INTRODUCTION

Ah, then 1 had fire in my mouth!
Clara Lemlich UkaineShavelson, looking back on her radical youth

This book has its roots in the memories and stories of my grandmother, Lena Orleck, a sharp-tongued woman with a talent for survival and for dominating everyone she met. A child immigrant from the Ukraine, she was less than ten when she began work at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, that most famous of U.S. garment shops. She claimed to have led a strike when she was seventeen, to have known "the famous anarchist Emma Goldman" and to have marched in the great early-twentieth-century Fifth Avenue suffrage parades.

But in the early 1970s, when I began to read histories of the immigrant labor movement, I found few echoes of my grandmother's life. The books available at that time contained no hint of the exhilarated activism she had described or the exhaustion she must have felt as a single working mother. Typical was Benjamin Stolberg's *Tailor's Progress: The Story of a Famous Union and the Men Who Made It.* This 1944 memoir of the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) contained only brief, sarcastic references to women but showed picture after picture of male union officers. Women were nearly

invisible in such accounts, appearing neither as leaders nor as shop-floor activists. [1]

The past twenty years have seen dramatic growth in the literature on American working-class women. Historians have given us insight into their participation in labor unions and women's union auxiliaries, in shop-floor culture and leisure activities. But we still know very little about these women's private lives. What were their dreams and yearnings? What friendships did they form in the shops and in their neighborhoods? How important were racial, religious, and ethnic ties and conflicts? How did they balance long-term intimate relationships with work and activism? And how did these forces shape their political vision?[2]

As a collective biography of four Jewish immigrant women radicals whose political activities

spanned the first half of this century, this book explores those questions. Fannia Cohn, Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson all came of age amid the women's labor uprisings of the early 1900s and remained active through the 1960s. All four rose from the garment shop floor to positions of influence in the American labor movement. They devoted their lives to the empowerment of working-class women, but they disagreed frequently and fervently about the best strategy for doing so. Using their writings, speeches, letters, and journals, together with oral history interviews, this book explores the tensions between their private lives and their public work, highlighting the links between personal experience and the larger processes of political change.

These four women were certainly not the only working-class women of their generation to devote themselves to political activism. But there were few who remained active for as long as they did, and even fewer who left behind much written evidence of their lives. Scarcity of sources has forced most historians of working-class women to depend on institutional records, social science studies, and journalistic accounts of strikes, boycotts, and protests. I was drawn to Schneiderman, Newman, Lemlich, and Cohn in part because, unlike most women of their class and generation, they wrote a lotboth about the work they did and about their more private, intimate

experiences. These rich and varied writings add a vital, and too often missing, dimension to working-class women's history: their own voices.

My ability to interpret these writings was greatly enhanced by interviews that I did with Pauline Newman herself, as well as with friends, colleagues, and children of the four women. Together these sources gave me a strong sense of immigrant working women in the United States as forceful historical actors. I offer this portrayal in contrast to the myriad accounts of poor and working-class women's livesscholarly, journalistic, and otherwisewhich have described in detail the ways that poor women have been victimized but overlooked the ways they have acted as agents of change. Biographies ascribe historical importance to individual lives. Poor and working-class women are rarely deemed worthy of such credit. One aim of this book, then, is to provide four fully fleshed characters to offset the faceless crowds and bit players who have dominated working-class women's history.

This book has several other purposes as well. The four women's shared origins allow me to examine the cultural roots of U.S. working women's radicalism during the first years of the century. Tracing the divergent paths taken by the four over their long careers, this book also suggests the range and evolution of working-class women's politics between 1900 and the 1960s. Finally, it illustrates through four women's lives and work, the longevity,

vitality, and impact of working-class feminism, a strain of political thought that has received little attention either from labor or women's historians.

Rose Schneiderman, a 4'9" capmaker with flaming red hair and legendary speaking power, came to believe that allying with progressive upper-class women and men was the quickest way to improve the lot of American working women. She remained, through her life, a committed and passionate union organizer. But she placed equal importance on building women's alliances across class lines. That led her into the cross-class New York Women's Trade Union League (NYWTUL), which she would guide and lead for more than forty years.

From a fire-breathing stump speaker, Schneiderman evolved into a lobbyist, a fund-raiser, and an administrator. Over several decades of activism, she moved through a range of cultural and political milieus, from the garment shops of Manhattan's Lower East Side to political offices in Albany and Washington, D.C. She counted Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt among her friends and taught them much of what they knew about working people. She helped shape some of the major pieces of New Deal legislation: the National Labor Relations Act, the Social Security Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act. By the end of her long career, Schneiderman had traveled far from the

culture into which she had been born and raised. As her life changed, so too did her sense of which strategy held the most promise for working women.

Schneiderman's best friend, Pauline Newman, was a die-hard union loyalist described by one male colleague as "capable of smoking a cigar with the best of them." An acerbic woman whose unorthodox tastes ran to cropped hair and tweed jackets, Newman loved the labor movement. She referred to the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union as her "family" and believed that it was, for all its flaws, the best hope for women garment makers. The first woman hired to organize full-time for the ILGWU, Newman remained on the union's paid staff for more than seventy years. But she was a pragmatist who understood that most union leaders were only marginally interested in the concerns of working women; so she agreed with Schneiderman that it was necessary to work for labor legislation and to ally with progressives of all classes. [3]

Newman's career was a balancing act. Torn between the gruff, male-dominated Jewish Socialist milieu of the ILGWU and the more nurturing, "women-centered" Women's Trade Union League, Newman chose, for personal as well as political reasons, to divide her energies between the two. Through the League she and Schneiderman found an alternative family of women who sustained each other, providing emotional as well as

political support. But unlike Schneiderman, Newman never left the trade union movement. She kept one foot in each world.

Thorny, emotional, and thin-skinned, Newman's ILGWU colleague Fannia M. Cohn dreamed of liberating workers through education. Skeptical about legislated change, Cohn believed that only through education would women gain the confidence to challenge gender as well as class inequalities. And only through learning, she argued, would men abandon their prejudices against women. Drawing the support of some of the nation's leading scholars, Cohn became the guiding force for a movement that created a vast network of worker education programs: worker universities, night schools, residential colleges, lecture series, and discussion groups. She believed that such programs would both enrich workers' lives and imbue a new generation of leaders with fresh visions of change.

Cohn occupied a unique place in the labor movement, as she does in this study. Unlike the other three women, she was not born into a poor family. Cohn's relatives were cosmopolitan middle-class urbanites who badly wanted her to attend college and graduate school. Cohn, who had been a teenage revolutionary in Russia, turned them down. She chose instead to take a job making kimonos in a Brooklyn sweatshop. At age twenty Cohn gave up her class privileges to live the life of a worker; and, as converts tend to do, she became an uncompromising and zealous advocate for her chosen cause. Cohn argued against cross-class alliances, placing all her hopes in the

working-class movement. Ironically, the most ardent and devoted supporters of Cohn and her work were middle-class educators and intellectuals. By contrast, many of Cohn's male union colleagues misunderstood and mocked her.

