“A Generation of Monsters”: Jews, Prostitution, and Racial Purity in the 1892 L’viv White Slavery Trial

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“How long will the jackals continue to feed upon our live bodies?”¹ So begins a Polish newspaper’s depiction of the rapacious activities of twenty-seven alleged international traffickers on trial for transporting girls from Austrian Galicia to brothels and harems in the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas.² After years of veiled discussion in the Polish-language press about the mysterious disappearance of poor female workers and peasant daughters, the case erupted in the fall of 1892, with lasting implications for the way trafficking and the domestic sex trade would be understood in the Habsburg lands and the former Polish territories alike. Seventeen men and ten women—all of them Jewish—stood trial for a decades-long conspiracy to scour the Crownland in search of “human goods” and “sell them to … local public houses or transport [them] abroad.”³ The affair helped define the public’s perception of the sex trade in Eastern Europe between the 1880s and 1930, as thousands of young women were smuggled out of the region and into sexual servitude. The trial played out in the Galician administrative capital of L’viv, a city of mixed Polish, Jewish, German, and Ukrainian population.⁴ Trial transcripts

¹“Handlarze kobiet” [Traffickers in women], Słowo [The word], 31 July 1891, 4.
²Estimates of the number of women leaving Europe each year to work as prostitutes abroad vary widely. Contemporary observers believed that 8,000 to 10,000 young women and girls were exported from Galicia annually, many of them having crossed into the Crownland initially from southeastern Russia. Numerous contemporary sources emphasize the wide idiomatic use of the term polaca for prostitute in parts of Latin America. See Bertha Pappenheim’s figures in “Kroniki” [Local news], Nowe Słowo [The new word], 15 May 1903, 224–25. For more general accounts, see Stanisław Posner, Nad otchlania: w sprawie handlu żywym towarem [On the abyss: The problem of the trade in human goods] (Warsaw, 1903), 90–91; Józef Macko, Prostytucja [Prostitution] (Warsaw, 1927), 347–52; and Major H. Wagener, Mädchenhandel (Berlin, 1911). On “polacas,” see especially Isabel Vincent, Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas (New York, 2005).
³“Handzarze Kobiet” [Traffickers in women], Słowo, 31 July 1891, 4.
⁴Commercial sex was a source of public concern within the Jewish and Ukrainian communities of Galicia as well. This study focuses primarily on the evolving attitudes of the Galician Polish elite. On Jewish community activism to combat white slavery, see Edward J. Bristow, Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939 (Oxford, 1982); Bertha Pappenheim and Sara Rabinowitch, Zur Lage der jüdischen Bevölkerung in Galizien (Frankfurt, 1904), 47ff; and Nora Glickman, “The Jewish White Slave Trade in Latin American Writings,” American Jewish Archives 34, no. 2 (1982): 178–89. Ukrainian sources focus less attention on white slavery until the post-World War I period. The most detailed discussion of young Ukrainian women recruited for service in Latin American bordellos is provided by playwright Myroslav Irych, who learned of the process from letters of Ukrainian immigrants in

and newspaper coverage provide a rare glimpse into the secret world of commercial sex at the turn of the twentieth century. More importantly, commentary from the journalists and local citizens attending the proceedings offers a window into the way the Galician public understood the commercial sex trade, a tolerated practice that employed medical doctors, police inspectors, landlords, pimps, and procurers, alongside the prostitutes themselves. The trial attracted attention as far away as Cracow, Warsaw, and Vienna, where the Austrian parliament devoted a fiery session to its outcome and to a discussion of the “shameful outrages of the Jewish people” in the affair. In the Galician setting, public exposure to the horrors of international prostitution networks contributed to a new and more militant direction in Polish nationalist sentiment, one that inextricably linked sexuality with ethnicity.

What can we learn from this discussion about how the reading public understood prostitution, prostitutes, and the recruitment of young women into the sex trade? The purpose of this article is to highlight the shifting stories Galician society told itself about venal sex and to look behind some of the misconceptions propagated during the trial. The tropes revealed here can be characterized briefly as the myth of female passivity in entering the world of paid sex; the myth of permanence once a woman “falls from grace”; and the myth of the social isolation of the prostitute from the world of polite society. In the end, I argue, each of these partial truths reflects elements of a profound discomfort the Polish readership was experiencing with social dislocation in the context of a sharpening national independence movement.

