

RESEARCHING BODIES AND SOULS: THE TRAGIC PLIGHT OF THREE JEWISH WOMEN FORCED INTO PROSTITUTION IN THE AMERICAS

By Isabel Vincent

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Ms. Vincent will not be able to attend the conference but her book will be available at the Book Sale.

I am not an academic, and this is not an academic paper. I am hoping to convey some of the difficulties I encountered as a journalist researching a group of marginalized women in Brazil, Argentina, and to some extent New York City between 1860 and 1939.

My book (*Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas*) is about the so-called white slave trade, which took place between these years. The book chronicles, in microcosm, the fate of thousands of Jewish girls from the shtetls of Poland and Russia, who were forced into prostitution in Brazil, Argentina and the United States. Some of the women were also trafficked to China, India and South Africa, but my book does not deal with these parts of the world.

I should mention that the reason I chose Brazil as the focal point of this story was because it was the only place in the world where some of these Jewish prostitutes joined together to create an extraordinary mutual aid organization that they called the Society of Truth (translation from the Hebrew). The organization was founded in 1916, after it was made clear to the Jewish prostitutes that the Jewish community would have nothing to do with their plight. They were shunned from synagogues and other cultural and social organizations and were not allowed to be buried in Jewish cemeteries. Not only did the prostitutes buy a plot of land in an industrial suburb of Rio that they used as their cemetery, but they also established their own synagogue in what was then the Jewish quarter of the city. Of course, they could never convince a rabbi to officiate, so they hired a cantor for Sabbath prayers. The minyan was often drawn from their oppressors – the men who had trafficked them to South America.

Much of my research on these women came initially from academic studies. The problem is that when I read a lot of these accounts, they were often devoid of any kind of humanity and lacked the kind of interesting detail that I look for as a journalist. I found a richer trove of information and invaluable detail in police and newspaper accounts of the period, and interviews.

The most invaluable text for me was Ferreira da Rosa's *O Lupanar* or *The Brothel*. This book was published in the 1890s by one of Rio de Janeiro's leading journalists of the day. The book contains the most complete description of how the brothels functioned and how young women were often duped by Jewish pimps, who often married them in quasi-

religious ceremonies, and shipped them off to be prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires.

Ferreira da Rosa uses police reports of the day to report on both the Jewish pimps and the plight of the women they enslaved. His detailed descriptions of their lives were invaluable to me. For instance, in the story of Sophia Chamys, a thirteen year old shtetl girl who is bought by a pimp in Warsaw and trafficked to both Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro, Ferreira da Rosa notes that one of the ways the pimp Isaac Boorosky was able to convince the girl to work as a prostitute was by promising her a trip by train. According to the police report, Sophia readily acquiesced even though she knew what fate awaited her, because she had always dreamed of riding on a train, and she would become the first person from her shtetl to make such a journey.

Ferreira da Rosa also documents a great deal of the humanity of both the pimps and prostitutes. There are accounts of prostitutes taking charge of a group of children whose Jewish immigrant parents perished in a Yellow Fever epidemic in Rio. The Jewish prostitutes take care of the three young children, communicating with their surviving relatives in Liverpool, and making sure that they get safely aboard the ship that takes them to England.

There are other such rich details in Ferreira da Rosa's account, which incidentally is not available in any library in Brazil. This is indeed unfortunate, but as with so many aspects of researching my book, I was lucky to stumble across people who helped me immensely. Esther Largman, a fiction writer, who had written a fictional account of these women, had a photocopy of the book in her possession, which she generously gave to me for my research. The book had been offered to her by the grandson of Ferreira da Rosa when her book *Jovems Polacas* was released in Brazil. Largman told the grandson that the book needed to be in the National Library, and urged him to donate the work. The Library, for whatever reason, refused the donation. I am told that in the end he donated the book to a regional library in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

In addition to Largman, I was also helped in my research by historian Beatriz Kushnir, whose MA thesis on the prostitutes was published in book form as *Baile de Mascaras*. Her book proved very difficult for me (a non-academic) to read, but Kushnir kindly handed over to me the minutes of the meetings of the Society of Truth from the 1930s through to the 1960s. Kushnir did not say how she came to receive this documentation, but at the time she was planning to donate it to one of the Rio archives. The minutes documented in detail how the prostitutes raised money to buy the two-storey building that they used as their synagogue and administrative offices. Many of their parties and religious celebrations were also documented, as was a major rift within the organization itself.