Clara Lemlich Shavelson, a proud maverick, rejected both mainstream unionism and alliances with women of the upper classes. A brilliant street-corner orator, Shavelson never wavered in her commitment to class-based organizing. She was an organizer and agitator first, last, and alwaysfrom her teenage years in the shop to her final days in a California nursing home. Blacklisted by garment manufacturers for her pivotal role in the 1909 shirtwaist strike, then fired from her job as a street-corner suffrage speaker for refusing to curb her politics, Shavelson turned to organizing in her own community. An early member of the Communist Party, Shavelson spent the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s building neighborhood coalitions of housewives to fight for public housing, better education, and price controls on rent and food. Shavelson remained closer to her cultural roots than any of the other four. She married and quit work to raise her children. She made her home in a densely populated Jewish working-class neighborhood that, into the 1940s, retained the flavor of the old Lower East Side. Still, Shavelson was no ordinary Jewish housewife and mother. A woman who ate, drank, and breathed politics, Shavelson was constantly active: she spoke on street corners, organized rent

strikes and citywide boycotts, lobbied in Washington, and led women's Marxist study groups. And at the end of the day, Clara Shavelson brought her politics into the family kitchen. Long before 1960s feminists popularized the idea of personal politics, Clara Shavelson had made her own home into a site of struggle.

Like most working-class women activists, the four women faced tripletiered conflicts: with men of their own class, with women of the middle and upper classes, and with each other. Each grappled with these multiple tensions in her own way, often disagreeing fiercely about matters of political strategy. Sometimes these arguments led to painful and acrimonious splits. Fannia Cohn disapproved of the cross-class women's networks that sustained Schneiderman and Newman. As a result she was unable to really trust or become close to either of them. A more dramatic rift resulted from Clara Shavelson's decision to join the Communist Party. Though she viewed it as a necessary political choice, it destroyed her friendship with former ILGWU colleague Pauline Newman, who blamed the Communists for fragmenting the union during the 1920s. Newman never forgave Shavelson for this shift in loyalties, and Shavelson never apologized.

But if these women's careers reflect the bitter infighting that so often fractured working-class women's solidarity

during the first half of this century they also illustrate the sources of its cohesion. For despite their differences, the four activists shared a set of beliefs rooted in their common experiences as Jewish immigrants, as women, and as workers. Schneiderman, Newman, Cohn, and Shavelson were all born in small towns in Eastern Europe between 1882 and 1891. They all moved to New York City at the turn of the century and went to work in the garment trades. They were all involved in the 1909 Shirtwaist Strike, the largest strike by U.S. women to that time. That strike, often called "the Uprising of the Thirty Thousand," and the decade that followed left its mark on a generation of organizers. Pauline Newman would later call her circle "the 1909 vintage," women whose vision of the world was forged in mass strikesand in fire.

For if the 1909 strike was their lasting inspiration, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was their recurring nightmare. It filled them with an urgency that precluded considerations of ideological purity. Newman and Lemlich had worked at the factory, and all four lost friends in the fire, which killed 146 young workers. Memories of the charred victims haunted them throughout their careers, reminding them that women workers could not wait for change. They adopted what they called the "common sense of working women" in their approach toward social change: whatever route was the quickest, whichever path seemed most promising, they would take. [4]

That pragmatism was matched by a fierce passion and conviction that made them lifelong activists when others of their generation were swept up only briefly in mass protest before retreating to the safety and relative peace of private life. "I'm not a redhead for nothing," Rose Schneiderman liked to say. And, explaining why she loved the soapbox so, Clara Lemlich Shavelson told one interviewer: "Ah! Then I had fire in my mouth!" [5]

Their beliefs were shaped by a deep-seated feminism, though they would never have applied that label to themselves. For they associated feminism with the women of the middle and upper classes, who had the luxury of focusing solely on gender; and they refused to embrace any movement that was blind to class. Their brand of feminism was deeply imbued with class consciousness and a vivid understanding of the harsh realities of industrial labor. They opposed the Equal Rights Amendment, not because they didn't care about equality but because they feared it would endanger laws protecting women workers. If their position on the matter was short-sighted, it was because images of sweatshops and industrial accidents blocked their vision. Memories of the shop floor would always remain central to their politics. For that reason they are best described by a term coined in 1915 by author Mildred Moore. Writing about the Women's Trade Union League, she labeled its members "industrial feminists."[6]

Industrial feminism does not fit neatly into any of the established categories of American feminist history; it contradictsand offers an important corrective tothe popular misconception that feminism was reserved to the middle and upper classes, while working-class, poor, and immigrant women identified more with their class, racial, or ethnic group. The process of political identity formation has never been so simple as that, certainly not in the complex world that early-twentieth-century immigrants found in the United States. Like other working-class women, Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson struggled to forge personal politics that balanced the conflicting pulls of gender, class, ethnicity, and family.

The political philosophy that emergedindustrial feminismwas a hybrid vision of working-class activism that was far broader than the bread-and-butter unionism of American Federation of Labor president Samuel Gompers. "The woman worker wants bread," Rose Schneiderman said in 1911, "but she wants roses too." Shorter hours, higher wages, safer working conditions, medical care, and decent and affordable housing and food were the bread for which industrial feminists fought. Meaningful work, access to education and culture, and egalitarian relationships were the roses. They pursued that dream through four strategies that became the blueprint for working-class women's activism in the twentieth-century United States: trade unionism;

worker education; community organizing around tenant and consumer issues; and lobbyingfor laws regulating wages, hours, factory safety, and food and housing costs.

I use the phrase "working-class women's activism" rather than "labor activism" intentionally. The vision of these four organizers extended beyond the shop floor to the homes and neighborhoods of working-class families. In their view, the home was not isolated from the marketplace, the unions, and the government. They believed that the wives of wage-earning men, organized as tenants, consumers, and voters, could be powerful combatants in the working-class struggle. By tracing the life cycles of four organizers rather than focusing on a particular period, this book charts the continuity of working-class women's activism over sixty years.

Examination of these women's long careers reveals significant unrest in decades when American women and workers are generally thought to have been quiescent: the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s. Because big labor unions were less active during these years than in the 1910s or the 1930s, and because there was no equivalent to the suffrage movement of the 1910s, the tendency has been to think of these decades as politically dormant. But Schneiderman, Newman, Lemlich, and Cohn did not stop organizing, speaking, or writing during these years. Accounts of the

work they did in "quiet" times are filled with vital information about working-class women who continued to protest and strike, scoring victories even without the support of large movements. Studying the sporadic protests of these decades, we can better understand how working-class women held the line against reaction and even made some gains in conservative times.

A closer look at the writings and speeches of Schneiderman, Newman, Lemlich, and Cohn also exposes the roots of late-twentieth-century American movementsthe struggle for women's, tenants', and consumers' rights, and for human rights around the globe. Clara Shavelson's support of Nicaragua's Sandinistas began not in the 1970s but in 1927, when Augusto Sandino first led his army against the U.S. Marines. Schneiderman's 1911 cry for bread and roses in many ways foreshadowed the 1960s slogan "The personal is political."