This discomfort expressed itself, among other ways, in an anti-Semitism that was ultimately tied to tropes of hygiene in women’s bodies and purity—moral and genetic—in the Polish nation. Revelations from court testimony about the sordid world of commercial sex prompted an extended discussion among Galician Poles about the forces driving a veritable army of young women into the streets. Alongside socialist and feminist proposals for solving the prostitution problem, anti-Semitic tendencies and proto-eugenics societies linked up to reorient concerns about public debauchery toward a preoccupation with racial purity. By emphasizing the ethnic outsider status of Jewish leaders in this and other sex rings, Polish prostitution experts tapped into a growing reorientation of the nationalist movement toward racist associations. The mythology around white slaves—as passive victims, permanently fallen, socially isolated, and entrapped by Jewish agents—masked an etiology that could trace these notions back to the Polish community and the Polish household. The Polish narrative of white slavery, though

Argentina while he was living in Canada. Irchan serialized the story of a woman whose father unknowingly turned her over to sexual captivity. “Iak tato don’ku prodav” [How a father sold a daughter], Ukrainsky slovo [The Ukrainian word], 29 April to 17 June 1928. I am grateful to John-Paul Himka for this reference.

5Quote from the motion introduced to the Austrian parliament by Professor Schlesinger on 11 November 1892 after the conclusion of the Lviv trial. The motion, signed by fourteen other deputies asked the prime minister “what … precautions [he] was taking to build an effective claim against the shameful outrages of the Jewish people in Austria?” Stenographisches Protokoll über die Sitzungen des Hauses der Abgeordneten des Österreichischen Reichsrats in den Jahren 1892 und 1893, IX Session, VII. Band (Vienna, 1893), 11 November 1892, 7638–39ff. Quoted in Bristow, Prostitution and Prejudice, 80–81. See also, “Von Nah und Fern,” Arbeiter-Zeitung, 18 November 1892, 1, for a report of the same debate.

grounded in some truth, thus made it possible to externalize paid sex and its economy and to attribute primary causality to Jewish ring leaders such as those on trial in Lviv.

Commercial sex existed in an awkward legal limbo in Austrian Galicia as it did in most of nineteenth-century Europe. Beginning in the early part of the century, commercial sex was regulated everywhere in the Habsburg lands by police-medical committees established in each metropolitan area. Section 512 of the 1885 Austrian legal code required women who engaged in paid sex to register with the police and to submit to twice-weekly sanitary exams. Legal penalties could only be applied to those who did not conform to police requirements or who functioned as mediators or suppliers for the sex trade. The law strictly forbade women to be taken abroad under false pretenses, the use of physical force, or in any capacity if they were minors. Because of government tolerance of domestic sex work and, by contrast, the strict legal prohibition on international trafficking, abolitionists would eventually zero in on white slavery as a tool for demonstrating the evils of prostitution in all its forms. Early Galician feminist journals, such as Ster and Nowe Słowo, reported extensively on international sex rings as a means of drawing attention to the tolerated practices their editors opposed.

The stage was set for the Lviv courtroom drama in a series of articles published in Polish language journals—both in Galicia and in the Kingdom of Poland—during the preceding year. These exposés told the stories of several dozen young women who had fled the brothels of Constantinople with the aid of the Austrian consulate and returned home to Galicia. Once the trial began, witnesses recounted the details of their disappearance from Galician towns up to seven years earlier, and of the promises of jobs, treasure, and husbands the defendants made. They told of being auctioned off at open-air markets in the Ottoman capital and of their inability to leave their employers until they had paid off the cost of their passage. By the second day of the trial, Lviv papers reported a “feverish interest” in “this abominable matter,” noting that “the gallery was overflowing with curious listeners.” Judging by the smaller crowds in attendance on the third day, most of these curious onlookers were women, who were forced “to crowd into the corridors and vestibules” of the courthouse when government officials barred females from entering. At the conclusion of the ten-day trial, all but five of the accused traffickers were found guilty and sentenced with three months to one year in prison.