But most importantly, by compiling a list of names from the minutes, I was able to finally track down the accountant who worked for the Society of Truth, from the 1950s until its demise in the early 1980s. Alberto da Costa proved an invaluable source of information

to me, filling in details, fleshing out the individuals I was writing about. I don't think that I could have completed this book without Alberto's help.

Another person who was extremely helpful was the custodian at the prostitutes' cemetery in Inhauma, an industrial suburb on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro. Daniel Rodrigues opened the iron gates of the cemetery whenever I showed up, and filled me in on the controversy surrounding the cemetery and described the final visitors in great detail. Daniel had taken care of the cemetery for the last forty years, and knew the ugly politics that had surrounded its upkeep in the Jewish community.

I visited the cemetery in April, with another journalist who was doing a story on my book. Daniel was no longer there. According to his nephew, who now oversees the cemetery's upkeep, Daniel disappeared. According to the nephew, Luciano Rocha, Daniel became a victim of the gangland violence that is becoming increasingly common in the favelas or shantytowns of Rio. Daniel was kidnapped outside the cemetery last October. The kidnapers seized his credit card, and went on a shopping spree. At some point they killed him, or that is what Rocha believes, since no one has heard a word from Daniel since the incident. His body has not been found.

I also benefited a great deal from doing research in the present-day red light district in Rio. I met one prostitute, in her seventies, who had worked for one of the polacas, as the Jewish prostitutes were called, when she was 18 years old. I also tracked down a seamstress who had made clothes for them, and remembered them well.

Surprisingly, many Jewish historians who specialize in this period, refused to speak to me. There is a code of silence that haunts this story. Many in the Jewish community are still immensely ashamed of this little piece of history. I suspect too that the many of the prostitutes' descendants, who are in positions of power in Brazilian society, don't want their past known. When I tracked down people who were listed as beneficiaries in the prostitutes' wills, all of them refused to speak to me. One woman, who had identified the body of Rebecca Freedman, the final president of the Society of Truth, when she died in 1984, denied that she ever knew her.

I spent five years researching this book, and it soon became clear to me that I needed to focus on a few of the women in order to do this story justice. As I mentioned earlier, there have been a few academic treatments of this story, but most of these were written in a broad sweep, with little regard for the individual stories that, as a journalist, and a reader I found to be critical.

Consequently, my book focuses on three women. In the first part of the book, Sophia Chamys represents the early period of the slave trade in naïve shtetl girls to the New World. Her naivete and lack of experience are staggering, and I found myself shaking my head in disbelief at her utter inability to understand what was happening to her.

Rebecca Freedman makes up the second and last parts of the book. From all accounts, she was already a prostitute when she arrived in Rio de Janeiro in 1916 at the age of 35.

She sailed from New York, to Rio although she was originally from Poland. She was one of the strongest willed women I have ever come across. For me, Rebecca represents the core of the Society of Truth, It was her single-minded devotion to the other women, her willingness to perform the tahara ceremony (cleansing ritual before death) that inspired me in this story. The image of a prostitute purifying another prostitute is something that I will never forget.

The third woman I focused on was Rachel Liberman, who was almost single-handedly responsible for the downfall of the Zwi Migdal in South America. The Zwi Migdal was the Polish-Jewish-dominated mob that controlled the slave trade. Liberman agreed to testify against them in a Buenos Aires courtroom. Her testimony sent shockwaves throughout the country, where dozens of pimps were rounded up and sent to jail. In this part of the research, Prof. Nora Glickman's account of Liberman's life and work was extremely useful to me.

I should add that when I finally completed my book, the original draft had more than 700 footnotes. I documented almost every sentence and paragraph because I did not want anyone to accuse me of making up such a story. This was extremely important to me because I am in a profession that values truth and facts above all else. However, when I handed the book into my publisher in New York, she told me I had to re-write it. She told me (and you will all excuse the comment) that nobody was going to get through these stories and be touched by the strength of these women if the book read like a university textbook. So, it was back to the drawing board in order to get that kind of rich detail to be able to tell a gripping non-fiction story. The second part of the research process proved much more difficult than the first because of this.

I want to conclude by saying that as a journalist, this was the most difficult assignment of my career. The investigation involved was difficult enough, but it was compounded by the fact that few people wanted to honor these women or even to speak about them. The women themselves left little in the way of letters (most of them were illiterate) or diaries that I would normally draw upon for this kind of work. I met with frustration on just about every day of the research. In the end, I hope that by focusing on a few stories for which I was able to gather the data, I have done these women some kind of justice.

Thank you very much, and I am sorry that my visa situation in Brazil has made it impossible for me to travel to the conference.