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JEWISH PROSTITUTION AND TRAFFICKING IN WOMEN

Jewish trafficking in women did not begin in a vacuum. Jews joined the crime wave that swept over East European Jewish society and spread throughout the world.

Prostitution and international trafficking in women, which were among the gravest plagues in Western society from the end of the nineteenth century on, did not bypass Jewish society, which had been undergoing enormous changes since the 1880s.

The migration from town to city and the increase in poverty contributed to the development of prostitution among Jews.

In most big cities that contained a large, poor population of Jews (Warsaw, Odessa, Vilna, Cracow, Budapest and Vienna, for example), there were concentrations of Jewish prostitutes working in brothels for Jewish pimps.

It was virtually impossible to work as a prostitute in small towns and shtetls where everyone knew everybody else and prostitutes were ostracized.

In large cities, prostitution took place in certain sections known to be controlled by the Jewish underworld, to which the authorities turned a blind eye.

Between 1872 and 1890 Jewish women constituted seventeen to twenty-three percent of all Warsaw's registered prostitutes, who in 1890 numbered 962.

At the time, the Jewish population (c. 300,000) constituted one-third of the city's total population (Bristow 55). In 1908, the American consul in Odessa reported that "All the business of prostitution in the city is in the hands of the Jews" (idem. 56).

In Minsk in 1910, two hundred and twenty-six women were registered as prostitutes, sixty-seven of whom were Jews. On the other hand, it was reported that half the prostitutes hospitalized for venereal disease in the city were Jews (idem. 64).

In addition to the general causes of prostitution, such as economic distress, loss of parental authority and the weakening of the family as a result of poverty, two additional factors were specific to Jews: antisemitic persecution and the restrictions

placed on Jews.
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These caused overcrowding, poverty and unemployment, creating a fertile environment for crime among unemployed men, while a number of young Jewish women found refuge from economic distress by working as prostitutes.

In Russia where Jews were generally permitted to live only in restricted areas (the Pale of Settlement), a Jewish woman registered as a prostitute could receive a permit to remain in a city such as St. Petersburg.

Paradoxically, it was this badge of shame which allowed poor Jewish women an existence beyond hunger and poverty. Some of the registered Jewish prostitutes, however, were not destitute but sought permits to live in St. Petersburg or Moscow in order to acquire higher education.

However, the increase in prostitution among Jews stemmed mainly from the large waves of migration that occurred among Jews in Eastern Europe, beginning in 1880.

Over approximately sixty years, millions of Jews endured wandering, hardship, separation of families, loss of direction and a break in tradition. ■■■■

JEWISH SEX TRAFFICKERS

Since unscrupulous Jews active in the underworld were familiar with the customs and traditions of Jewish society, they knew how to exploit the innocence of young Jewish girls.

The inferior status of Jewish women combined with Jewish religious law to render them especially vulnerable and contributed to their falling into the hands of sex traffickers.

Sex trafficking, which developed in the surrounding society, drew Jewish criminals into profitable sex deals. Several contented themselves with local deals while others exported prostitution to distant lands.

While many young women were brought into prostitution without their knowledge, some worked as prostitutes in their home towns and hoped to improve their fortunes in richer countries.

Most of these willing prostitutes also fell victim to the false promises of their pimps, finding themselves in an inferior position in a foreign country, not knowing the language and completely dependent on their pimps because of the debts they had accumulated.

To entice their victims, Jewish sex traffickers used newspaper advertisements for jobs, the promise of an immigration certificate and marriage proposals, all the while taking advantage of the parents' naiveté and poverty.

They knew, for example, that a Jewish wedding requires two witnesses and a ring and that a rabbi is not necessary. The "secret wedding ceremony" became one of the methods for bringing Jewish women into prostitution.

One trafficker managed to marry a record twelve women and send them into prostitution (Bristow 104).

The second evil was the problem of agunot (anchored wives). Women whose husbands died without witnesses or went missing without leaving a writ of divorce became agunot—with no status, helpless and vulnerable to trafficking.

Many husbands who went on journeys without their wives in order to try their luck in America “forgot” to send their wives any sign of life. Others never returned from war, but their deaths could not be proven.

In 1929 the World Jewish Women’s Congress in Hamburg, Germany, reporting on twenty-five thousand agunot in greater Poland alone, described the situation as the catastrophe of Eastern European Jews (JTA Bulletin, June 26, 1929).

Before World War I, the National Desertion Bureau was established in New York to search for delinquent husbands.

Jewish sex traffickers were prominent in major transit points from Europe to Latin America such as Berlin, London and Hamburg. In the latter, for example, of four hundred and two sex traffickers caught by police in 1912, two hundred and seventy-one were Jewish (Bristow 52–53).

Although the facts speak for themselves, there was also a tendency to exaggerate the percentage of Jewish sex traffickers and Jewish prostitutes because it was easier to condemn an entire group, especially if they were Jews.

At a time when antisemitism was increasing throughout the world, reports of the involvement of so many Jews in such shady dealings caused a great deal of damage to the image of Jews and were used by antisemites. ■■■■

Jewish communities found it difficult to deal with this embarrassing problem and for a long time ignored it, until newspaper reports forced them to confront it. ■■■■#JewishMethod

The problem of prostitution among Jews began in Eastern European countries and spread throughout most of the world in which trafficking in women existed.

The Jewish prostitution networks recruited young women in Eastern Europe and brought them via transit stations across Europe to various destinations throughout the world.

Preferred destinations were South America (Buenos Aires , São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro), the United States (New York, Chicago, Philadelphia), South Africa, Turkey (Constantinople) and Egypt.

In addition to their moral outrage over the phenomenon itself, the local Jewish communities suffered greatly from the stigma that resulted from Jewish involvement in prostitution. The chief method they used to fight traffickers and prostitutes was ostracism.

The “impure ones,” as they were termed, were not permitted entry into the community’s synagogues or burial in its cemeteries. In Buenos Aires, traffickers in women formed their own society, Zwi Migdal, which established its own synagogues and cemeteries.

Beginning in 1910, after years of apathy and denial, most important Jewish organizations established committees against “white slavery,” sending representatives to international conferences on the topic.

The severity of the situation and the official statistics of Jews involved in criminal activity made it impossible to continue to ignore the issue.

Yet before the Jewish organizations were forced to intervene, well-to-do Jewish women did a great deal to convince Jewish community leaders of the severity of the problem.

They prepared the ground, organizing an infrastructure of wide-scale activity to protect immigrant Jewish women and young girls from the dangers that lay in wait for them.

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