Even as social activists, proto-feminists, and medical experts in Galicia emphasized the link between domestic prostitution and international trafficking in women, perceptions of female “victims” settled into definable stereotypes. Public focus on the accused traffickers and their techniques encouraged many commentators to adopt a paradigm of passivity and innocence in

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8On the links between domestic prostitution in Eastern Europe and the export of women to foreign brothels, see Major Evans-Gordon, The Alien Immigrant (London, 1903); Bristow, Prostitution and Prejudice; and Donna J. Guy, Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires: Prostitution, Family, and Nation in Argentina (Lincoln, 1991).
9Coverage actually began a full year before the trial opened when the Warsaw newspaper, Słowo, printed details of the practices of the “white slavers.” “Handlarze kobiet,” Słowo, 31 July 1891, 4.
10“Handlarze dziewcząt” [Traffickers in girls], Gazeta Narodowa [The national gazette], 21 October 1892, 2.
11“W sprawie handlarzy dziewcząt” [On trafficking in girls], Gazeta Narodowa, 29 October 1892, 2. The relatively light sentences are in keeping with the penalties assigned in the 1852 Austrian penal code for procuring and for trafficking in minors.
depicting women involved in the sex trade. Scenarios about the “fall” into prostitution typically portrayed victims as impoverished country girls, newly arrived in the city and vulnerable to the false promises of procuring agents. Women working as prostitutes are ascribed little personal agency and appear unable to discern their own best interests; instead, powerful agents make decisions about their fate and coerce them into compliance. Indeed, the young women who spoke of their experiences in the brothels of the Middle East or Africa were depicted as innocent “white lilies” and “poor victims” whose mothers were “tricked” into sending them off to a foreign land to “public debauchery.”12 Characteristically, the women were promised positions as cashiers or household servants.13

One witness is said to have been working as a serving girl in a small town in Galicia when “an evil man bedeviled her, speaking like the snake who seduced Eve. Promising her high wages and an estate upon her return, he took away the naive girl, and she never even knew to which side of the world.”14 In order to buttress further the reference to original sin and hence the innocence and purity of the victims in this case, the reporter depicts the young woman, Róża, using standard bourgeois images of virtue: “She has a face of purity…. Pale like sorrow, she has sky-blue eyes, like veiled fog—and hair the color of straw. She is overwhelmingingly frail [and] speaks only hesitantly. She has an enigmatic silence about her, as if having returned from the abyss of purgatory, she is frightened to remember it and is worried she will be sent there again[,]… her pale lips are stubbornly pressed together from nervousness.”15 Descriptions such as this carefully situate the “victims” within the standard bourgeois ideal of weak, passive, and compliant female virtue. In this case, Róża is portrayed as appropriately fair haired and blue-eyed—even though her surname, Rosenreich, would suggest she was of Jewish background, as were several of the witnesses16—the prototype of an “innocent” Polish girl. The presentation is in no way altered by the news, later in her testimony, that “it is true that before [her] seduction to Constantinople [she] sold love” for two years in her home town in Poland. Her ultimate downfall is still blamed on the male procurer and his false promises.

Newspaper accounts depicted the strategies traffickers employed for entrapping their victims, noting that the “poor and unhappy” girls were generally “tempted with images of wealth, luxury, happiness, sometimes love, and then intoxicated … with the sweet hope of taking her away from horrible torment and eternal oppression.”17 Desperately impoverished and hopelessly naive, the victims could not be expected to assess the reality behind the promises. One

