

Caftens, Kurvehs, and Stille Chuppahs:  
Jewish Sex Workers and their Opponents in Buenos Aires, 1890-1930

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*“I wanted to ask what your business is. What exactly do you deal in?”  
The man from Buenos Aires: “What do I deal in? Ha, ha!  
Not in Hanukkah candles, my friend, not in Hanukkah candles!”<sup>1</sup>*

These lines conclude one of the beloved Yiddish author Sholem Aleichem’s Railroad Stories, a series of farcical monologues narrated by a salesman traveling through the fin-de-siècle Jewish Pale of Settlement, originally published in 1909. In “The Man from Buenos Aires,” the reader and the narrator endure the self-aggrandizing tale of an international businessman’s success without discovering the nature of his merchandise. A contemporary reader would probably have recognized the stereotypical attributes of the grandiose Jewish “trafficker in human flesh” somewhat before the narrator: “On one finger he sported a heavy gold ring with a diamond whose thousand facets glittered in the sunlight.” The enigmatic businessman illustrates his work: “I provide a commodity that everyone knows about but no one ever talks about... all over the world: in Paris, in London, in Budapest, in Boston – but my headquarters are in Buenos Aires.”<sup>2</sup> This narrative falls somewhere between an anti-Semitic stereotype and a social fact. From the 1880s through the 1930s, feminists in London, Berlin, and New York rallied against the evils of the “White Slave Trade,” and organized conferences and rescue missions on behalf of innocent European maidens coerced across the Atlantic by swarthy pimps. Muck-racking journalists flooded the yellow press with voyeuristic tales of seduction, betrayal, and syphilitic death. Whether factual or fictitious, based on morality or

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<sup>1</sup> Sholem Aleichem, “The Man from Buenos Aires,” in *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1987): 176. Originally published in 1909 as “Der Mentsch fun Buenos Aires,” this translation by Hillel Halkin. While generally translated into English as “Hanukkah candles” or “prayer books,” the Yiddish text uses “esrogim,” the Yiddish version of the Hebrew word for the ritual fruit, an etrog or citron, used in the celebration of the harvest holiday of Sukkot as a symbol of purity and perfection. These translations erase the ironic juxtaposition between the purity of the symbol and the violation of purity at the core of his actual business. Thanks to Sasha Sedlerovich for pointing out this translation detail.

<sup>2</sup> Quote spans pages 167-76.

mortality, the disproportionate association of Jews with the forced migration of women across the Atlantic into the South American underworld triggered a self-defensive reaction against anti-Semitism among Jews in Buenos Aires and around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Two of the most pervasive aspects of the White Slave panics were the association of Jews with the seduction, traffic, and management of once-innocent women, and the image of Buenos Aires as the debauched final destination of girls swept oceans away from home. Buenos Aires was described as a favorite destination for white slavers from the earliest associations of white slavery with prostitution, and over time the city became something of a metonym for the phenomenon. By the 1927 publication of *Le chemin de Buenos Aires* by French journalist Albert Londres, quickly published on both sides of the Atlantic in several languages, the reference to the city in the title was sufficient to alert

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<sup>3</sup> I feel some obligation to preface this work with the disclaimer that I have no intention of overlooking or diminishing the real experiences of those coerced into sexual labor, both in the past and the present, which should not be minimized, and when possible punished and by all means prevented. However, sometimes stories of exploitation have begun to take on lives of their own, to serve other social causes, as I discuss in my dissertation with the concept of “white slavery.” For example, in the United States, alleged rapes of white women by black men justified lynching as a common practice for many years. Most scholars and journalists who have written on this subject have emphasized the victimhood of the Jewish women exploited by the unfortunate Jewish criminal element. Today’s opponents of human trafficking often echo this somewhat simplistic view, which nearly always denies its subjects the possibility of choice or agency. I hope to give agency, as Donna Guy does to some extent, to the women involved by liberating them from the victim narrative and showing they indeed made choices, if among a very limited range, hoping at best to model themselves on the famed “Esther the Millionaire,” who became not only independent, but wealthy. The men of the Zwi Migdal were characterized as evil and corrupt criminal types by contemporary anti-White Slavery organizations, and generally both by those who have researched them and by those who criticize the researchers for giving undue publicity to the subject. I hope to give them some agency as well, not by justifying their often violent and certainly exploitative actions, but by looking at them as immigrants and businessmen, as they certainly saw themselves. I would also like to align myself with other attempts to voice the vast range of those experiences, not just the dichotomies of sex slave and sex worker or prostitute and client. Women (and men) move in and out of work related to sex over the course of their lives, and observers from Engels to contemporary feminists have criticized the limitations of women’s capacity to give or withdraw consent in various economic exchanges with sexual content or valances, from marriage to waitressing. Historical examples of grey areas include sexual “treating,” a Victorian-era term to refer to the exchange of food or recreational activities for sexual favors during dates. On this subject see Elizabeth Clement, *Love for Sale: Courting, Treating, and Prostitution in New York City, 1900-1945* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2006). In this case, among the first generations of immigrant Jews in Buenos Aires, I believe that such complexities also characterized the lives of women called white slaves and men called rufianes, both groups ostracized as “unclean” by other Jews, while in fact they may have been acting more like all the other immigrants than anyone cared to admit.

readers to the sensational nature of the subject matter. Jews were often blamed for the seduction and forced traffic of European women. Organized Jewish community opposition to white slavery, highly visible throughout the period, often had the contrary effect of inflating the popular perception of actual Jewish participation in the trade. While these two elements of international prostitution did have some connection to fact, the association of white slavery with both the Jews and the city of Buenos Aires resonated with other concerns that served to exacerbate these identifications.