Biography helps us to unravel the tangled interaction between the personal relationships activists build and the political strategies they pursue. Still, the late-twentieth-century historian must be careful when reading the lives of early-twentieth-century women. This study spans more than six decades, during which conceptions of women's roles, of gender, and of sexuality changed dramatically. It is therefore not surprising that several of the women chronicled here were prickly toward feminist historians

who came to interview them during the last years of their lives.

I certainly got a taste of that when I visited ninety-five-year-old Pauline Newman. She grilled me with the same white-hot intensity that had served her so well as an organizer and lobbyist. She was not even faintly charmed by my stated desire to write about her life and work. She wanted to get a sense of me, my politics, and my motives before she answered any questions. Her discomfort stemmed in part from her coming of age in an era that held very different views on privacy and relationships than we hold now at the end of the century. But it also reflected understandings of politics, trade unionism, and feminism formed in the 1910s rather than the 1970s or the 1980s. One of the purposes of this study is to show how the meanings of those terms have changed with time.

By choosing to devote themselves to activism, Shavelson, Cohn, Newman, and Schneiderman violated the cultural norms prescribed for women of their generation, class, and ethnicity. They sacrificed the respect accorded to wives and mothers in Jewish culture. They lived without the protections that early-twentieth-century U.S. culture promised to respectably feminine women. Choosing careers as political activists left them vulnerable to charges that they were failures as women. From the earliest days of her union career, Rose Schneiderman's mother warned her that activism would destroy her chances of marriage.

Indeed, Schneiderman, Newman, and Cohn never did marry.

Their "singleness" made them outcasts in many ways, but it also forced them to create alternative families and emotional support networks. Even Clara Shavelson struggled to recast the boundaries of conventional family life, for her activism did not fit easily with the traditional roles of wife and mother. These personal experiences colored the women's politics. In their speeches and writings, in the unions, schools, and neighborhood councils they organized, the four activists began to articulate a political vision that called for more than economic reform. They also looked for ways to transform relationships between women, between male and female workers, between husbands and wives.

The life of a political organizer is, by its nature, draining and difficult. No activist could persevere for long without emotional support. When I asked Pauline Newman how she was able to keep the fire of activism going for so long, she told me about her friendsRose Schneiderman, Mary Dreier, Frieda Miller, and Elisabeth Christmanthe women who led the Women's Trade Union League for half a century. Newman, who outlived all the rest, was visibly irritated by the accolades she received at the end of her life. "I did my share," she snapped in a 1984 interview. "That's all." And she would say no more about herself. But she spoke warmly and endlessly about her friends, the

women who walked with her on picket lines, lobbied with her in state legislatures, and strategized around the poker table. [7]

Such friendships were key to these activists' vision of social change. They looked toward a world in which social as well as political and economic relations would be transformed so that even a lowly garment worker attached to a sewing machine from dawn until dark could gain education and culture, express herself creatively, and form meaningful relationships with friends, colleagues, and lovers. The unions, workers' schools, and neighborhood councils they organized became testing grounds for these new kinds of relationships. Within these alternative communities men were not foremen or sexual predators but brothers and comrades. Women were not sexual competitors but friends and sisters.

Were these four activists and their vision representative of American working-class women in the first half of the twentieth century? In some very important ways, yes. They were all immigrants. All but Cohn were forced by economic hardship into factory labor as early as nine years of age. None but Cohn was educated beyond the eighth grade, and she had only a high school degree. They were moved to action by the same hunger for education and shock at factory conditions that drew hundreds of thousands of women workers into unions in the early twentieth century. And, finally, their strong class identification tied them to the average woman worker.

Of course, they themselves were not average. All but Shavelson ultimately held paid positions in government or the labor movement that offered them more comfort and prestige than any factory worker could aspire to. They were all Jewish, and their organizing efforts worked best among Yiddish-speaking Jewish women, though they tried, with varying degrees of success, to reach out to working women of other races and ethnicities. Finally, their commitment to political activism and the strength of their class identification proved stronger than that of many women workers. They were political animals who thrived on struggle and debate. That's how they became leaders.

But as leaders they represented a wide range of working-class women, and their political vision encompassed workers across racial and ethnic lines. Through their contributions to the National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 and the labor laws that followed, they helped transform the relationship between the federal government and workers. By lobbying, demonstrating, and working in state and federal agencies, these women also helped push the U.S. government into the business of regulating the cost and quality of food and housing. The study that follows is, thus, a political as well as a social history of women's activism. [8]

The careers of Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson illustrate the

extent to which working-class women have participated in all facets of U.S. political life. If they or other working-

class women activists have not been given their due as political actors, it is because U.S. political history has been too narrowly defined. This book seeks to expand those boundaries. [9]

Working-class women organized, demonstrated, lobbied, and ran for office during the first half of this century. However, their activism has been discounted as apolitical because many of the issues that moved them to actionrising food prices, poor housing, and inadequate child care and birth controlwere considered "private sphere" matters, removed from the centers of power. And their organizing venuesstreet corners, kitchens, and local food marketsfell outside the lens used by most journalists and political historians, who have focused more on the halls of government than on the hallways of tenements.

Even when working-class women have engaged in inarguably political activitiesvoting, lobbying, demonstrating in state capitals and in Washington, D.C., organizing unions, strikingtheir class and sex have rendered them invisible to journalists and political historians. One goal of this book is simply to make these women's activism visible, to challenge the myth that poor women are capable of spontaneous protest but not of sophisticated or sustained political work. The careers of

Newman, Schneiderman, Lemlich, and Cohn force a rethinking of that stereotype.

Their collective biography sheds new light on a remarkably broad spectrum of issues in twentieth-century U.S. history: the emergence of an immigrant labor movement; women's cross-class political alliances and their role in shaping reform politics; the women's suffrage movement; the crystallization and evolution of the welfare state; the bureaucratization of labor unions; the rise and fall of the Communist Party; the rise of tenant and consumer organizing; and the impact of McCarthyism on women's political activism. It also offers important insights into the truncated development of the U.S. labor movement.

Industrial feminists struggled to create democratic trade unions in which men and women worked together as equals. This book highlights the contributions these women made to their labor unions and the ways that male labor leaders ignored or discounted them. The expansive vision of the 1909 vintage clashed first with the pure and simple unionism of Samuel Gompers and later with the corporate unionism of David Dubinsky, who ran the ILGWU from the 1930s through the 1960s. As losers in a fierce battle for the soul of the garment unions, industrial feminists were largely written out of U.S. labor history.

But as we approach the end of the twentieth century, with the U.S. labor movement having grown largely moribund

and popular opinion of unionism at an all-time low, it is a good time to ponder what happened to American trade

unionism. One answer to that question is contained in the story of a generation of women organizers who fought to keep their unions from becoming what most are now: hierarchical bureaucracies governed by remote and conservative leaders who know and care little about the average worker.