13“Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 20 October 1892, 2; “Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 22 October 1892, 2; “Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 23 October 1892, 2.
14“Z tajemnic” [Society’s secrets], Gazeta Narodowa, 9 July 1892, 2.
15Testimony of Róża Rosenreich, a “victim” probably of Jewish background in ibid.
16Although contemporary sources often characterized Jewish women as comprising a disproportionate number of prostitutes in Galicia, local police records for Cracow and Lviv do not confirm this impression. Roughly 25 to 30 percent of the surnames on the Cracow registries for 1878 to 1911 are Jewish, and similar figures are reported for Lviv. For example, 76 out of a total of 392 prostitutes inscribed on the Lviv police registry in 1905, or about 24 percent, were Jews—approximately the same proportion of Jews to Christians in the town. Archiwum Państwowe Miasta Krakowa i Województwa Krakowskiego (State Archive for the City and District of Cracow), DPKr (Dyrekcja Policji w Krakowie—Director of Police in the Cracow District) 439–440. “Prostytucje we Lwowie” [Prostitution in Lviv], Part V, Świat płciowy [Sexual world] 7 (1906): 31–33. Nonetheless, Jewish commentators expressed concern about the number of Jewish women resorting to prostitution. See for example, Pappenheim, and Rabinowitch, Zur Lage der jüdischen Bevölkerung, 47ff.
17“Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 19 October 1892, 2.
young woman testified that after the death of her father she was promised “treasure and wealth and a trip to America” by the defendants. Another, a fourteen-year-old orphan, was lured by the promise of marriage from one of the traders. The desire to “get ahead” through migration, marriage, or improved professional opportunity played into the naïveté with which the young women viewed these offers. Many believed they could earn a dowry in a few months and “more easily find a husband” when they returned. Even worse than the deception or trickery, reports emphasized the physical coercion the slavers applied to their captives, noting that “if one of [the girls] began to awaken and foresee the horrible future, saying she wanted to return, they used force to continue transporting them.” Indeed, the case was foreshadowed the previous summer by the discovery of the death of a young Christian girl from Galicia who refused to ply her trade as a prostitute after arriving in Istanbul and was beaten to death by her new “owners.”

The second predominant myth highlighted during white slavery trials was the myth of permanence. The imagery of women “falling” from virtue at the hands of Jewish middlemen removed the element of choice in the decision to engage in paid sex and helped depict prostitution as a permanent occupation, a one-way street from which a woman could not return to respectable life. An editorialist in the leading Lviv newspaper, Gazeta Narodowa, encapsulates this view when he wonders, “and what of these … unhappy beings … what will society do with them? They will testify to the place they are from and will be sent there. And then? And then society will turn away from them because they are excluded from it…. They are cast away in shame…. This woman is hated by all…. What is she? Is she a person? So what can she do? She has a choice: either she can smash her head with a stone from the pavement, or continue selling herself. Because people will give her nothing. She is excommunicated.” In fact, the relatively new terminology of the “white slave” (biała niewolnica), used for the first time in connection with prostitution in 1839 by a London reformer, appeared in Polish vernacular only in the 1880s, and was employed to depict the seemingly permanent shift in status the young women experienced. Commentators during the Lviv trial declared the defendants’ alleged crimes to be “more horrible … than [those of] Jack the Ripper” because, rather than taking “only the lives of [their] victims,” these “degenerates” left their prey in lifelong “shame and hard slavery.”

The notion that known prostitutes were socially excommunicated ties into the third mythological strain in these discussions—the idea that sex workers lived an isolated existence, neatly removed from bourgeois society. By presenting prostitutes as non-people, comfortably marginalized in foreign brothels or shut up in urban houses of ill repute, the Polish-language press sidestepped the more prevalent form of prostitution throughout the Habsburg lands at the turn of the century—individual women turning to paid sex to supplement meager wages or as a temporary occupation after arriving in a great city. The tale Galician papers told themselves and their readers about the social status of prostitutes was a tale of demoralization that hardly implicated the respectable classes of the landed nobles or urban professionals. Instead, prostitu-

18“Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 22 October 1892, 2.
20Ibid.
22“Z tajemnic,” Gazeta Narodowa, 9 July 1892, 2.
23Michael Ryan, Philosophy of Marriage (London, 1839), 14, quoted in Bristow, Prostitution and Prejudice, 35.
24“Handlarze dziewcząt,” Gazeta Narodowa, 19 October 1892, 2.
tion was discussed as a problem of the lower classes, the product of alcoholism, dysfunctional families, and laziness. Polish middle and upper classes could experience pity for its victims, but rarely did they exhibit a sense of complicity or responsibility.