As the term white slavery became associated with the transport of women across national borders, generally from the Old World to the New World, the destinations were usually left vague and terrifying, but when specified more often than not turned out to be along the Rio de la Plata. In 1888, British moral reformer Josephine Butler appealed to the women of the United States to join British women in the combat against “the enforced movement... of these youthful victims of human cruelty... [of whom] the greater number are probably engaged for Montevideo and Buenos Ayres.”<sup>4</sup> In the same year, a New York Times article about a market in Constantinople where “European girls... imported for the purpose... are publicly sold as slaves” mentioned Buenos Aires as the principal destination of international traders.<sup>5</sup> In journalists’ and anti-vice organizations’ mappings of the trade routes and interconnected criminal associations of purportedly internationally organized white slave traders, Buenos Aires always appeared as a key hub or destination.<sup>6</sup> The charge that white slaves were destined for South America was so common that a group of Latin American delegates led a protest against

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<sup>4</sup> Josephine E. Butler, “Josephine Butler’s Appeal to the Women of America,” *Friend’s Review* (Philadelphia) 41 (49): 201-210 (July 5, 1888), 202.

<sup>5</sup> “German Slaves in the East: Public Sales of European Girls in Constantinople,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1888.

<sup>6</sup> “Man’s Commerce in Women,” *McClure’s Magazine* 41 (4): 185 (August 1913).

the League of Nations in 1927, whose investigations about the traffic in women, they charged, were made by investigators who spoke only English and were biased towards emphasizing the scale of white slavery in non-Anglo countries.<sup>7</sup> In a 1930 Polish novel, a Warsaw Vice Squad director denies passport clearance to Argentina to a beautiful young applicant, telling her “If you wished to emigrate to North America, to the United States for instance or to Canada, I shouldn't put any obstacles in your way. But I know too well what South America has in store for a young, pretty girl.”<sup>8</sup>

The popular association of Jews with international sex trafficking in this period was so great that Argentine police documents used the term “caften” to refer to arrested pimps in the 1890s.<sup>9</sup> This Yiddish word for the long coat worn by religiously observant Jewish men entered the language of the Buenos Aires underworld as a synonym for Jewish pimp, sometimes applied more broadly to all pimps and traffickers. Contemporary Argentine observer Victorio Luis Bessero describes these “caftens” of Buenos Aires as “prowling impudently through our streets, insolently flaunting regal automobiles and valuable jewels, [in] a life of luxury and of pleasures at the expense of the lucrative market in white flesh...Owners of grandiose brothels and of enormous sums of capital, all was achieved with money.”<sup>10</sup> The author emphasizes the free flow of money, “lent to

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<sup>7</sup> “Commission Revises White Slave Report: Latin Nations at Geneva Charge it Criticizes Them and Whitewashes Anglo-Saxons,” *New York Times*, November 27, 1927.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Kirkor (pseudonym of Antoni Marczyński), *The Ravishers: a Novel of White Slavery in Its Heyday* (New York: Ignis Co, 1955). Originally in Polish as *Szlakiem han'by: W szponach handlarzy kobiet* (Warsaw: Rój, 1930).

<sup>9</sup> Police records reprinted in Federico Rivanera Carles, *Los Judios y la Trata de Blancas en Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Instituto de Investigaciones Sobre la Cuestion Judia, 1986), 39, 78-79 n. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Victorio Luis Bessero, *Los tratantes de blancas en Buenos Aires: (el escandalo de la pseudo sociedad "Varsovia" o "Migdal"* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Aspasia, 1930), 3. Translation mine, as for all Spanish and Yiddish texts excerpted here unless otherwise specified.

anyone,” which these men used to secure legal impunity, reflecting stock anti-Semitic associations of Jews with dirty money.<sup>11</sup>

Albert Londres’ aforementioned 1927 *Road to Buenos Aires*, which quickly became an influential piece of evidence in the international discourse on the prevention of White Slavery, describes the Jewish pimps as “dark Levites, their filthy skins making the strangest effect of light and shade, their unwashed locks corkscrewing down their left cheeks, their flat round caps topping them like a saucepan lid... turning their heads all the time to look after me, just as savages do.”<sup>12</sup> Londres emphasizes the clannishness of the Jewish pimps and procurers, who ignore him suspiciously, as compared with their French and native-born counterparts, who, from his tales, seem to have accepted him without question into their midst, teaching him the tricks of the trade to the point at which he begins to procure women himself. He dubs Buenos Aires’ infamous port barrio of La Boca “the Kingdom of the Polacks.”<sup>13</sup> The term *polaco* was also used to refer to all pimps, not just to Jews or Poles, and *polaca* to all prostitutes. The word *judío*, or Jew, on its own implied pimping in certain contexts.<sup>14</sup> Yiddish words also entered the lexicon of the Buenos Aires underworld, as Jewish pimps used Yiddish terms such as *schmates*