The lives of Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, Fannia Cohn, and Clara Lemlich Shavelson illustrate the complex interactions between personal and political matters, between feminism, trade unionism, and twentieth-century U.S. politics. This book examines those links, reflecting on their significance as keys to a revision of U.S. social and political history. It also tells the story of four remarkable women.

PART ONE.
THE RISE OF A WORKING-CLASS WOMEN'S MOVEMENT, 1882-1909

Prologue.
From the Russian Pale to the Lower East Side: The Cultural Roots of Four Jewish Women's Radicalism

Poverty did not deprive us from finding joy and satisfaction in things of the spirit
Pauline Newman

During the summer of 1907, when New York City was gripped by a severe economic depression, a group of young women workers who had been laid off and were facing eviction took tents and sleeping rolls to the verdant Palisades overlooking the Hudson River. While rising rents and unemployment spread panic among the poor immigrants of Manhattan's Lower East Side, these teenagers lived in a makeshift summer camp, getting work where they could find it, sharing whatever food and drink they could afford, reading, hiking, and gathering around a campfire at night to sing Russian and Yiddish songs. "Thus we avoided paying rent or, worse still, being evicted," Pauline Newman later recalled. "Besides which, we liked living in the openplenty of fresh air, sunshine and the lovely Hudson for which there was no charge." [1]

Away from the clatter of the shops and the filth of Lower East Side streets, the young women talked into the night, refreshed by what Newman called "the cool of the

evening, glorious sunsets, the moon and stars." They shared personal concerns as well as shop-floor gripesworries about love, about the future, and about the pressing problems of housing and food.

Their cliffside village meant more to Newman and her friends than a summer escape. They had created a vibrant alternative to the tenement life they found so oppressive, and their experience of it had set them to wondering. Perhaps the same sense of joy and comradeship could help workers transcend the drudgery of the garment shops and form the basis for effective organizing.[2]

At season's end, they emerged with strengthened bonds and renewed resolve to organize their communities around issues that the recent depression had brought into sharp relief: the need for stabilized rent and food prices, improved working conditions, and housing for the poor. Fired up by their time together, inspired by the Socialist shoptalk they'd

heard at their jobs and by the militant street actions of Lower East Side wives and mothers, this group would soon spearhead the largest rent strike New York City had yet seen. [3]

The spirit of intimacy and solidarity that pervaded the summer of 1907 would inspire much of Pauline Newman's later organizing. Indeed, it became a model for the vision of change that Newman, Fannia Cohn, Rose Schneiderman, and Clara Lemlich shared. The four were moved to political struggle not simply by the need for better wages, hours, and working conditions but also, in Newman's words, by a need to ensure that "poverty did not deprive us from finding joy and satisfaction in things of the spirit."[4]

That summer taught the young women that their politics were not separable from the quality of their personal lives. Sharing troubles to ease hard times, they forged friendships with other working-class women. On the strength of such bonds they would later build effective political institutions: women's unions, worker education programs, and neighborhood housewives' councils. The effect was strongly reciprocal. For just as shared politics strengthened their relationships with friends and lovers, a desire for fuller lives shaped their political vision.

These marginally educated immigrant women wanted to

be more than shop-floor drudges. They wanted lives filled with beautywith friendships, books, art, music, dance, fresh air, and clean water. "A working girl is a human being," Newman would later tell a legislative committee investigating factory conditions, "with a heart, with desires, with aspirations, with ideas and ideals." That image nourished Newman, Schneiderman, Lemlich, and Cohn throughout their long careers. And it focused them on a single goal: to reshape U.S. society so that "working girls" like themselves could fulfill some of their dreams.[5]

The Lessons of the Pale: Sex, Ethnicity, and Class

The four women profiled in this book moved through strikingly different cultural milieus over the course of long careers that would carry them in different directions. Still, they each bore the imprint of the shared culture in which they were raised, first in Eastern Europe and then in New York City. That common experience gave them a particular understanding of gender, class, and ethnicity that shaped their later activism and political thought.

All four were born in the Russian-dominated pale of Jewish settlement during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Rose Schneiderman was born in the Polish village of Saven in 1882; Fannia Cohn was born in Kletsk,

Poland, in 1885; Clara Lemlich was born in the Ukrainian village of Gorodok in 1886; and Pauline Newman was born in Kovno, Lithuania, around 1890. [6]

They were ushered into a world swept by a firestorm of new ideas, where the contrasting but equally messianic visions of orthodox Judaism and revolutionary Socialism competed for young minds. The excitement of living in a revolutionary era imbued these young women with a faith in progress and a belief that political commitment gave life meaning. It also taught them, at an early age, that gender, class, and ethnicity were fundamental social categories and essential building blocks for political change. Being born into turbulence does not in itself make a child into a political activist. But the changes sweeping the Russian Empire toward the end of the nineteenth century shaped the consciousness of a generation of Eastern European Jews who contributed, in wildly disproportionate numbers, to revolutionary movements in Russia and to the labor and radical movements in the United States. Even before the four were born, the tradition-bound world of Eastern European Jewry was tearing asunder. As revolutionary fervor in Russia crested, government officials lashed out at the Jews, stirring ancient religious and social tensions to distract peasants from their burdens. The assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 fueled anti-Semitic edicts, bloody pogroms, and

mass expulsions of Jews from their homes in White Russia and the Ukraine. Whole villages disappeared as hundreds of thousands of Jews wandered the countryside in search of new homes.[7]

At the same time, rapid industrialization was robbing Jewish artisans and innkeepers of their traditional livelihoods, leaving a large percentage of the population on the brink of starvation.[8]Tens of thousands of young people left small towns to find work in the garment factories of Kiev, Odessa, Minsk, and Vilna. There they were exposed to the new ideas of Socialism, Zionism, Russian revolutionary populism, and Yiddish cultural nationalism then being debated all over Eastern Europe. Many provincial Jews were radicalized in this way, and when they brought their visions of change back to the Jewish small towns, their younger brothers and sisters were radicalized as well.[9]

Small towns closed to the world for centuries were suddenly opened to Western and urban influences. Sons and daughters were tantalized by tastes of secular knowledge, literature, art, and science. Carried away by visions of revolution, many turned their backs on tradition and joined struggles for social and political change. It was into this turbulent atmosphere that Newman, Schneiderman, Cohn, and Lemlich were born.[10]

The four were exposed to Marxist ideas at a tender age. As Eastern Europe shifted uneasily from feudalism to

capitalism in the latter part of the nineteenth century, class analysis became part of the common parlance of young

people in Jewish towns and villages. "Behind every other volume of Talmud in those years, there was a volume of Marx," one union organizer recalled of his small Polish town. Clara Lemlich grew up on revolutionary tracts and songs; Fannia Cohn considered herself a committed Socialist by the age of sixteen. [11]

Their awareness of ethnicity was even more keen. As Jews in Eastern Europe, the four learned young that ethnic identity was a double-edged sword. It was a source of strength and solace in their bitterly poor communities, but it also enabled Tsarist authorities to single Jews out and sow seeds of suspicion among their peasant neighbors. Jews living under Russian rule were made painfully aware of their status as permanent "others" in the land where they had lived for centuries.

