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**DARK AGENTS OF SEX:
SEARCHING FOR THE SOURCES OF PROSTITUTION
IN EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY POLAND**

Abstract

A rise of interest in issues of heredity and advances in medicine in the nineteenth century resulted in the widespread medicalization of social phenomena. Theories formulated in the field of natural sciences increasingly served as a tool to explain unacceptable patterns of social behaviour, including prostitution which began to be seen as a biologically determined condition. As a main channel for the spread of STDs – some of them potentially transmissible across generations (congenital syphilis) – prostitution became one of the major concerns of medical professionals. Thus, what was previously a sin and an insult to middle-class moral standards, now came to be seen as a health menace to the entire population. In times of increased competition between nation-states, the latter argument played an even more important role, and the ruling elites sought to tighten control over what they perceived as ‘dangerous bodies’. As campaigners against the ‘great social evil’ also analysed prostitutes’ social milieu, discourses on the causes of prostitution were highly confusing. One source of confusion was Morel’s theory of degeneration, in which the author skilfully combined environmental influence with the concept of hereditary pathology. Additionally, some authors still adhered to a much older explanation for social ills. The construction of an evil ‘Other’ – typically unscrupulous Jew – responsible for planting various physical and/or moral ‘plagues’ in a victimized population, thus threatening its biological existence. The fear of deterioration, inevitably leading to extinction, unified proponents of old-style and modernist anti-vice campaigners. This article offers an overview of expert narratives on the causes of prostitution in the early decades of twentieth century Poland.

Keywords: prostitution, nature versus nurture debate, social hygiene, eugenics, traffic in women and children, anti-Semitism, Poland

Leaping progress in the natural sciences in the course of the nineteenth century created the temptation to see various social phenomena through biological lenses. Social scientists eagerly embraced the tenets of the theory of evolution to explain the workings of human societies, and the increased interest in issues of heredity and the theory of degeneration provided tools to explain a variety of social ills, such as alcoholism, prostitution, or supposed criminal inclinations, in purely biological terms. The popularity of biologism in elite circles may be seen as a reaction to the obvious failure of efforts to curb undesirable social phenomena through moral education and reform. It should be noted, however, that nineteenth century reformers often desired to change individuals, not their living conditions and social milieus. In light of their failures, they were keen to adopt the concept of a biological predilection to explain certain patterns of human behaviour, including sexual habits foreign to middle-class standards.

The theory of degeneration is an example of a convenient explanatory model that originated the biological school of explaining of 'social evils' in a scientific way. One of such social evils was prostitution, which was feared as a hotbed for sexually transmitted diseases (STD). In the late nineteenth century progress in medical knowledge on STDs, seen as a potentially dysgenic factor (congenital syphilis), was not accompanied by corresponding advances in treatment, which must have evoked fears of an inevitable decline among medical professionals. Alfred Fournier (1832–1914), who emphasized importance of syphilis in degenerative process, claimed that the children of syphilitic parents were recognizable by their 'inherent weakness' and "they come into this world diminutive, mean-looking, sickly, of poor constitution, wrinkled, shrivelled, stunted-looking, like 'little old men'".¹ By the end of the nineteenth century physicians commonly agreed that syphilis was a cause of general paralysis and in infected children was responsible for various malformations, arrest of physical development, mental retardation, impairment of vision, deafness and generally weak constitution. This powerful image of a 'degenerated syphilitic body' translated into stigmatization of a prostitute.

¹ Quoted in: Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease. The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-century Medical Discourse* (New York, 1997), 151.

I AN AUGUR OF DECLINE

The scheme of degeneration was first described by the French psychiatrist Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809–73) in his *Traité des dégénérescences*, published in 1857. Degeneration – Morel argued – was a pathological alteration in a perfect primitive type and resulted from the influences of environmental factors, such as climate, diet, diseases, poverty, poor education (or its lack), alcohol abuse and moral depravity. According to this concept, pathological traits acquired under the influence of the environment would be inherited from generation to generation with growing intensity, eventually causing complete sterility and the disappearance of degenerated families. Late nineteenth century intellectuals rejected the latter argument, claiming that the birth rate in what they called ‘degenerated families’ was actually much higher than in other segments of society, which must lead to the gradual decline of humanity. Thus reversed social fertility became one of the primary concerns for medical professionals and social workers.