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<sup>11</sup> This context must also include analysis of scholarly work on Jewish organized crime, notably: Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983); Robert Rockaway, *But He Was Good to His Mother: The Lives and Crimes of Jewish Gangsters* (New York: Gefen Publishing House, 2000); C. Van Onselen, “Jewish Marginality in the Atlantic world: Organized Crime in the Era of the Great Migrations, 1880-1914,” *South African Historical Journal* 43: 96-137 (November 2000); and Daniel Vyleta, “Jewish Crimes and Misdemeanours: In Search of Jewish Criminality (Germany and Austria 1890-1914),” *European History Quarterly* 35 (2): 299-325 (April 2005).

<sup>12</sup> Albert Londres, *The Road to Buenos Ayres* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1928), 166-67.

<sup>13</sup> Londres, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Cohen, “Secretary’s Report to the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women,” April 22, 1931, translated into Spanish as “Informe de la ‘Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women,’” 253-70 in Julio L Alsogaray, *Trilogía De La Trata De Blancas: Rufianes, Policía, Municipalidad* (Buenos Aires: L.J. Rosso, 1933), 256, 259.

(rags) and *treifene* (literally “not kosher,” to refer to Christian girls) to discuss their wares.<sup>15</sup>

Jews around the world were concerned with this subject from its earliest years, as indicated by the 1500-page Yiddish serial novel published in New York in 1894 titled “The Traffic in Women or a Monster in the Community of Man: A novel from life in Europe and America.” Arthur Moro, vice-president of the London-based Jewish Association for the Protection of Women and Girls (JAPGW), reports that in 1904, the police in Odessa had lists of (Jewish) men who regularly traveled back and forth between that port and South America, bringing each time a “wife” and several other girls.<sup>16</sup> A young Jewish immigrant to New York reported later of her 1918 arrival at Ellis Island that “You’ve been told that any man... you don’t know, is going to take you to Buenos Aires to a brothel, that was the favorite source of terror to young girls traveling alone.”<sup>17</sup>

One of the broader associated concerns, not only for Jews but for the civil authorities of immigrants’ countries of origin and destination, was the issue of *Stille Chuppah*, a Yiddish term literally meaning “quiet wedding,” the religious marriage ritual performed by a rabbi but without legal recognition in the broader host society. This became intertwined with the problem of the arrival of Jewish emigrants unknown to a particular locality in the Eastern European Jewish Pale of Settlement claiming success in “*hacer la America*,” (making it in America), searching for local girls to marry and take

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<sup>15</sup> Carles, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, *Official Report of the Jewish International Conference on the Suppression of the Traffic in Girls and Women Held on April 5th, 6th, and 7th, 1910, in London, Convened by the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women* (London: JAPGW Central Bureau, 1910), 35-36.

<sup>17</sup> Oral history quoted in Val Marie Johnson, “Protection, Virtue, and the ‘Power to Detain’: The Moral Citizenship of Jewish Women in New York City, 1890-1920,” *Journal of Urban History* 31 (5): 655-84 (2005), 655.

back across the Atlantic.<sup>18</sup> Publicity around white slavery often contained tales of false marriage obtained under such a ruse, and rabbis performing ceremonies without sufficient information about bridegrooms-to-be were criticized as accomplices.<sup>19</sup> Whether or not the intentions of these suitors were legitimate, wives bound only by stille chuppahs found their marriages to have no legal weight in countries such as Argentina, leaving them with no protection in case of spousal abandonment.

Although often exaggerated and distorted to anti-Semitic effect, the Jewish neighborhoods of Buenos Aires indeed included brothels, streetwalkers, and powerful associations of Jewish pimps. The most infamous of these associations, the Zwi Migdal society, became internationally known in the wake of highly-publicized legal proceedings in 1930. International JAPGW Secretary Samuel Cohen argued in 1932 that the hundreds of traffickers and brothel owners of the Zwi Migdal were responsible for the anti-Jewish sentiments of the larger population against the 300,000 Jews in Argentina.<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Argentine anti-Semitism is an older and more complex phenomenon than a simple reaction to the existence of a pimps' mutual aid society, but the many decades of this organization's notoriety and the broader Jewish community's battles against it may well have influenced the contours of local prejudice against Jews.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Auerbach, "Die Juden in Galizien" (Paris, April 10, 1905), 26.

<sup>19</sup> On the marriage ruse, see Egal Feldman, "Prostitution, The Alien Woman And The Progressive Imagination, 1910-1915," *American Quarterly*, 19 (2): 192-206 (1967), 196-97, 203-4. For some primary source examples: "Jewish Girls Are Sacrificed: Sensational Disclosures in Chicago Ghetto," *Los Angeles Times* (October 21, 1907); "Syndicate in 'White Slaves'," *Los Angeles Times* (January 2, 1910); "Russian Jew on Trial: Charged With Conducting 'White Slave' Traffic, Alleged Wife Being Chief Witness," *Los Angeles Times* (February 21, 1912); the untitled article on this subject in the *Buenos Aires Herald* (May 10, 1930).