Clara Lemlich's family lived not far from Kishinev, where in 1903 the Tsar's government openly and unabashedly directed an orgy of anti-Jewish violence that shocked the world. After the massacre, in which scores were killed and hundreds gravely injured, young Clara listened as her elders debated whether to stay and form Jewish self-defense groups or leave Russia for good. In cosmopolitan Minsk, where she had gone to study, Fannia Cohn watched with dismay as the revolutionary populist organization she had joined began mouthing the same anti-Semitic

conspiracy theories spewed by the government they despised. Frustration turned to fear when her brother was almost killed in yet another pogrom.[12]

Pauline Newman, even as a child, was anxious about rising anti-Semitism in Russia and across Europe. Tension grew in her household as her father read daily accounts of the treason trials of Major Alfred Dreyfus, a French Jew whose court-martial and Devil's Island imprisonment laid bare French anti-Semitism. After Zionist visionary Theodor Herzl visited their village, Newman's older sisters believed they had found the answer. Jews would never be safe, young Pauline heard them argue, until they created their own Jewish state. She never felt a pull to Palestine, but the memory of anti-Semitism colored her work with women workers of other races and ethnicities.[13]

Sex was just as distinct a dividing line as class and ethnicity. Eastern European Jews had observed a strict sexual division of labor for more than a thousand years. But by the late nineteenth century, as political and economic upheaval jolted long-accepted ways of thinking, sex roles too were being questioned. And so the four girls' understandings of gender were informed both by traditional Jewish conceptions of womanhood and by the challenges issued by new political movements.

In traditional Jewish society, mothers were also entrepreneurs. Clara Lemlich, Pauline Newman, and Rose

Schneiderman were all raised by mothers who were skilled businesswomen. Jewish mothers' success in this role grew

out of and reinforced a belief that women were innately suited to competition in the economic sphere. 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.

These women, like their American counterparts, were responsible for the home, but that responsibility did not bind them to it. Like women in many preindustrial societies, they often peddled food and wares from town to town and traveled to market to support their families. All contributed financially to their family's upkeep; some were the sole breadwinners. [14]

Clara Lemlich's mother ran a small grocery store. Pauline Newman's mother provided most of the family income by buying fruit from peasants in the countryside and selling it at the town marketplace. Pauline's older sisters worked as seamstresses in a dress shop. And Rose Schneiderman's mother did a little bit of everything: she sewed for neighbors, baked ritual breads and cakes for local weddings, treated the sick with homemade herbal medicines, and tended bar in a nearby saloon when the proprietor was too drunk to do it herself. [15]

But as much as women's entrepreneurship was respected, a far higher premium was placed on study and prayer. And

that, religious tradition dictated, could be performed only by men. A woman was expected to be pious, to read the vernacular Yiddishrather than ancient Hebrewtranslation of the Bible, and perhaps to attend women's services at the synagogue. But her primary religious role was as keeper of the home. Formal religious education was offered only to males. A young boy began studying in Hebrew, the language of male religious ritual and scholarship, at the age of three or four and continued at least until his thirteenth birthday. Some girls were given a year to study religious texts translated into Yiddish. The majority received no formal education at all.[16]

Years later, many Jewish women immigrants would describe a lingering sense of deprivation and desire for the education lavished on their brothers. Study, the rabbis had told their brothers, was an exalted process that would bring liberation. Ironically, many Jewish men of that generation remembered their years in *kheydr* (religious school) as an exercise in rote memorization. But it was easy for their sisters to feel jealous with their noses pressed against the glass.

They shared with the young men of their generation a longing for release from the bonds of small-town isolation and religious insularity. But what differentiated themand would continue to set them apart from their male counterparts in the Jewish immigrant labor movement in the United States

was that they had to fight for every scrap of education they received. For this reason, they began to see education as the key to independence from all masters.

The link between education and liberation was reinforced for them when, as young girls, they heard Zionist, Yiddishist, and Socialist speakers attack Jewish religious education and gender roles as old-fashioned, narrow, and provincial. The most costly aspect of Jewish backwardness, many speakers argued, was the belief that women did not need to beindeed, should not beeducated. If Russian Jews were mired in poverty and ignorance it was because they refused to educate their women. [17]

Many Jewish parents, like the Lemlichs, resisted the kinds of changes called for by urban intellectuals. They feared that once their daughters were exposed to a broader world they would be unable to control them. Worried that young women would abandon religious traditions entirely, anxious elders forbade them to learn Russianthe language of the oppressoror attend lectures given by Socialists and Zionists. More than a few Jewish daughters, Lemlich among them, got their first taste of rebellion by defying their parents' injunctions against studying the newest political theories.

But other small-town Jewish parents, including those of Newman, Schneiderman, and Cohn, were moved by

"enlightenment" arguments, and by their daughters' entreaties, to send them to school. All three saw their parents buck centuries of convention, fighting both religious and secular authorities to educate them. Schneiderman, Newman, Cohn, and Lemlich learned an enduring lesson in their quests for education: those in power limit access to education as a way of preventing change. That realization forever politicized education in their minds.[18]

"Though it was somewhat unusual for girls to study," Rose Schneiderman later recalled, "Mother was determined that I learn Hebrew so I could read and understand the prayers recited at home and in the synagogue." When they moved from the small town of Saven to the city of Khelm, Deborah and Samuel Schneiderman fought successfully to get Rose into a public school, despite quotas limiting the number of Jews who could attend. There she learned to read, write, and speak Russian. Schneiderman's knowledge of Hebrew and Russian made her an educated woman by her mother's standards. But she would always hunger for more, and her desire to emigrate to the United States was linked to her dream of getting a free, public school education.[19]

Pauline Newman's parents helped their daughter get the education she wanted so badly. When the one public school in Kovno denied Pauline entry because her family was Jewish and poor, the bookish child begged the local

rabbi to let her attend the all-boy religious school. He refused. But after much lobbying, Pauline, a born negotiator, won his permission to attend Sunday school, where she learned Hebrew. And when her father was hired to teach Talmud to the sons of several wealthy townsmen, he gave eight-year-old Pauline the rare opportunity to sit in on the classes. The arrangement fueled much gossip in the town. "My father laughed at the taunts and kept me in the class," Pauline recalled proudly. [20]

But to her father's chagrin, religious education turned his youngest daughter into even more of a rebel, for Pauline soon concluded that she could not accept the restrictions Jewish law placed on women. "I remember ... asking my father why the synagogue had two sections-one for men, the other for women-since they all came to worship the same God. The answer my father gave me was too complicated for my young mind to understand. But in later years I often wondered whether this observation conditioned me to resent and to fight all discriminations based on sex. I think it did."[21]A little taste of education whetted the young girl's appetite for more. "Desire . . . to learn, to understand," she wrote later, "became the dominant force in my life." She haunted the small local library, beginning a process of self-education that she would continue for the rest of her life.