Morel distinguished four stages of degeneration: in the first generation the touch of degeneration would be manifested in a nervous and hysterical temperament and eccentric behaviour, whereas intellectual skills remained unimpaired; second generation degeneration would cause individuals with unimpaired intellectual capacities to suffer from emotional imbalances, disturbances in their feelings, and consequently lead to moral corruption. The final two stages were a generation of imbeciles with a severe degree of mental retardation, and finally a generation of idiots, driven only by instinct and demonstrating extremely low mental development.² Prostitutes were typically described as hysterical, morally insane and/or feeble-minded and, as such, they fell neatly into Morel’s taxonomy of degenerates.

This scenario of a degenerative process was nothing but an interpretation of the theory of heredity, i.e. the inheritance of acquired characteristics, a theory attributed to Jean Baptiste Antoine de

² Richard. D. Walter, ‘What Became of the Degenerate. A Brief History of the Concept’, *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, xi (1956), 422–9, here 423.

Lamarck (1744–1829).³ In his *Philosophie zoologique*, published in 1809, Lamarck explained that changes in environmental conditions cause adaptation changes in a given organism, which are passed to the offspring, bringing about an evolution of the succeeding generations. *Mutatis mutandis* this theory justified the necessity of social reform and improvement of the living standards and education of the poor and needy segments of society in order to uproot various pathologies. However, a negative interpretation of the theory could also be applied to explain the involution of the human species. According to this pessimistic scenario, an unfavourable environment reinforces undesirable traits and leads to inevitable degeneration.

Morel's theory was a particularly attractive concept inasmuch as it stood at the crossroads of environmental and hereditary discourse and offered a biological/constitutional explanation for various social ills, while at the same time making it possible to retain at least certain elements of the environmental approach. According to his highly ambivalent argumentation external factors may cause regress, and once it occurs it is passed on to the next generation. Thus, a 'born prostitute' could be seen, on the one hand, as a victim of poor living conditions and moral standards, and on the other as an unreformable pathological deviation from what was considered normal.

II

'A BORN PROSTITUTE'

Scientific studies on prostitution were carried out as the nineteenth century progressed⁴, providing a picture of a prostitute's supposed physiognomy and physiology and revealing features of her character

³ Kamil Popowicz pointed out that Lamarck was not the founder of the theory and suggested the formulation – "Hippocratic theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics". Kamil Popowicz, *Lamarckizm społeczny a rasizm i eugenika we Francji* (Warszawa, 2009), 99. In this paper, however, I use the terms 'Lamarckism' and 'neo-Lamarckism' since they are more common in the literature.

⁴ First systematic studies on prostitution were carried out in 1830s in France and in 1840s in England. See: Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute. Representing Prostitution in 19th century France* (Cambridge, MA, 1989), 8–33; Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society. Woman, Class and the State* (Cambridge, 1980), 32–47.

and social background. As early as 1836⁵ the French hygienists – Alexandre Jean Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet (1790–1835) provided a description of the physical appearance of the prostitute – the body weight, hair and eye colour, temperament and peculiarities of genital organs – the image that reappeared in later studies on prostitutes’ physiognomy. However, and unlike the later eponymous authors in the field, Parent-Duchatelet rejected any idea that the prostitute was inherently marked as a prostitute. In his view, specific pathologies observed in prostitutes, especially in their genital organs, were the results of illness, not hereditary pathology. As Sander Gilman points out, “this follows from his view that prostitution is an illness of a society, rather than that of an individual or group of individuals”.⁶

Late nineteenth century experts on prostitution tended to see a prostitute’s body as the signature of her inner qualities and predilections. “Anomalies were the signs of something else (atavism, degeneration, social danger) and thus they played a part in medical semiology.”⁷ A ‘born prostitute’ was assumed to be marked by specific corporal structure and features of appearance and easy to distinguish from a ‘normal woman’. “The manner in which reformers used the term ‘prostitute’ was highly variable and vague, though each was convinced of his ability to recognize such a woman.”⁸

The founder of the theory of a born prostitute was Benjamin Tarnowsky (1837–1906), a Russian physician and expert on venereal diseases. In his *Prostitution und Abolitionismus*, published in 1888, he argued that the predisposition to prostitution was mirrored by physical appearance. As the most frequent *signa degenerationis* he catalogued abnormalities in skull shape, facial asymmetry, distortion

⁵ Alexandre Jean Baptiste Parent-Duchatelet, *On prostitution in the city of Paris* was published posthumously in 1836.