<sup>20</sup> Julio L Alsogaray, *Trilogia De La Trata De Blancas: Rufianes, Policía, Municipalidad* (Buenos Aires: L.J. Rosso, 1933), 259.

<sup>21</sup> The only monograph that surveys Argentine anti-Semitism is the lengthy and impressive Daniel Lvovich, *Nacionalismo y Antisemitismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires: Javier Vergara, 2003). One anthology deals with only the last quarter of the twentieth century, but is a useful comparison: . Leonardo Senkman, ed., *El*

Prostitution under a regulated brothel structure was legal in Argentina from 1875 to 1936, in a public health-oriented system based on the French model, which was particularly threatening to observers from countries such as the United States and Britain, who opposed legalization. Critics of regulated prostitution spoke up within Argentina as well, such as police commissioner Julio Alsogaray, vociferous opponent of the Zwi Migdal and of its purported bribe-based influence throughout the police and municipal bureaucracies. The strict and often-reformed rules governing legal brothels were not complied with by probably the majority of prostitutes and brothel-owners, and the consequently large number of clandestine prostitutes creates inaccuracy in all collected statistics. A brief comparison of statistical estimates can provide a glimpse into regulated brothels, if not into the larger clandestine world.

Donna Guy's 1991 book *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina*, a social, political, and legal history, sets the standard for contemporary scholarly historical investigation into organized sex work in fin-de-siècle Argentina, and has informed scholars internationally working on prostitution and issues of gender more generally in Latin America.<sup>22</sup> Guy's demographic analysis estimates that

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*antisemitismo en la Argentina*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de America Latina, 1989). See also Leonardo Senkman, *Argentina, la Segunda Guerra Mundial y los refugiados indeseables, 1933-1945* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor Latinoamericano, 1991). The handful of scholarly articles that deal specifically with Argentine anti-Semitism in this period is comprised of: Sandra McGee Deutsch, "The Argentine Right and the Jews, 1919-1933," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18 (1): 113-34 (1986); Emilio Herrera, "Los prejuicios raciales en la Argentina del '80: Julian Martel y su novela 'La Bolsa'," *Indice* 1 (2) (April 1968); and Allan Metz, "Reluctant partners: Juan Peron and the Jews of Argentina, 1946-1955," *Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life* 41 (4): 378-94 (1992).

<sup>22</sup>Donna Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991). Earlier analyses of Argentine prostitution by Argentine authors include: Adolfo Batiz, *Buenos Aires, La Ribera y los Prostibulos en 1880: Contribucion a los estudios sociales (Libro Rojo)* (Buenos Aires: Aga-Taura, 1960); Rodolfo Kusch, *De la Mala Vida Portena* (Buenos Aires: A. Pena Lillo, 1966); Jose Leon Pagano, *Criminalidad Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1964); Rafael Ielpi and Hector Zinni, *Prostitucion y Rufianismo* (Buenos Aires: Encuadre, 1974); Francis Korn, *Buenos Aires, los huespedes del 20* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1974). Clearly inspired by Guy's book is Andres Carretero, *Prostitucion en Buenos Aires*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Corregidor, 1998). Work on

prostitutes who had emigrated from Russia, Romania, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire, of whom the vast majority would have been Jewish, made up 36 percent of registered prostitutes between 1889 and 1901, and 48.6 percent in 1934, far outnumbering their relative proportions in the broader population.<sup>23</sup> Another influential scholar estimates that between 1889 and 1913, around 4200 Jewish women, 30 percent of the total, registered for the municipal brothels of Buenos Aires, while at least as many operated outside the law.<sup>24</sup> In the following table, a comparison of the overall nationality figures with several sets of statistics suggests that although Jewish women made up a high proportion of prostitutes relative to their total numbers in the population, they certainly did not comprise an absolute majority, as suggested by some contemporary critics. Alsogaray, for example, estimated that of 800 registered women in 1930, ninety percent were exploited by organized Jewish pimps (who according to other sources, dealt with Jewish women in the vast majority).<sup>25</sup>

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contemporary prostitution in other parts of Latin America includes: Katherine Elaine Bliss, "A Right to Live as Gente Decente: Sex Work, Family Life, and Collective Identity in Early-Twentieth-Century Mexico," *Journal of Women's History* 15 (4): 164-69 (2004); on Bolivia, Antonio Paredes Candia, *De Rameras, Burdeles y Proxenas: Historia y Tradicion*, (La Paz, Bolivia: ISLA, 1998); Sueann Caulfield, "Women of Vice, Virtue, and Rebellion: New Studies of Representation of the Female in Latin America," *Latin American Research Review* 28 (2): 163-74 (1993); E. J. Suarez Findlay, "Decency and Democracy: The Politics of Prostitution in Ponce, Puerto Rico, 1890-1900," *Feminist Studies* 23 (3): 471-99 (1997); Elizabeth Q. Hutchison, "El-fruto-envenenado-del-arbol-capitalista': Women Workers and the Prostitution of Labor in Urban Chile, 1896-1925," *Journal of Women's History* 9 (4): 131-51 (1998); D. McCreery, "This Life Of Misery And Shame: Female Prostitution in Guatemala City, 1880-1920," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 18: 333-53 (1986); and Yvette Trochon, *Las Mercenarias del Amor: Prostitucion y Modernidad en el Uruguay (1880-1932)* (Montevideo: Taurus, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Guy, 16.