Newman found a model for her later attempts at peer education in a Zionist study group formed by her sisters and their friends. Listening to their discussions did not make Newman a Zionist. But she was impressed by the way that studying together helped unite her sisters' friends on behalf of a cause. Remembering the bond that shared study could create, she would later use study groups as a jumping-off point for union organizing.[22]

Clara Lemlich had to struggle against parents, religious authorities, and state authorities to get her education. Like most girls she was taught Yiddish but was offered no further Jewish schooling. Her parents were willing to send her to public school, but they knew that Gorodok's only school was closed to Jews. In protest, they banned the Russian language from their house, which only served to inflame their daughter's passion for Russian culture. Defying her parents, the headstrong child befriended non-Jewish peasant children, who taught her Russian folk songs. She taught those songs to older Jewish girls; in exchange, they taught her how to read Russian and lent her their volumes of Tolstoi, Gorky, and Turgenev.[23]

Before she was in her teens, Lemlich was sewing buttonholes on shirts to pay for her reading habit. Already fluent in written Yiddish, she fattened her book fund by writing letters for illiterate mothers to send to their children in America. When her father found a cache of her

books hidden beneath a meat pan in the kitchen, he burned the whole lot, and Clara had to start her

collection again from scratch. She began storing her books in the attic, where she would perch on a bare beam to read. One Sabbath afternoon, while her family dozed, she was discovered by a neighbor. Ten-year-old Clara burst into tears, inconsolable until he assured her that he would keep her secret.

The neighbor did more than that. He lent her readings from his own collection, including revolutionary, anti-Tsarist pamphlets that might have brought her parents prison time if they had been found. The tracts of her book-lending neighbor, the only adult in town who encouraged her education, left their mark. By 1903, when the Kishinev pogrom convinced her family that it was time to leave the Ukraine, sixteen-year-old Clara was committed to the Russian revolutionary movement. Clara came to America believing that only revolutionary thought could truly free the mind. It was a belief she would carry for the rest of her life. [24]

Fannia Cohn was also radicalized through education, but not because she had to fight her parents to get it. Cohn's family members, she later said, "distinguished themselves with culture, wealth, and humor." They were cosmopolitans who prided themselves on their progressive views in terms of both politics and treatment of their daughters. In the early twentieth century, Jewish merchant

families like the Cohns often educated their daughters as a sign of their enlightenment and sophistication. Cohn was sent to a private school, where she learned to read and write Russian as well as Yiddish. Her parents sought to preserve their status by educating their children to become pharmacists. All but Fannia did.[25]

Fannia's decision to pursue learning for its own sake rather than for a vocation was perhaps sparked by the unfulfilled desire of her mother, who had been denied the opportunity for advanced study because she was a woman. Cohn recalled "being raised by my mother on books" and promising her mother that "I would continue my studies . . . as my mother wanted her children to be no less than professors."[26]

As her mother hoped, Cohn did make education her life's work. But her mother never imagined that study would lead her intense and emotional daughter where it did. For Cohn, as for Lemlich, studying Russian was the first step toward involvement in the Russian revolutionary movement. Much to her family's dismay, Cohn grew deeply enamored of the ideas of populist revolutionaries who idealized, and attempted to mobilize, Russian peasants and workers.

In 1901, at the age of sixteen, Cohn joined the Minsk branch of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, an underground organization that sought to win popular support and foment revolution by assassinating

particularly hated government officials. Despite danger of imprisonment, she remained in the organization

for three years. But in 1904, after one brother was nearly killed in a pogrom, Cohn decided to emigrate to the United States. Swallowing her revolutionary pride, she accepted the steamship tickets sent by wealthy cousins in New York. [27]

Cohn's strident ethos quickly created tensions with her upwardly mobile family. "When I arrived in New York," she later told a friend, "my cousin's husband suggested that I continue my education and he would finance it.... I proudly rejected this offer." Cohn claimed that taking money from her cousin would have "conflicted with my sense of independence. Coming as I did from a revolutionary background I was eager to be with the people." A few years later, her brother invited her to join the family's thriving wholesale drug business, but she declined.

Cohn had made up her mind to give up, once and for all, the comfortable trappings of middle-class life. "I was convinced that to voice the grievances, the hopes and aspirations of the workers, one must share in their experiences." Fannia Cohn chose to look for work in a garment shop. That choice would soon bring her together with other militant young garment workers, including Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman, and Clara Lemlich.[28]

The four emigrated as part of the mass movement that brought two million Jews from Eastern Europe to the United States between 1881 and 1924. Schneiderman came in 1890, Newman in 1901, Lemlich in 1903, and Cohn in 1904. Like most of their compatriots, they arrived in New York Harbor and settled on Manhattan's Lower East Side, the largest settlement of Eastern European Jews in the United States.[29]The newcomers were tantalized by the exciting diversions that New York life promised: libraries, theater, music, department stores, and amusement parks. But they had neither time nor money to indulge in such pleasures, for all of them soon found themselves laboring long hours to support their families.

Not long after arriving in New York, ten-year-old Pauline Newman succumbed to despair as she walked home from work through the teeming streets of the Lower East Side. She had worked from dawn to dark and was exhausted. As she passed little children playing in garbage and noted the uniformly "tired and drab" expressions on the faces of the working men and women shuffling home, an overwhelming sadness struck her. "Dear God," she recalled whispering to herself, "Will this ever be different?"[30]But that same grim environment offered Newman, Schneiderman, Lemlich, and Cohn

glimpses of two new movements for change: Socialist trade unionism, which they would learn about as adolescents on the shop floor, and housewives' food and rent protests, which they watched take shape in the bustling food markets and tenements of the Lower East Side.

Growing up female in the culturally rich and politically charged community that Eastern European immigrant Jews created on the Lower East Side in the early 1900s, the four developed an understanding of class distinctly different from that of their brothers. Older workers, Socialist newspapers, and street-corner speakers taught them the gospel of trade unions. But simultaneously, their mothers taught them that the quality of working-class life was not solely determined by the wages that unionized workers could win at the bargaining table. It rested as well on mothers' entrepreneurial skills and their successful campaigns to block sharp increases in housing and food costs.