⁶ Sander L. Gilman, *Sexuality. An Illustrated History. Representing the Sexual in Medicine and Culture from the Middle Ages to the Age of AIDS* (New York, 1989), 298.

⁷ David G. Horn, *The Criminal Body. Lombroso and the Anatomy of Deviance* (New York and London, 2003), 11. The medico-anthropological construction of a prostitute’s body partly corresponded with older theories of physiognomy and phrenology which, it could be argued, in certain way referred to the ancient Galenic concept of four types of temperament, depending on the dominance of one of the body liquids: sanguinic, melancholic, choleric, and phlegmatic.

⁸ Barbara Littlewood and Linda Mahood, ‘Prostitutes, Magdalenes and Wayward Girls: Dangerous Sexualities of Working Class Women in Victorian Scotland’, *Gender & History*, iii, 2 (1991), 160–75, here 162.

of ear-shape, a low forehead, deformed nose, atrophy of the incisors, excessive weight, and dark hair.⁹ Tarnowsky attributed prostitution to a special type of hereditary female pathology responsible for the particular predilection to practice prostitution. This approach provided an explanation of the difficult to understand cases of women who, while not forced to do so by poverty, earned their living as prostitutes. “The core of prostitution – wrote Tarnowsky – is always comprised of those women who have a sick loathing toward any work and are morally so deadened that the disgrace of venal caresses is relatively less burdensome for them than any other occupation, any other wages.”¹⁰ Pauline Tarnowsky¹¹ continued this line of argumentation providing anthropometric measurements of prostitutes’ skull size and abnormalities of the face, such as overdevelopment of the parietal region of the skull and appearance of so-called Darwin’s ear¹².

Italian psychiatrist Cesare Lombroso (1836–1909), who in 1876 popularized a constitutional model of a ‘born criminal’ and therefore is commonly credited as the father of the ‘born prostitute’ concept, further developed this theory in his *La Donna Delinquente*, published in 1893. Lombroso’s anthropological model of a born prostitute corresponded with the physiognomy of a prostitute proposed by Tarnowsky. What Lombroso contributed was the claim that a born prostitute is a creature deprived of any signs of emotional life, including sexual desire. “Increased sexual desire does not make a woman a prostitute,” wrote Lombroso, “It may push her to excessive use of her husband or looking for sexual compensation with other men, even a complete stranger, but she will not slide into prostitution. A feeling of shame, even though sometimes overshadowed by the power of

⁹ Veniamin Tarnowsky, *Prostitution und Abolitionismus* (Hamburg and Leipzig, 1890), 133–4.

¹⁰ Quoted in Laurie Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters: Prostitutes and their Regulation in Imperial Russia* (Berkeley, 1995), 127.

¹¹ Laurie Bernstein argues that Benjamin Tarnowsky’s work „had additional ‘scientific’ grounding in work of his wife, Praskov’ya Tarnowskaya, in Europe known as Pauline Tarnowsky”, Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, 126. Sander Gilman, however, mentioned that Pauline Tarnowsky „wrote in the tradition of her father, V.M. Tarnowsky” (Gilman, *Sexuality*, 299) and in yet another work „in the tradition of her eponymous colleague V.M. Tarnowsky” (Sander Gilman, ‘The Hottentot and the Prostitute. Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality’, in Kimberly N. Pinder [ed.], *Race-ing Art History. Critical Readings in Race Art History* [New York, 2002], 127).