<sup>24</sup> Bristow, 118-19.

<sup>25</sup> Alsogaray, 243. This number cannot be contested without a comparative analysis of the national origins of pimps and traffickers, which has not been attempted by prior scholars, perhaps due to a lack of comparably accessible data. As part of my broader dissertation research, I am analyzing the legal and police records of Jewish pimps, and hope to be able to make at least an intitial stab at comparison.

### Comparison of Registered Prostitutes' Statistics<sup>26</sup>

Nationality and percentage of total Buenos Aires population in 1909, if available <sup>27</sup>	Number of Registered Prostitutes 1899-1915 <sup>28</sup>	Percent of Total 1899-1915:	Number of Registered Prostitutes 1910-1923 <sup>29</sup>	Percent of Total 1910-1923	Percent of Arrests for Scandalous Behavior 1920-1930 <sup>30</sup>
Russian (Jewish) 1.1	3687	22.4	1325	15.6	7.5
Argentine 54.5	3212	19.5	1916	22.6	
French 2.1	2484	15.1	1743	20.5	19.8
Italian 22.5	1765	10.7	844	9.9	15.2
Uruguayan	1507	9.2	805	9.5	7.1
Spanish 14.2	1454	8.8	1063	12.5	30.7
Austrohungarian (Jew)	1066	6.5	199	2.3	1.5
Polish (Jewish)			155	1.8	
German	435	2.6	40	0.5	1.2
Rumanian (Jewish)	175	1.1	48	0.6	0.5
British	126	0.8	25	0.3	1.3
Belgian	117	0.7	76	0.9	
Paraguayan	87	0.5	36	0.4	1.8
Turkish	87	0.5	59	0.7	1.7
Brazilian	35	0.2	12	0.1	1.2
Chilean	31	0.2	16	0.2	2
North American			37	0.4	
Portuguese			26	0.3	
Other 2.7	200	1.2	61	0.7	8.2
Grand Total	16468	100	8486	99.8	99.7
Total Jewish 1.1	4928	29.9	1727	20.3	9.6
Total European 42.6	11596	70.4	5664	66.7	87.8

<sup>26</sup> As this research develops, a more rigorous comparison of statistics from various sources will be made, as well as an analysis of the nationalities of pimps and traffickers. Note the low numbers of Italian and Spanish prostitutes relative to their total proportion of the immigrant population and the high numbers of prostitutes from France and Uruguay. The high numbers from Uruguay might partially be accounted for by the popularity of traffickers' use of Montevideo as a port of entry into Buenos Aires, potentially causing false claims of Uruguayan nationality. The numbers of women considered "Argentine" should be qualified with more information about the data source. Also note the low numbers of British women in relation to the high levels of concern of British feminists and reformers with the White Slave Traffic.

<sup>27</sup> James R Scobie, *Buenos Aires: Plaza to Suburb, 1870-1910* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 260, from 1909 Buenos Aires Census, pp. 3-17.

<sup>28</sup> Raw numbers from Boleslao Lewin, *Como Fue la Inmigracion Judia en la Argentina*, 2nd ed. (Buenos Aires: Plus Ultra, 1983), citation of Carlos Bernaldo de Quiros, 208. My calculations.

<sup>29</sup> Victor A Mirelman, *Jewish Buenos Aires, 1890-1930: In Search of an Identity* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1990), 205, from Records of Buenos Aires Municipal Health Department.

<sup>30</sup> My calculations from annual breakdown in Guy, 119, which she took from Korn, 142. Includes foreign-born women only.

Many observers of organized Jewish prostitution, in an attempt to salvage the reputation of the Jewish community, have emphasized the scale of Jewish opposition to those whom they ostracized as *t'meyim*, or “unclean ones.” From the first significant appearance of Jewish pimps and prostitutes in Buenos Aires in the 1890s, other Jews worked hard to bar them from religious festivals and community activities.<sup>31</sup> The London-based international Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women (JAPGW) established its first branch outside of Europe in Buenos Aires in 1901, and in one of its first activities, founding Rabbi Henry Joseph blocked *t'meyim* from entering the synagogue.<sup>32</sup> Ironically, this opposition prompted the Jewish pimps to organize themselves as well. One of the first collective acts of the Jewish pimps and traffickers in Buenos Aires was the formation of a synagogue where, among other religious observances, they followed the rites of Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement (critics made much of the futility of their quest for absolution, but everyone wants a High Holiday ticket!).<sup>33</sup>

Over nearly half a century, the relationship between the so-called *t'meyim* and their opponents often took on a dialectic aspect, in which ostracism inspired the creation of mirror institutions in the underworld, as in the synagogue and cemetery of the Varsovia Society. When denied access to the only Jewish cemetery in Buenos Aires in the late 1880s, Jewish pimps created their own burial society, the short-lived Club de los 40.<sup>34</sup> The Varsovia, or Warsaw Society, which would later become the Zwi Migdal, was originally founded as a burial and mutual aid society, legally incorporated in the Buenos

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<sup>31</sup> Alsogaray, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Cohen, 255.