So what was not being said about prostitution when the public focused on the procuring agents as the primary culprits? First, it appears that some of the young women who testified against their “captors” actually made the step into prostitution quite knowingly. Reports from white slavery trials acknowledged that young women torn from the bosoms of their families by “satanic” criminals were often very much “reconciled to their fate” and that many had “it is true, sold love before their seduction to Constantinople.” While recognizing that “many of them belonged to that class of women about whom one does not speak in society,” and that “each of them had been prompted by the misery of their life to market their own bodies,” the trope of innocence and vulnerability is nonetheless maintained throughout. Some confessed that they had knowingly accompanied their “captors” to distant ports; others depicted the harsh conditions in Turkish brothels as better than what they left behind back home in Galicia. “After all [testified one], I would go there again.”

In this and other cases, the preoccupation with the traffickers’ trickery and coercion averted attention from the dire poverty of the countryside, from which most of the “captives” escaped. Indeed, rural and inner-city economic desperation appear to have driven the turn to paid sex in the majority of cases. As one muckraking journalist discovered while conducting informal interviews with Lviv prostitutes a decade later, family pressures and poverty were the leading contributors to the decision to take up public sex, not trickery or coercion by male agents. Published in the somewhat radical journal, *Swiat płciowy* or “Sexual World,” these interviews reveal poignant tales of mothers and stepfathers forcing teenage daughters into prostitution in order to garner their wages, or of women who leveraged their poorly-paid positions as servants or waitresses to locate clients and supplement their meager salaries. The incidence of married women who engaged in commercial sex with the full knowledge of their husbands, or of those whose names were removed from the police registries in order to marry, was small but significant and suggests that the Polish lower classes may have viewed the turn to paid sex more pragmatically than their more prudish Victorian social superiors. Moreover, the widely held belief that many household maids, factory workers, and waitresses supplemented their earnings through paid sex, reflected in the occupations listed for prostitutes registered with the police, indicates that part-time prostitution may have been very closely integrated into the web of urban Galician society. Such assumptions may also account for the Lviv municipal government’s implementa-

\[26\] “Handlarze dziewcząt,” *Gazeta Narodowa*, 19 October 1892, 2.

\[27\] Ibid.

\[28\] Testimony of Elka Jenner and Chana Herman, “Handlarze dziewcząt,” *Gazeta Narodowa*, 20 October 1892, 2. Note that Jewish-sounding names predominate among the witnesses testifying against the accused traffickers. While there is no evidence that the procurers used the time-honored practice of ritual marriage to enable them to travel abroad with their wares, the procurers may well have been acquainted with the witnesses before the decision was made to “export” them.


\[30\] Statistics reported in the Lviv journal, *Swiat płciowy*, for 1905 indicate that of the 392 prostitutes officially registered in Lviv in January of 1906, six were married and four of these “conducted this business with the full agreement of their husbands.” Of the 225 names officially removed from the registry the previous year, eight left the profession in order to get married and twelve left to take up “honest work.” “Prostytucje we Lwowie,” Part V, 32. Christine Stansell discusses the incidence of “casual” or episodic prostitution as a means of supplementing meager wages in New York’s growing city streets in *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana, 1982), 171–92.
tion of regulations requiring all so-called “discrete prostitutes”—those whose part-time work as prostitutes was “screened by their work as cashiers, waitresses, or other similar functionaries”—to be subjected to regular medical examinations beginning 1 March 1906.31

These reports suggest both that prostitution was neither a one-way street from which girls could not return nor a practice that was isolated and segregated from polite society. Instead, sex work appears to have been an activity that implicated nearly every stratum of the social hierarchy. Not only did noblemen and burghers frequently force their maids to have sex with them, they also paid them such low wages that the women had little alternative but to seek compensation on the streets. Moreover, at all levels of the government bureaucracy, especially after 1867 when the Galician provincial government was in Polish hands, ethnically Polish police officers, medical doctors, and government officials ran a system that tolerated and perhaps even encouraged women to supplement their day jobs with commercial sex. Far from being enticed by dishonest brokers into selling sex on city streets or in foreign brothels, the young women who resorted to prostitution did so either because of a long-standing convention in Polish society or out of a calculated effort to earn money in times of need, or both. In either case, they were helped along by a partially Polish-staffed system of registration, examination, and regulation. Each of these observations points to some deep underlying gender inequalities, urban neglect, domestic abuses, and social and economic tensions that were only rarely addressed in public debate.