¹² Gilman, *Sexuality*, 299.

desire, remains. If, despite sexual coldness, a woman falls into prostitution the reason is not promiscuity but a lack of moral sense. Sexual coldness is only aiding element, adaptation in the Darwinian sense, because a woman equipped with a higher sexual sensitivity would not stand a prostitute's life."¹³

Experts on prostitution such as Tarnowsky argued that an inborn female pathology cannot be changed and the only way to protect respectable segments of society from the threat of syphilis was strict control and surveillance. The nineteenth century system of regulation – with its tolerated brothels and compulsory police-medical control – expanded control over the life of women suspected of being a potential source of infection with STD. Thus, “the pursuit of scientific knowledge legitimized the establishment of technologies of power apparatuses for regimentation, surveillance, and control of female sexuality.”¹⁴

Towards the end of the century, however, the failure of the regulatory system to control STDs became obvious to the majority of reformers worldwide. In her comprehensive analysis on prostitution in Polish lands Keely Stauter-Halsted pointed out that the lack of success in treating syphilis “helped affirm a growing sentiment in favour of segregating diseased women from the rest of ‘clean’ society. This preoccupation with labelling, documenting and isolating replaced the earlier emphasis on treatment, cure and reintegration of morally suspect women into the social mainstream.”¹⁵ It could be argued, however, that regulation enhanced the stigmatization of the women registered rather than their rehabilitation and social reintegration. The efforts to find a remedy for syphilis were dictated by a fear of spreading the infection to the noble classes, not by sympathy for the fate of a prostitute. This became all the more true when the potentially dysgenic results of infection were articulated.

¹³ Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *Kobieta jako zbrodniarka i prostytutka. Studia antropologiczne poprzedzone biologią i psychologią kobiety normalnej* (Warszawa, 1895), 462 (author's own translation from Polish into English).

¹⁴ Paula Werth, ‘Through the Prism of Prostitution: State, Society and Power’, *Social History*, xix (1994), 1–15, here 12.

¹⁵ Keely Stauter-Halsted, ‘The Physician and the Fallen Woman: Medicalizing Prostitution in the Polish Lands’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, xx, 2 (2011), 271–90, here 283.

At the end of the century, this newly acquired knowledge helped to establish organizations promoting sexual purity. As Mary E. Odem pointed out “already during the 1890s an increasing number of physicians expressed their support for the social purity campaign ... Unlike female reformers they didn’t focus on the sexual vulnerability of women but rather emphasized the health menace posed by illicit sexuality.”¹⁶ Thus ‘purity’, as opposed to ‘promiscuity’, became the key word in the drive to prevent a nation from inevitable health deterioration and degeneration, and a eugenic program proposed in the early years of the twentieth century struck a chord with the social purity campaign. Polish intellectuals borrowed ideas that were popular in other countries and enthusiastically embarked on an anti-vice campaign.

III A EUGENIC LINK¹⁷

In the early years of the twentieth century, periodicals such as *Zdrowie* [Health] or *Czystość* [Purity] became an important platform for public debate among Polish doctors, social workers and educators concerned with various aspects of hygiene and sexuality, and therefore became arenas for the incubation of eugenic ideas. The dysgenic effects of prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases were the primary concern of Poland’s eugenic movement in its early years, and remained important in the following decades when the eugenic program broadened to include harsher negative eugenic measures. Polish physicians were continually alarmed by the dangerous increase in the number of individuals infected with sexually transmitted diseases, which affected both the quality and quantity of future generations. Physician Tomasz Welfle argued that “the devastating consequences of syphilis

¹⁶ Mary E. Odem, *Delinquent daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the United States 1885–1920* (Chapell Hill, 1995), 33.

¹⁷ Segments of this paragraph were first published in Kamila Uzarczyk, ‘State-oriented Eugenic Movements: Poland’, in Marius Turda (ed.), *The History of East-Central European Eugenics, 1900–1945. Sources and Commentaries* (London, 2015); for more on the Polish eugenic movement see also the comprehensive study by Magdalena Gawin, *Rasa i nowoczesność. Historia polskiego ruchu eugenicznego 1880–1952* (Warszawa, 2003), and Michał Musielak, *Sterylicacja ludzi ze względów eugenicznych w Stanach Zjednoczonych, Niemczech i w Polsce (1899–1945)* (Poznań, 2008).