<sup>33</sup> Alsogaray, 18.

<sup>34</sup> Guy, 17.

Aires suburb of Avellaneda on May 7, 1906.<sup>35</sup> Pimps and prostitutes who fled to Brazil after the legal proceedings against the Zwi Migdal were forbidden to bury their dead in the Jewish cemetery, and were consigned to the unconsecrated separate area for suicides and other outcasts.<sup>36</sup>

The Varsovia Society centralized their work in a lavish mansion located in Buenos Aires at 3280 Cordoba. This mansion served as the organization's headquarters, hosting lavish parties, wedding receptions, and, much to the chagrin of respectable society, the formal presentation of newly arrived prostitutes in debutante balls of the underworld.<sup>37</sup> Also in this building was their synagogue, which included a traditional balcony and for the segregated seating of women, and an elaborate "arc" to hold the Torah scroll.

The Argentine Yiddish theatre was one of the first expressions of Jewish culture in the region, with greatest popularity from the 1900s to the 1930s. One work of criticism has observed that "Ironically, some of the financial backers of the theatre companies were the *temeyim*, ... they were the most generous and enthusiastic public for Yiddish theatre in Argentina."<sup>38</sup> Pimps and madams enjoyed private boxes, while some prostitutes solicited audience members. Their financial patronage extended into influence over what was produced, and they strongly objected to the production of plays which portrayed

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<sup>35</sup> Alsogaray, 123; "Juzgados de Instruccion: Numero 3 - Asociacion Ilicita," *Gaceta de Foro* 15 (4729): 3-23 (November 1, 1930), 6, col. 1, gives the organization's full name as the Sociedad Israelita de Socorros Mutuos Varsovia, Barrancas – Buenos Aires.

<sup>36</sup> Esther Regina Largman and Robert M Levine, "Jews in the Tropics: Bahian Jews in the Early Twentieth Century," *Americas* 43 (2): 159-70 (1986), 167.

<sup>37</sup> Alsogaray criticizes these perverted debutante balls, made even more shameful by being held on national holidays, 62-63.

<sup>38</sup> Nora Glickman and Gloria F. Waldman, eds. and trans., *Argentine Jewish Theatre: A Critical Anthology*. (Lewisburg: Bucknell UP and London: Associated University Presses, 1996) 9. Their footnote references "Argentina," in *Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana* (Mexico: Editorial Enciclopedia Judaica Castellana, 1961), 472.

prostitution in a negative light or criticized traffickers. Battles over Peretz Hirschbein's *Miriam* in 1908 and Leib Malach's *Ibergus (Regeneration)* in 1927 prompted the expulsion of pimps and prostitutes from the two Yiddish theaters in Buenos Aires, on the doors of which were hung signs reading "t'meyim forbidden."<sup>39</sup> The uproar over *Ibergus*, which sharply criticized Jewish pimps, drove playwright Malach out of Buenos Aires to Paris, where he died shortly thereafter.<sup>40</sup> The Yiddish syndicalist organization "Yugnt" (Youth) was centrally involved in the effort to drive the t'meyim out of the Yiddish theater, and also launched a campaign not to rent property to be used as brothels.<sup>41</sup> The Yiddish press also played a key role in voicing the Jewish community's opposition to the t'meyim, and covered the entire prosecution of the Zwi Migdal almost daily.<sup>42</sup>

The reactionary dialectic between the t'meyim and their opponents shaped the underworld association's legal dissolution, name change and organizational restructuring between 1927 and 1929. In 1927, Selig Ganopol, staff translator for the local branch of the JAPGW, complained to the Polish government's representative in Buenos Aires about the society that bore the name of the Polish capital city. The Polish government began to complain that the notoriety of the Varsovia Society was causing "offense to Polish national honor."<sup>43</sup> The Varsovia Society was then legally dissolved, technically ceasing to exist. This event was proudly advertised by the international JAPGW in its February

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<sup>39</sup> Bristow, 216 and 225.

<sup>40</sup> Glickman and Waldman, 21.

<sup>41</sup> Carles, 37; Lewin, 211. Similar controversy surrounded the 1923 New York opening of Sholem Asch's play *God of Vengeance*, which portrayed a Jewish-run brothel in Poland. See Harley Erdman, "Jewish Anxiety in 'Days of Judgement': Community Conflict, Antisemitism, and the God of Vengeance Obscenity Case," *Theatre Survey* 40 (1): 51-74 (1999).

<sup>42</sup> Buenos Aires' daily Yiddish newspapers *Di Yidishe Tsaitung* and *Di Prese* closely covered the Zwi Migdal case, in addition to their years of prior interest in the activities of the pimps and traffickers and the organizing efforts of their opponents. Spanish language Jewish newspapers, including *Mundo Israelita*, *Israel Ilustracion*, *Semenario Hebreo*, and *La Calle* also published on the subject, as did English language Argentine newspapers *The Buenos Aires Herald* and *The Standard* and the broader Spanish language Argentine press.

<sup>43</sup> Alsogaray, 140.