Jewish women played as central a role economically in the American ghetto as they had in the shtetls and cities of Eastern Europe. Daughters worked in garment shops with their brothers and fathers, while mothers engaged in a wide range of money-making enterprises. Some Jewish wives worked alongside their husbands in "mom and pop"

stores; others ran their own stores. Many Jewish wives became peddlers, dragging their children along with the cart. And almost all of them rented out space in their apartments to boarders, while cooking, washing, and ironing for everyone in the house. [31]

Most immigrant Jewish families lived on the edge. For widows like Mrs. Newman and Mrs. Schneiderman, the boarder's small contribution was all that stood between their families and eviction. Rose Schneiderman's mother, Deborah, struggled for years after her husband died of influenza in 1892, leaving her with three small children and another on the way The family survived for a while on a daily basket of food sent by United Hebrew Charities. But it was not enough. Reluctantly, Deborah Schneiderman sent her two sons to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum for temporary care. Only the arrival of a boarder fresh from Poland, Rose later recalled, postponed the further breakup of her family: "After Father died, we rented out the living room of our apartment to a young man, a tailor who worked at home, and we kept the bedroom and the kitchen. As long as he stayed, we were able to pay the rent of seven dollars a month." [32]

Deborah Schneiderman supplemented the boarder's contribution by working odd jobs at night, but her meager income was not enough to feed her two daughters. Soon she was forced to send Rose and her sister Jane to the orphanage as well. It took her a year to save the money to

bring them home again. She would not have enough to retrieve her sons for several more years.

Despite the family's poverty, Deborah Schneiderman kept Rose in school as long as she could, for she knew how desperately her elder daughter wanted an

education. But just as gender and ethnicity had limited Schneiderman's education in Poland, class would thwart her hopes in America. Deborah worked a night job while Rose took care of her baby sister. But she was laid off when Rose was still in eighth grade, and she was unable to find another night job.

So the thirteen-year-old Rose was forced to leave school and find work in a department store. She never got over it. Throughout her long career, Schneiderman felt embarrassed about her limited schooling. From that time forward Rose would be the prime support of her family, a source of some pride. But memories of the orphanage and of being forced to leave school stayed with Rose all her life; and those memories were bitter reminders that, for working women, "women's issues" like child care were hardly peripheral. [33]

Pauline Newman, too, was raised by a single mother. Soon after she was widowed in 1900, Mrs. Newman sailed to New York City with her three daughters; her brother and son had already set up homes there. Nine-year-old Pauline felt uprooted. Decades later, she could still recall the pain she felt on leaving "the lovely land" of her childhood, and her sadness at leaving her father alone "in the ground."

The Newmans arrived in New York with only the clothes on their backs, having become separated from their

belongings at Ellis Island. Though Pauline had hoped to continue her education, she and her sisters were immediately sent out to work. Pauline assembled hairbrushes, while her sisters found work as seamstresses, the trade they had learned in Lithuania. Mrs. Newman supplemented her daughters' earnings by "taking in washing."[34]

Though Clara Lemlich's father was still alive and able-bodied in 1903, when the family landed in New York, sixteen-year-old Clara found a job more easily than he did. This was common. Even in shops that produced expensive, high-fashion clothing, employers preferred to hire young girls rather than their more highly skilled elders. Girls accepted lower pay and, employers believed, were less likely to be drawn into labor organizing than boys and grown men. Clara found a job almost immediately, sewing "very beautiful, very costly, very delicate" dresses at a fraction of the wage her father would have earned for the same work.[35]

A 1909 study by settlement house worker Louise More indicated that even in intact two-parent families like Lemlich's, children's earnings were critical to the family's survival. More's study also found that wage-earners handed their paychecks over to the mother, who disbursed the family income on rent, clothes, and food. Watching their mothers battle to improve their families' standard of living, it was clear to working daughters like

Schneiderman, Newman, and Lemlich that their homes were not isolated from market forces that determined wages, rents, and food prices. Their mothers saw their homes as

directly linked to the larger economy and fought to keep them safe from deprivation. [36]

During the first decade of the twentieth century, Jewish mothers dramatically illustrated their awareness of that link. Five times between 1902 and 1908, when sudden increases in staple commodity prices or housing costs stretched their budgets farther than they could go, immigrant mothers on the Lower East Side and in other Jewish ghettos organized and fought back. Building on informal neighborhood networks, they picketed, boycotted, and marched in protest.

These housewives' predilection for protest was nourished by the unique political culture of Eastern European immigrant Jews. The excitement over new ideas then sweeping Eastern Europe was intensified on the Lower East Side, where Jews from countless villages, towns, and cities lived together in what was, with the possible exception of Beijing, the most densely populated square mile on earth. Lower East Side political organizations and labor unions played an important role in fomenting protest. Jewish immigrant mothers were politically transformed by their husbands, sons, and daughters, who came home from the shops speaking the language of Socialism and trade unionism.[37]

These new ideas were reinforced by what they read in the

daily papers. Abraham *Cahan's Jewish Daily Forward,* the favorite paper of New York's Jewish immigrants, offered a daily dose of brass-tacks Socialism and trade union theory. And the message was not aimed solely at men. Yiddish newspapers made a particular effort to appeal to women: editors knew that women made up a sizable part of their readership, so they provided entertainment, poetry, and fictionoften by women writersas well as sympathetic coverage of both the labor movement and housewives' activism.[38]

The *Forward* provided Newman's first exposure to trade unionism. "One day while I was standing and watching the multitude, I saw a small boy selling ... *the Jewish Daily Forward....* The first piece that claimed my attention was a story about working men and women of the east sidethe conditions under which they worked and livedthe long hours, the terribly low wages, the filthy tenements. All this and more interested me so much that I looked forward to the next day when I could again buy the *Forward."* In its pages, Newman was introduced to the works of Yiddish poets and political theorists, male and female. Soon her aspiration was to write for the *Forward;* before she was eighteen, she was a regular contributor. Newman's early success at publishing thrilled her, and she began to harbor hopes of one day becoming a professional writer. Though her progression from reader to writer was atypi-

cal, her devotion to the *Forward was* not. Most Jewish immigrant New Yorkers of her day were nourished on the same daily diet of Socialist fundamentals. [39]

Jewish religious leaders were, at most, lukewarm to Socialism. But in the Jewish Socialism of the time there was a cross-fertilization of Biblical and Marxist imagery that made even men and women from religious homes feel comfortable with Socialist ideas and activism. Immigrant Jewish Socialism had its own language and symbols, a mixture of the ancient prophets and nineteenth-century revolutionaries. Jewish Socialists used Biblical allusions, says former organizer Sidney Jonas, to appeal to "Jewish workers who were deeply imbued with an Old Testament sense of social justice." The Book of Isaiah, with its warnings to the rich and haughty and its prophecies of judgment and cleansing, was particularly popular.[40]

That potent amalgam of Isaiah and Marx animated the speeches of Jewish mothers who organized the kosher meat boycotts and rent strikes that rocked New York's ghettos between 1902 and 1910. These housewives referred to themselves as "strikers" and to those who broke their boycotts as "scabs." They lashed out at the middlemen who profited by selling meat at high prices while poor children went hungry. And they promised just retribution.