affect not just one generation, but they are passed on to future generations and, therefore, damages caused [by the disease] are far more grievous than the rate of its spreading.”¹⁸ According to his research, carried out in 1930, three per cent of newborns in Poland suffered from congenital syphilis and a large majority of them died prematurely, before their first year. Moreover, argued Welfle, around ten per cent of feeble-minded children were infected with syphilis.¹⁹ At the same time Leon Wernic, the president of Polish Eugenic Society, noted some beneficial effects of the STD epidemic in the more rapid disappearance of “the least valuable female psychic type: a prostitute,”²⁰ who due to syphilitic contamination becomes sterile quickly. However, as he also noted, the undesirable effects of infection – infertility, frequent miscarriages, a high mortality rate or severe feeble-mindedness of children of syphilitic parents – far outweighed the advantages and could lead to the extinction of eugenically valuable types. “Venereal diseases”, argued Wernic, “threatened the health condition of fit individuals, characterized by a strong sexual desire. The weak (asthenia) types typically exhibited a weak sexual desire and therefore avoided infection. Exclusion of the fit individuals from procreation (because of infection and the resulting infertility) would worsen the prognosis as to the quality of future generations, because the unfit would dominate in the procreation of the human kind.”²¹ The impact of sexually transmitted diseases on the health of the nation and the process of biological selection required that all possible measures be taken to prevent further deterioration.

The Polish eugenic program, as it developed in the early years of the twentieth century, embraced a set of preventive reforms traditionally belonging to the older movement of social hygiene. The link between the two movements came from the importance of heredity and concern with the biological condition of future generations. Social hygiene was clearly an outgrowth of the popular neo-Lamarckian

¹⁸ Tomasz Welfle, ‘Przymiot jako czynnik dysgeniczny w społeczeństwie’, *Zagadnienia Rasy*, 4 (1933), 240, quoted in Uzarczyk, ‘State-oriented Eugenic Movements’, 75.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*. For discussion on congenital syphilis see: Sponberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease*, 143–59.

²⁰ Leon Wernic, ‘Rola chorób wenerycznych w selekcji biologicznej’, *Zagadnienia Rasy*, 1 (1936), 3–15, here 11.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics, whereas eugenics, in the strict sense, referred to the new discoveries in the science of genetic inheritance. Adherents of the neo-Lamarckian concept claimed that over the course of time and under improved social conditions and education, nurture would transform nature. The followers of the hereditary theory, based on Weismann's discoveries and the rediscovery of Mendel's laws of inheritance, maintained that biological endowment determined the nature of an individual, regardless of environmental influences, and that a genetic predilection to certain patterns of behaviour sooner or later comes to light.

IV NATURE VERSUS NURTURE

Although new discoveries in the field of heredity at the turn of the century gave a boost to biological determinism and the rise of the eugenic movement, the concept of a hereditary predisposition to prostitution gradually lost popularity among the intellectual elite. Nevertheless, in Poland the debate over prostitutes' backgrounds revealed a certain ambiguity. On one hand, a majority of authors explained prostitution in a socio-economic context, as the result of poverty and a poor social background; while on the other hand the same authors clearly did not entirely abandon the idea that hereditary pathological traits might push some women – though only a small percentage – to prostitution.

According to Leon Wernic, 40 per cent of prostitutes were forced into prostitution by poverty, 20 per cent due to their ignorance, and 10 per cent were seduced and abandoned by their lovers. Only a small percentage of prostitutes were hereditarily predisposed, and in this group the daughters of alcoholics and parents suffering from syphilis were especially destined to fall into prostitution.²² A physician and Polish expert on prostitution, Józef Maćko, was similarly undecided and explained that:

In colloquial language a born prostitute is one who demonstrates weak moral standards, is not properly educated, easily manipulated, lazy

²² Zofia Daszyńska-Golińska, *Zagadnienia polityki populacyjnej* (Warszawa, 1927), 303.

and deceitful. But many of those whom we designate as a born prostitute slid into this humiliating condition because of poverty, their environment, and bad behavioural patterns. Only in a small proportion of these women can psychopathological traits be traced. ... Only a very few women practice prostitution driven by their passion, although not for free.²³

In his study on prostitution in Poland Maćko expressed the view that there were certain endogenic factors, such as excessive sexual drive, which increased the risk of sliding into prostitution, but he considered them to be of secondary importance. At the same time, however, he argued that:

One of the most important conditions predisposing one to prostitution is sexual psychopathy, and most of all paradoxical sexuality. This term relates to the condition when a strong sexual drive occurs too early or too late in life, at a totally inadequate age. There are cases of childhood satyriasis or nymphomania, in which even seven-year-old children demonstrate an excessive sexual drive rooted, indeed, in their nature and not the result of environmental influences.²⁴