1928 report to the League of Nations' newly formed Traffic in Women and Children Committee as due to the direct result of their intervention: "A society of persons calling themselves the Jewish Warsaw Society, and alleged to be largely composed of traffickers, has been deprived of its rights of recognition on the intervention of our Committee with the Polish Consul and the Argentine Government."<sup>44</sup> Despite this pronouncement, the members of Varsovia continued their association, which they restructured into two separate societies, each of which held legal civil status: the Ashqenasum and the Sociedad de Socorros Mutuos Synagoga y Cementario Zwi Migdal.<sup>45</sup> Some observers attributed this split to personal differences among the leaders of the original association, while others claimed that the Ashqenasum was established to meet the particular needs of the Jewish immigrants from Russia and Romania and the Zwi Migdal to meet the needs of those from Poland.<sup>46</sup> The two groups continued to share the cemetery in Avellaneda. The Zwi Migdal inherited at least two-thirds of the business of the Varsovia Society, and the control of the Buenos Aires mansion.

After more than 40 years of official toleration, the organized Jews of the Zwi Migdal met their legal end in 1930, after its denunciation by a betrayed prostitute and the determined investigations of Judge Rodriguez Ocampo and Police Commissioner Julio Alsogaray. Raquel Liberman, prostitute turned antiques' dealer turned prostitute again, has been lauded by historians seeking women's agency in this history that often appears

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<sup>44</sup> Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, *League of Nations' Advisory Commission for the Protection and Welfare of Children and Young People, Traffic in Women and Children Committee, Seventh Session: Report of the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women for the Year Ending December 31st, 1927* (Geneva: League of Nations, 1928), 5.

<sup>45</sup> Alsogaray, 139; "Juzgados de Instruccion", 11, col. 4.

<sup>46</sup> Alsogaray, 142-43. He estimates that the Ashqenasum Society is about half the size of the Zwi Migdal, and equivalent in size and profits to that of all other nationalities combined.

to be one of unbroken victimization.<sup>47</sup> After saving enough money from prostitution to walk away from the Zwi Migdal and open her own storefront selling “objets d’art,” Liberman was again seduced by an unknown Zwi Migdal member who convinced her to marry him, then revealed himself and pushed her back into prostitution again. She took her story to the police on December 31, 1929, and her denunciation was exactly what investigators had been waiting for.<sup>48</sup> The Zwi Migdal Society had long maintained its security through extensive bribery and relationships with officials throughout every relevant agency and bureaucracy, including a fund for the legal protection of their collective interest, which through consistent legal victories ensured that women would not risk the futile endeavor of denouncing their pimps as exploitative.<sup>49</sup> After gathering additional evidence, the police issued warrants for the just under 450 members of the Zwi Migdal listed in their books, and stormed their headquarters and brothels in several weeks of lightning raids. While over 100 men and 15-20 women were arrested, most of those with warrants out had either already died or found out about the investigation and had fled to safety.<sup>50</sup> Judge Ocampo sentenced all those detained to prison on September 27, 1930, where they remained until other influences obtained their release between January 25 and 27, 1931.<sup>51</sup>

On September 6, 1930, in the midst of this heavily publicized trial, General Jose F. Uriburu took power in the first in a series of military takeovers that would dominate Argentine politics for most of the rest of the century. Although the correlation has yet to

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<sup>47</sup> For heroization of Liberman, see for example Nora Glickman, *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman* (New York: Garland, 2000) and Isabel Vincent, *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas* (New York: William Morrow, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Alsogaray, 176.

<sup>49</sup> “Juzgados de Instruccion”, 5, col. 4.

<sup>50</sup> Alsogaray, 190-92.

<sup>51</sup> Alsogaray, 204.

be examined by historians, police commissioner Julio Alsogaray's anti-Zwi Migdal treatise implies that this change of government (referred to by its supporters as a Revolution by its supporters and a coup d'état by its opponents) did indeed alter the system in which pimps and brothel owners operated. Alsogaray's own career certainly appears to have been advanced by this shift, which raised him to the post of Commissioner of Orders of the Police of the Capital.<sup>52</sup> He criticizes pre-Uriburu politicians from across the political spectrum for their complicity in the system which allowed the existence of the Zwi Migdal. Alsogaray blames radicals, conservatives, and socialists for their complicity in the exploitation of the society's victims, singles out the Radical Party and the nation's prior leader, President Irigoyen, for being particularly complicit and corrupt, and damns the entire period from 1916, when Irigoyen was first elected, to his overthrow in September of 1930, as the country's epoch of greatest corruption and moral decadence.<sup>53</sup> He professes the hope that this political change might create the space for cleaning up the corruption of the police and city government that he criticizes throughout this text for complicity with pimps and traffickers, then blames political subversion and institutional inertia for the ongoing influence of the rufianes following Uriburu's ascent to power such that their prison sentences are overturned.

Contemporary observers and later historians agree that the 1930 prosecution of the Zwi Migdal marked the end of noteworthy Jewish participation in international flows of sex workers. While none of those convicted remained in prison beyond the end of January, 1931, the legal status of the mutual aid society would not be re-established, and few of the hundreds of pimps, traffickers, and madams who had fled the country would

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<sup>52</sup> Alsogaray, 82.