Contrary to the mythology surrounding Jewish urban procurers, many of the habits and rituals that brought young women into the world of commercial sex appear to have originated in the social practices of gentry estates and among established Polish families. Not only were serf owners granted the “right of the first night” with prospective peasant brides—or so many peasants believed under serfdom and thereafter—so too were emancipated peasant girls working as servants in manor houses expected to “service” visiting gentlemen as part of their employment.32 Indeed, medical reports from the 1860s and 70s emphasize the need to conduct sanitary examinations on young women working in noble households because it was here that peasant girls received their first introduction to the world of public sex. Moreover, army garrisons located away from urban centers typically ran their own brothels, also staffed by village girls.33 Later, in the early years of the twentieth century, the first step into commercial sex was often a servant’s relations with the master of the house or his son. In many respects, then, the moral panic of the late nineteenth century resulted at least partially from the greater visibility of the sex trade. Paid sex was not a new social problem, but was rather a transplanted or relocated phenomenon at this time. The possibility that parents were aware of their daughters’ activities in the manor houses and in army garrisons undermines the assumptions of village control over the morals of young women in the countryside. Indeed, evidence from the 1892 trial and elsewhere indicates that at least one mother demanded 500 zloty in “compensation” when her daughter was taken away to Constantinople. A 1905 survey conducted among registered prostitutes in L’viv discovered that the chief reason women turned to prostitution was pressure from

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32 See, for example, the work of Józef Rolle, a medical doctor stationed in the Polish countryside in the 1860s. He wrote his observations in a series of articles in *Przegląd lekarski Towarzystwa Nauk. Krakowskiego* [The medical review of the Cracow Scientific Society] (1869), nrs. 38, 39, 40.

33 Rolle notes the importance of provincial garrison towns. Baczkowski discusses Cracow’s significance as a concentrated center of soldiers and officers. Michał Baczkowski, “Prostytucja w Krakowie,” 596–97.
their families, primarily parents and stepparents driving their daughters into the trade so they could benefit from their earnings.34 By 1911, Cracow newspapers reported that trafficking in women was “conducted completely openly … under the protection of [the girls’] mothers.”35

Instead of focusing on the socioeconomic ills that helped drive the apparent increase in open sex trafficking, the Galician elite instead turned to a pattern of scapegoating that eventually emphasized racial purity and the salvation of the nation. Even in the 1892 trial, coverage emphasized the Jewishness and outsider status of the defendants, who are made to bear the responsibility for an entire system of paid sex. In this and other sex trafficking trials, Polish observers—while not always explicitly anti-Semitic—helped draw a clear link between Jews and the sex trade in the popular imagination. Reports emphasized the Yiddish terms at play among members of organized sex gangs and the Hebrew words coined for their private courts.36 Protagonists in the trial were clearly labeled. All the “main organizers were Jews,” noted one article. Those they procured were identified as “a poor Christian girl,” “a Polish girl,” or the “daughter of a farmer,” even as significant numbers of the prostitutes themselves were Jewish.37 By attributing primary responsibility to the so-called Jewish “kaftans” who ran the sex trade and discounting the agency of the women involved, such presentations provided the raw material for analyses that would make Jews the chief culprits in the ongoing sexual degeneracy of Polish society, while ignoring the role of Polish society in the export of young women for prostitution.

Even worse to the Polish Catholic reader, these “innocents” fell into a distinctly Jewish net. They were mistakenly buried in Jewish cemeteries and treated by Jewish doctors. In at least one case, we learn that the Jewish defendant had enjoyed sexual relations with one of his Christian victims.38 The sense of vulnerability and anxiety such depictions created for the Polish reading public was encapsulated in the rhetorical question, “how long will the jackals continue to feed upon our live bodies?” In the Polish imagination, the link such references implied between Jewish procurers “feeding” on the bodies of innocent young women and the frequent accusations against Jews in Central Europe for the ritual murder of Christians may have been easily drawn. Blood libel accusations retained currency in the East Central Europe of the 1880s and 1890s, and such references were probably not lost on Polish readers. The depiction here is of a world turned upside down. Rather than Christian Europeans with a civilizing mission enslaving pagan Africans, “monstrous,” “satanic” Jews had established networks of predatory agents to dupe Christian girls into sacrificing their virtue and their freedom. In this reverse enslavement process, Christian Poles are removed from European soil and transported to the Near East and North Africa, ending up in the Muslim dominated sites of Constantinople, Alexandria, and Cairo.