One of the studies on prostitutes' backgrounds which clearly favoured the theory of a hereditary predisposition to illicit sex was the research carried out in 1915 by the psychiatrist Maria Grzywo-Dąbrowska in a hospital for venereal diseases near Łódź. She examined 110 of the 587 prostitutes incarcerated in the hospital and, based on this sample, concluded that 65 per cent of the women studied showed signs of a hereditary predisposition to prostitution; in this group 15 per cent were clearly 'born prostitutes' and 50 per cent were hereditarily burdened with alcoholism and/or mental illnesses. The remaining 35 per cent²⁵ showed no hereditary pathological traits, but demonstrated certain acquired abnormalities (laziness, impulsive

²³ Józef Maćko, *Nierząd jako choroba społeczna* (Warszawa, 1938), 45.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, 49; this argument stood in obvious contradiction to Lombroso's picture of a born prostitute as a creature deprived of passion and sexual desire. In his earlier publication Maćko mentioned that "a born prostitute remains so her entire life and there is no way to bring her back to a respectable life", see Józef Maćko, *Prostytucja. Nierząd – handel żywym towarem – pornografia ze stanowiska historii, etyki, higieny i prawa* (Warszawa, 1927), 65.

²⁵ The data from this study were quoted by Halina Siemieńska, 'Metody wychowawczo-poprawcze w zakresie zwalczania nierządu', *Praca i Opieka Społeczna*, 2 (1933), 156–63.

reactions, deceitfulness etc.).²⁶ “Environmental factors might force a woman to become a prostitute,” she remarked, “but living conditions alone do not explain why she becomes a professional prostitute for life. In such cases there are special traits of character predisposing to prostitution. ... It is commonly accepted in psychiatry, she concluded, that certain individuals are predisposed to mental disorders and in such cases nervous collapse, contagious diseases etc. may cause serious mental illness. I wonder if, similarly, a predisposition to prostitution is not congenital in some persons who are hereditarily burdened and degenerated and therefore easily slide into prostitution.”²⁷

Nevertheless, in the early years of the twentieth century the theory of a ‘born prostitute’ was clearly in decline, and in Poland as well many authors stressed that certain pathological traits found in prostitutes, and formerly seen as inborn qualities, were in fact acquired characteristics and the result of practicing prostitution. However, there was a common agreement that alcoholism, mental illnesses, and feeble-mindedness, considered as hereditarily transmitted in 70 per cent of cases, were factors predisposing a woman to prostitution. Feeble-minded women, some physicians argued, usually demonstrate an excessive sexual desire; according to Józef Maćko in some cases it manifests itself in compulsive masturbation, in others in vulgar language or scenes of jealousy etc. Since women were seen as incapable of resisting their instinctive sexual passions, they were an easy prey to procurers. “The facts are striking and prove that in women sexual desire is controlled by a big brain, whereas in men by secondary brain centres”²⁸, wrote Maćko.

As Paula Bartley pointed out, “in the case of women, feeble-mindedness was associated with the crimes of immorality and prostitution. In turn immorality and prostitution were associated with feeble-mindedness, making it difficult to separate cause and effect. Nevertheless, not all prostitutes were thought to be feeble-minded; the successful, those who serviced the middle and upper classes and those ... who operated in higher social milieu, were considered in full control of their wits.”²⁹ Economically successful prostitutes did not

²⁶ Maria Grzywo-Dąbrowska, *Psychologia prostytutki* (Warszawa, 1928), 13.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, 70.

²⁸ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 70.

²⁹ Paula Bartley, *Prostitution. Prevention and Reform in England 1860–1914* (London and New York, 2000), 125.

fall into the category of degenerates. As one of the physicians assumed “the woman who is a professional prostitute is seldom feeble-minded, while casual prostitutes, women who are prostitutes only when other means of livelihoods fail ... are frequently feeble-minded.”³⁰

Women were regarded in general, when compared to men, as mentally underdeveloped creatures. Their intellectual inferiority meant that they were not capable of controlling their affections and therefore men “as a partner more sound of mind should usually be considered responsible for seduction.”³¹ The narrative of seduction was popular in both medical writings and in the turn-of-the-century novel.³² Typically, the seducer was a married, middle-class man of a certain status, and his victim belonged to the impoverished working class milieu. To quote Carol Walkowitz: “Construction of a prostitute as a victim strengthened the determination to control prostitution. ... The construction of a prostitute as an innocent, wounded body in combination with moralist discourse implies that prostitutes can be treated sympathetically only if they can be positioned as victims of social or psychological maladjustment, trauma, or force.”³³ Scientific studies served to prove the traumatic experiences of prostitutes’ childhood and youth.