<sup>53</sup> Alsogaray, 97, 114-17.

return. A Polish police-woman's memoir claims that "Between 1928-1935 Poland was visited fairly frequently by members of the 'Zwie Migdal' gang, who probably sought asylum in Poland after the case brought against them by Judge Ocampo. Identification of these visitors was considerably facilitated by a dossier in the possession of the Women's Brigade sent by the Argentine Police at the request of the Central Bureau in Warsaw."<sup>54</sup> While some Jewish pimps and prostitutes surely remained hard at work in Buenos Aires, their days of debutante balls and Yom Kippur atonement were over. The Jewish community as a whole, however, had laid a sturdy institutional foundation in the decades-long battle against the t'meyim.<sup>55</sup>

The recent book on this subject by Israeli author Ilan Sheinfeld (published only in Hebrew) inspired a spate of public responses to an online review in an Israeli newspaper.<sup>56</sup> These responses (often vitriolic) criticized, among other things, the author (or reviewer's) framing of this exposure of the Zwi Migdal and the story of Argentine Jewish prostitution as new, as having never been told before. Other writers have framed it in the same way, as in the title of Nora Glickman's book *The Jewish White Slave Trade and the Untold Story of Raquel Liberman*, and in the sensationalist tone of Canadian journalist Isabel Vincent's *Bodies and Souls*.

This story is neither new nor untold. It was broadly known at the time, both in Argentina and around the world. It was so broadly known at the time as to inspire both

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<sup>54</sup> Stanislaw Paleolog, *The Women Police of Poland, 1925 to 1939*, trans. Eileen Garlinska (London: Association for Moral and Social Hygiene, 1957), 86.

<sup>55</sup> I have found some primary sources indicating that the participation of Jews in prostitution or at least anti-prostitution organizing in Argentina did not necessarily end with the prosecution of the Zwi Migdal, which is the standard periodization of the topic, i.e. S. Cohen's letter to F. Sempkins, Feb. 16, 1937, The Women's Library, London, 4IBS/6 FL112.

<sup>56</sup> Rona Kupferboim, "Argentine Jewry's Dark Secret," *Ynetnews*, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3403899,00.html>, accessed April 30, 2008. Originally published in *Israel Jewish Scene* (May 25, 2007).

Jewish and non-Jewish organizations to take action on an international scale, creating new organizations, conferences, institutions, publications, League of Nations committees. For the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the story held a mystique that inspired fiction writers and dramatists in various languages: Sholem Aleichem, one of the founders of modern Yiddish literature, immortalized the standard narrative of the Buenos Aires trafficker returning to Eastern Europe for fresh merchandise; Sholem Asch created several controversial Yiddish plays about the Warsaw underworld; Issac Babel wrote about its Russian counterpart; Argentine writers tackled the subject from contemporary Roberto Arlt to Myrtha Schalom's recent novel based on Raquel Liberman's life.<sup>57</sup> Here in the United States, the prominent new novel by Nathan Englander opens with the Buenos Aires community literally covering up this sordid past in the face of the repressive dictatorship of the 1970s and early 80s, chipping the names of pimps and prostitutes off of their infamous cemetery's tombstones to protect their descendants.<sup>58</sup>

More interesting than whether or not this story is new or untold, is the question for whom is it new, and for whom is it dead and should stay buried, and why. Many members of the Argentine Jewish community during the time of this story's unfolding were so afraid of the anti-Semitism that would result from the story's spread that they devoted life-long efforts to its suppression. And this concern was not mere paranoia. The Nazis twisted the numbers of Jews involved in prostitution and pimping internationally to

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<sup>57</sup> Aleichem; Sholem Asch, *Der Got Fun Nekome: A Drame* (Vilna: Tsukunft, 1907); Sholem Asch, *Motke Ganef* (New York, 1923); Isaac Babel, *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel*, ed. Nathalie Babel, trans. Peter Constantine, (New York: Norton, 2002), esp. "My First Fee," 709-17; Roberto Arlt, *Los Siete Locos* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Claridad, 1929); Roberto Arlt, *Los Lanzallamas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Claridad, 1931); and Myrtha Schalom, *La Polaca: Inmigracion, Rufianes y Esclavas a Comienzos del Siglo XX* (Buenos Aires: Grupo Editorial Norma, 2003).

<sup>58</sup> Nathan Englander, *The Ministry of Special Cases* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007).

the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile, as recorded in their propaganda film *The Eternal Jew*. Anti-Semites within Argentina made much of the Zwi Migdal, both during its existence and downfall and in later years. The contemporary concerns about anti-Semitic reactions if the story was exposed are ironically echoed in the negative Jewish responses to Sheinfeld's book, as critics squall, as they did then, that this is a Chillul HaShem, a desecration of G-d's name, a shame upon the Jews, to be stamped out and ignored, not given publicity.

Ilan Sheinfeld responds to one of his critics with the statement that he is interested not in the phenomenon of Argentine Jewish prostitution itself, but in its significance for Jewish memory. To elaborate on his position, I wonder what might it mean for the Jewish community in Buenos Aires and for Jews around the world to remember the Zwi Migdal and other elements of the story of Jewish prostitution in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Can this story be framed in a way to become more than simply a source of shame and fear of anti-Semitic reprisal? Is there another way to ask, or perhaps a better question than the classic "is it good for the Jews?"