for six cents a pound. I thought if we just wait, the prices will come down.

But all in a moment, it seems, we charge the door, as though we are one woman with a thousand legs. We rip the door from the hinges. We charge and collect the meat. It is liberating, this meat, at the heart of so much, wet in our fingers and underneath our finger nails, soft liver, red blocks of brisket, veal and handfuls of *schmaltz*, chickens so freshly dead the feathers still stand straight out from the skin.

We take the meat and lift it over our heads. We bring it into the street. More meat than I've ever seen, fresh meat, good meat, sweating in the sunset, piled high like the *goyim* burning prayer books, meat as though it is suddenly not meat at all, but the hearts of our enemies. We have captured the meat, there, in the middle of Monroe Street, a big stinking pile. I am thinking of Fanny, I am thinking of Myla. And I am thinking of being robbed of life here in New York.

Mrs. Melkins and Mrs. Grosshaver have brought kerosene. Someone lights the match and there, as the sun has fallen below the tenement roofs, the meat cooks and burns, it snaps and smokes.

I don't know who starts what, because we are so used to the men dancing. But we grasp hands and sing. Around and around, it is a bonfire of cooking meat. Around and around, singing and laughing as the flames make us sweat and the dust makes us sneeze, but around and around, until the paddy wagons arrive.

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