But these women did not simply echo the principles they had learned from rabbis, newspaper writers, husbands, and children. They contributed a layer to immigrant working-class discourse that arose out of their own experience as wage-earners, entrepreneurs, and money managers. Feeling neither confused nor helpless, they saw and articulated a relationship between production and consumption that mainstream Socialist theory either ignored or rejected outright. They saw a power in organized consumers that paralleled that of organized producers. Daughters like Clara Lemlich would later try to tap that power by mobilizing women consumers as a wing of the working-class movement.[41]

One housewife leader of the era, Cecilia Schwartz, clearly articulated Jewish women's sense that their homes were directly affected by market forces. In a speech made from her apartment window to a crowd of women who stood below complaining about meat prices, she urged the women to boycott meat. Displaying her mastery of political economy, she rallied her troops: "If we don't buy from the butchers, they won't be able to buy from the wholesale dealers. The result will be that the wholesalers will find themselves with a lot of meat on their hands. They will then sell cheap to our butchers and we will get our meat cheap."[42]

There is evidence of similar activity by Jews dating back to late-eighteenth century Poland. The first leader of the

Hasidic movement, Israel Baal Shem Tov, won much of his early support by criticizing kosher butchers for charging

exorbitant prices. Rural Polish Jews 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. [43]

But there the parallels end, for there was no precedent for the scale and duration of the food protests that began in the early 1900s and continued for the next fifty years. When preindustrial Eastern European Jewish values collided with the principles of trade unionism, the result was a new political strategy among housewives that was as volatile as it was effective. The tinderbox atmosphere on the Lower East Side was noted by a *New York Times* reporter, who commented during a 1908 women's meat boycott that "when East Siders don't like something they strike."[44]

The first of these women's food protests began spontaneously in May 1902, when the price of kosher meat rose suddenly by 50 percent. Calling for a boycott of kosher meat, thousands of women marched through the streets of the Lower East Side, entered kosher butcher shops, and threw the meat into the streets. The *New York Times* called it a "riot." Police arrested seventy women and

fifteen men and charged them with disorderly conduct. A strike support rally attracted twenty thousand people.[45]

Four days later, Jewish women in Brooklyn and Harlem joined the boycott. In the Williamsburg and Brownsville sections of Brooklyn, four hundred women "patrolled" butcher shops to make sure no one purchased meat. Committees of women visited labor unions, benevolent societies, and fraternal lodges to lobby for the establishment of cooperative meat stores. Two such stores were established and lasted for many years after the strike ended. More immediately, the price of kosher meat was rolled back to within two cents of the prestrike cost.[46]

Though the immigrant housewives may not have been looking to join a movement, the success of the 1902 boycott made them aware that community organizing was a powerful tool. Strikes and boycotts by their nature enhance a sense of group consciousness. 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.[47]

That sense of shared responsibility extended beyond food prices to women's other traditional responsibilityproviding shelter. Working-class families commonly responded to rent increases by moving. Rose Schneiderman recalls moving three or four times a year: "It was easier for the poor to move than to pay rent. When you moved into a

new place, you always paid a month's rent and you got a concession of a month or six weeks. After that was all used up, if

you had the money to pay the next month's rent you stayed on. If not, you moved again." [48]

By 1904 moving was no longer an option. Construction of the Williamsburg Bridge, several parks, and a school had displaced thousands of families and created a housing shortage on the Lower East Side. With no place to go, several hundred East Side mothers decided to stay and fight. They urged tenants to "fight the landlord as they had the czar" by withholding their rents to protest rent increases. Two thousand tenants responded. Within a month local landlords rolled rents back to prestrike levels.[49]

Three years later, tenants on the Lower East Side launched a rent strike that dwarfed all previous subsistence protests. The Depression of 1907 had left an estimated hundred thousand people unemployed on the Lower East Side and their families unable to pay rent. That was the summer Pauline Newman and a group of her co-workers from the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory created a utopian outpost for three months on the Palisades. By the time they returned to their homes and jobs in September, they had decided to fight against evictions and for rent controls.

After five years on the shop floor, sixteen-year-old Pauline Newman had seen enough misery and developed enough political sophistication that she hatched an ambitious plan:

to build a rent strike using both women's neighborhood and shop-floor networks. The result was the best organized of the early-twentieth-century housewives' actions, and the largest rent strike New York had ever seen. Newman and her friends began by organizing their peers. By late fall they had assembled a band of four hundred self-described "self-supporting women" like themselves, committed to rolling back rents. These young women soon found a sea of willing converts: the mothers of the Lower East Side.[50]

The young garment workers, who could not work the neighborhood during the day, organized committees of housewives who could. The housewives canvassed from tenement to tenement and convinced the residents to strike for a one- to two-dollar reduction in monthly rents. Assured of legal support by the Socialist Party, the young women promised tenants that they would be represented in court if their landlords tried to evict them. Then, on December 26, 1907, they called for a hundred thousand residents of the Lower East Side to ring in the New Year with a rent strike.

The following day the *New York Times* profiled the group's voluble young leader:

> The rent war begun yesterday on the Lower East Side is led by a frail looking woman who is hailed throughout the Grand Street section as the east side

> Joan of Arc .... The young woman who is recognized as the real leader of the movement is Pauline Newman, who is employed in a shirtwaist factory on Grand Street. Although most of her daylight hours are spent in the shop, she has for a week or more devoted six hours out of twenty-four to visiting the tenements and arousing the interests of the dwellers there. She has organized a band of four hundred women, all of whom earn their own living, whose duty it is to promulgate the doctrine of lower rents. 51

Newman and her "band of four hundred" fell short of their dream of mobilizing 100,000. Still, by year's end 10,000 familiesapproximately 50,000 peoplehad pledged not to pay their rents on January 1. Striking tenants sent the following message to their landlords. (Note the language of the form letter; women, not men, communicated with the landlords.) "We the tenants of _____ having realized our present misery came to the following conclusions. Whereas the present industrial depression has affected us most severely and whereas our husbands are out of work and cannot earn a living, and whereas the rent for the last two years has risen skywards so that even in the so called days of prosperity the rent was a heavy burden upon us. Therefore we resolve to demand of you to decrease the rent immediately."[52]

The rent strike, described by the *New York Times* as "greater than any that has occurred in this city before," had mixed success. By January 7, landlords had won three-day eviction orders for six thousand families. They either paid

or moved. Two days later the strike was over. However, according to organizers, some two thousand families had their rents reduced. Most important, the strike attracted the attention of Lillian Wald and Mary Simkovitch, leading figures in the settlement house movement. They called for capping Lower East Side rents at 30 percent of a family's monthly income. The ceiling was not established, but the idea of rent control entered New York political discourse and in the 1930s became law.[53]

Newman, Schneiderman, Cohn and, above all, Clara Lemlich would work to keep community-based women's protest alive in the decades to come. All four women would later try, with varying degrees of success, to build permanent organizations of working-class housewives. All four would argue that the working-class movement must include not only factory workers but also housewives. With a heady mix of ideology gleaned from Isaiah, Marx, and their mothers, immigrant Jewish women in the first decade of the twentieth century laid the groundwork for working-class women's activism for the next fifty years. Rose Schneiderman, Fannia Cohn, Clara Lemlich, and Pauline Newman would sustain and adapt those traditions over their long careers.