In Poland the most comprehensive research project was carried out between 1934 and 1939 on a group of 600 registered Warsaw prostitutes. The author of the project, Irena Surmacka, adhered to the view of the importance of prostitutes’ social background, pointing out that the “living conditions of the women subjected to examination were so far from average that one shouldn’t doubt that there was a direct link between standard of living and prostitution.”³⁴ Interestingly, she claimed that in Jewish families “it was not poverty and economic conditions that played the decisive role in a girl’s fall into disgrace, but a specific tragic dynamic of the family relationship ... most of all

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 68.

³² See Kamila Uzarczyk, “Sonjas Töchter”: Die Darstellung der Prostitution in der polnischen Literatur des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts’, *Historie. Jahrbuch des Zentrums für Historische Forschung der Polnischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, iii (2009/10), 166–81.

³³ Carol Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work* (London, 2006), 143.

³⁴ Irena Surmacka, ‘Charakterystyka prostytutek warszawskich w świetle ankiety’, *Zagadnienia Rasy*, 4 (1936), 315–48, here 346.

a disruption of family ties due to the emigration of the fathers and husbands of the examined women to Palestine, France, Argentina, and to a lesser extent America. Besides,” continued Surmacka, “in Jewish circles there is a different problem – that of mental illnesses that are almost non-existent in examined Christian families. ... In one of the local families, out of seven siblings two brothers were mentally ill (and hospitalized), one sister as well, one brother “sexually degenerated” and the informant practiced prostitution.”³⁵ Thus, Surmacka linked prostitution not only to a hereditary pathology of mental illness, but also to a supposed hereditary-racial predisposition toward mental illness.

Similarly as many other authors, Surmacka maintained the possibility that “cases of prostitutes meeting the criteria of a born prostitute could certainly be found”,³⁶ but fundamentally she collected an array of data supporting the socio-economic model of explaining prostitution. She distinguished two main categories of public women: those ‘educated to be prostitutes’, which encompassed working class women who were born in the city and grew up in an unfavourable, corrupting social environment, and ‘uneducated prostitutes’ a group comprised of inexperienced newcomers from rural areas, whose arrival to the industrial urban world, with its night clubs, brothels and procurers lurking in wait for naive young women, caused their fall into disgrace. Among the factors that increased the risk of entering into prostitution she listed the death of one or both parents in a girl’s childhood years, the disruption of family ties, chronic unemployment of a family provider, little or no education, alcoholism, a prostitute mother, premature separation from the family, and sudden loss of job. In the light of statistical data for 1938, as many as 75 per cent of the Warsaw prostitutes had been previously employed as domestic servants, workers, needlewomen, shop assistants, waitresses and milliners. The remaining 25 per cent had never worked, and this group consisted mostly of the women who fell into prostitution as children.³⁷ According to this survey only two per cent of Warsaw prostitutes gave up their previous jobs and took up prostitution voluntarily.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 325–6.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, 347.

³⁷ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 54.

³⁸ Surmacka, ‘Charakterystyka prostytutek’, 347–8.

Surveys usually specified the average age of prostitutes as between 15 and 40 and emphasized illiteracy as common in this group. According to Irena Surmacka this was due the fact that the social age of prostitutes was six to eight years higher than their biological age, which meant that they were forced to undertake economic duties prematurely, at the cost of their education and professional training.³⁹

This collective profile of the social background of Polish prostitutes corresponded with similar reports and studies carried out in other countries. From all these accounts it seems clear that the highest percentage of prostitutes came from extremely poor working class families. However, as Ruth Rosen noted:

Prostitution was not simply 'caused' by poverty but represented an integral part of the culture determined by poverty. Poverty directly affected women's choices to enter into prostitution in several important ways. The low wages paid to women workers, the sudden changes in family income status, and a desire for upward mobility were some of the important economic factors influencing women's decisions to practice prostitution.⁴⁰