Indeed, the great European imperial powers are accused of tolerating such practices, whether as a mere extension of the domestic sex trade or out of a desire to avoid inflaming tensions between Jews and Slavs in the borders of their empires. As one exposé put it, “this monstrosity has become a business, organized on a wide scale, operating arrogantly under the eye of the Austrian police and even … with the cooperation of some of its members.... The [Austrian]

34Of 105 registered sex workers surveyed, thirty-five responded that they engaged in prostitution because of pressure from their families and twenty-one claimed they turned to it out of a desire to save money for a dowry or other “legitimate” interest. These results challenged the generally held assumption that women were driven into the trade by “agitation on the part of procurers.” “Prostytucje we Lwowie,” Part IV, 27–28.
35“Bagno wielkomiejskie” [The filth of the great city] Ilustrowany kuryer codzienny [The illustrated daily courier], 5 May 1911, 1–2.
36“Handlarze dziewczat,” Gazeta Narodowa, 19 October 1892, 2.
38“Handlarze dziewczat,” Gazeta Narodowa, 20 October 1892, 2.
Consulate [recommended] that it was better for the entire Austrian province [of Galicia] to keep the matter quiet and not to discuss it.”39 To the extent that imperial censorship permitted such commentary, Polish critics sought to excise both the external foreigner of the occupying powers and the internal Jewish foreigner. Ethnic Poles set out to deflect responsibility for the sex trade and thereby exculpate their own national community of blame for the moral downfall of a whole generation of compromised young women.

While there is certainly ample evidence that Jews were well represented in the sex trade in the Polish lands—as they were in most urban professions and international trading networks—it is equally clear that by turning the problem of paid sex and trafficking in human goods into a primarily Jewish issue, the Polish public effectively dodged a whole host of causal factors responsible for maintaining a thriving prostitution industry in Poland and beyond. Increasingly, Polish-language publications in Galicia quoted casually from sources that assumed “the majority of the procurers [in Galicia] are Jews,” or that trafficking was “an historical calling of the Jewish nation.”40 Moreover, a 1903 Polish-language overview of sex trafficking trials in Silesia concluded that “from the beginning to the end—the culprits, the victims, the agents, the informants, every link in this entire devil’s chain belongs to the Jewish faith.”41 In this way, a deep underlying malaise about the various perils of modernity—the dislocation of rural-urban migration, the shortage of jobs for single women, the dangers of emigration, the abuses of the household servant system—was sidestepped when the chief cause of the widening system of paid sex was agreed to be wily procurers who duped innocent girls into compromising their virtue.

Fantasies of Jewish involvement in public sex also helped channel discussions about prostitution into debates about the status and fate of the Polish nation. In particular, the public health anxieties that arose about the dramatic increase in the rate of syphilis prompted the birth of abstinence, purity, and eugenics societies that focused attention on issues of racial cleanliness. Interestingly, sexuality was being used in the service of a nationalism that was exclusionary and race-based. Newly-founded Polish abolition and sexual abstinence societies helped focus attention on these nationalist themes. Medical doctors led a campaign to ban prostitution for eugenics reasons. Poznanian doctor Antoni Wysłouch, for example, introduced new arguments for abolishing tolerated prostitution, explaining in a 1905 pamphlet that “it leads to the degeneration and bastardization of the species and the race.”42 Wysłouch’s work focused attention on the physical and racial implications of the sex trade. He posed the national body—including the family and unborn children—as the chief victims of the plague-like spread of venereal diseases. Highlighting medical research about the percentage of “innocent wives” who contracted syphilis from their infected husbands and the effects of the disease on unborn children, Wysłouch reserved his strongest sentiments for a new concern. He discussed the inherited syphilis-related deformities, such as “psychopathy, retardation, idiocy, neuropathy, hysteria, infertility, epilepsy, deafness,” and the possibility of “a new generation born as monsters.”43

These new ideas about inherited diseases and their effects on “race,” drawn from British and German thinkers, found reflection in a new Purity Society (Ethos), founded in 1905 at Jagiellonian University in Cracow by several members of the medical faculty.44 Organized primarily to fight the prostitution epidemic through moral suasion, the society stressed chastity before

40Dr. Schrank, Der Mädchenhandel, quoted in “Handel kobietami” [Traffic in women], Czystość 23 (1909): 354–56.
41Posner, Nad otchłanią, 22–23.
42Antoni Wysłouch, Prostytucja i jej skutki [Prostitution and its effects] (Poznań, 1905), 12–16.
43Ibid.
44See Gawin, Rasa i nowoczesnosc, for more on Czystość and other proto-eugenics organizations in the Polish lands.
marriage and promoted charitable and educational institutions to help “fallen” women return to honest lives. The new society’s journal promoted notions of the “degeneration of the species” such as those found in books like Wysłouch’s and stressed specifically the damage prostitution was causing to the Polish nation. For the first time, the Purity Society brought together sexual danger, urban blight, Jews, and prostitution in a campaign for national cleanliness and purity. Commercial sex was now explicitly labeled—“the moral evil that is destroying our nation”—and those who could be persuaded to work on the battle against public sex were urged to bring about the “regeneration of society” and to “love intensely our nation and devote [them]selves with all [their] strength to sacrifice” in its name.

As debate on the prospects of a regenerated Polish state heated up in all three partitions, Czystość acknowledged the increased “consciousness in the awakening of our nation” while emphasizing the need for moral cleanliness as an instrument of national renewal. The pages of the society’s journal became a forum for the proto-eugenics themes of racial purity and cleanliness, and the inherited diseases communicated by prostitutes were increasingly linked to anxiety about Jewish procurers. By 1909 the journal was claiming that the Jewish nation had an “historical calling” to traffic in live goods, that Jews consciously sought to “perform the historic work and fulfill their mission, their obligation on earth” of international trafficking. This new eugenicist emphasis on race, sex, and nation thus transformed anxieties about urban cleanliness and female virtue—both of which featured Jewish corruptors of morals—into anxieties about the cleanliness and future health of the nation. In so doing, the Jew became the persistent cancer infecting the Polish national body—its cities, its women, its families, its economy.

As commercial sex loomed ever larger in the public consciousness of early twentieth-century Galicia, discussions about the causes and remedies of the embarrassing “problem” of open prostitution revealed more about popular uneasiness with Polish “modernity” than they did about contemporary images of the Jew. Commentators relied on the time-honored tropes of Jews as corruptors of innocents, economic middlemen, and powerful conspiratorial figures rather than addressing the sources within Polish culture of the steady turn toward paid sex. Medical doctors, legal experts, university professors, and journalists alike, with only very rare exceptions, avoided direct concentration on the plight of a whole generation of impoverished young women caught between declining moral authority in the countryside—if that authority had ever really dominated—and the economic vulnerability of the great city. With few formal agencies stepping forward to aid this army of female proletarians and a whole host of middle- and upper-class Poles willing to take advantage of their inexpensive services, criticism of the system of sexual provisioning would have cut to the very heart of Polish class and gender relations. Obviously, prostitution was not a new practice in Galicia or anywhere else. Nor was the imagery of Jewish control a recent rhetorical device. Rather, what is novel here is the way in which the Polish national self-image was being reshaped through the use of sexual allusions and a more militant vocabulary of discipline, abstinence, and purity. The multiple tropes of victimhood allowed many members of the Polish-speaking Galician elite to focus attention away from the internal societal causes of the paid sex trade and to externalize the responsibility for prostitution outside of the nation they were trying to build.

45 Wysłouch’s book was reviewed in Czystość 6 (1905): 76–79.
46 Czystość 6 (1905): 66; Czystość 9 (1905): 81–82.
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