Research into prostitution in various countries led historians of the field to similar conclusions. Laurie Bernstein, in her study on prostitution in Russia, confirmed that, "instances where women turned to prostitution for reasons as noble or as desperate as those of Sonia, who sold herself to keep her family from starving, were not unknown. Nevertheless, they appear much less frequently than situations wherein prostitution was a conscious attempt not simply to survive, but to live what was perceived as a better life."⁴¹

V

BACK TO A RESPECTABLE LIFE

Studies on prostitutes' social background provided reformers with arguments in support of various reformatory and educational programs for destitute girls and women. However "their goal was to transform individuals, and to help each personally make his or her own way to

³⁹ Irena Surmacka, 'Wiek społeczny a degradacja w świetle badań nad nierządem', *Praca i Opieka Społeczna*, 1 (1938), 27–9, here 28.

⁴⁰ Ruth Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood. Prostitution in America 1900–1918* (Baltimore, 1982), 147.

⁴¹ Bernstein, *Sonia's Daughters*, 142.

the ‘throne of Grace’. Only secondarily did they want to reform society in order to ease the individual’s path to salvation.”⁴² Institutions established for the rehabilitation and moral education of ‘fallen women’ offered a mixture of religious life and job training, mainly in industry-related professions and household work, in order to educate proper working-class wives.⁴³ Girls who were categorized as prostitutes or morally debased and at risk of entering the business were deprived of the possibility of obtaining better education, and thus a chance for higher earnings and desired upward mobility. This scheme of re-education was put into practice in many countries and, as Linda Mahood pointed out, “reformers hoped that inmates would embrace middle-class values such as family, cleanliness, chastity, domesticity and appropriate feminine gender roles. Philanthropy ... was an act of authority that created a dependent relationship between the poor and the rich.”⁴⁴

In Poland in the years 1932–7 reformatory institutions for former prostitutes and girls at risk received 5,171 inmates, of whom – as the author of the report claimed – 50 per cent “kept up a respectable lifestyle” after having left the reformatory home.⁴⁵ Almost all of these institutions were religious in character, run either by the religious orders of Magdalene or Nuns of the Good Shepard, and religious societies such as the Catholic Society for the Protection of Women (founded in 1900) or Jewish Society for the Protection of Women (founded in 1904). Long isolation from the outside world and a work period of from one to four years, together with a disciplined lifestyle, were aimed at restoring the dignity of these ‘fallen women’. The draft of regulations in one of such institutions, the House of Providence, gives us a hint of the methods used and recommended teaching curriculum:

5.30	inmates wake up, get dressed, do their beds, pray
6.30	morning mass
7.30	breakfast

⁴² Littlewood and Mahood, ‘Prostitutes, Magdalenes and Wayward Girls’, 161.

⁴³ In Poland surveys showed that domestic servants were highly at risk of falling into prostitution and Polish reformers did not recommend training for maids.

⁴⁴ Linda Mahood, *The Magdalene. Prostitution in the 19th century* (London and New York, 1990), 102.

⁴⁵ According to the report of 1938, out of 23 reformatories in the country only two were non-religious. Central Archives of Modern Records [Polish: Archiwum Akt Nowych, hereinafter: AAN], Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 456, pp. 1–7.

8.00–9.00	inmates tidy up their rooms and common space
9.00–12.00	handicrafts and learning
12.00–13.30	dinner and resting time
13.30–18.00	work and learning
18.30	supper
19.00–20.00	individual courses, reading, choir singing
20.30	prayer and sleep
On Sunday and church holidays: reading, dressmaking courses, and excursions ⁴⁶	

The striking resemblance between the organization of a lifestyle in reformatories and general hospitals reminds one of the primary character of these institutions, which were more concerned with “sweeping disorder from the streets” and protecting existing values than anything else. In the same way that the early modern ‘undeserving poor’ were seen as a threat to the established social order, so too a “prostitute’s dangerous sexual autonomy ... was contrary to bourgeois expectations of natural feminine decorum and dependence. ... Written on the prostitute’s body was not only unruly sexual desire and sex as a disruptive force, but also fear of rebellion, revolution and non-conformity.”⁴⁷

This rigorous organization of life in religious reformatory institutions met with some criticism in the early 1930s. Some of the female reformers stressed that re-education programs should be constructed according to the individual needs of the inmates and free of preaching. Instead, an aesthetic environment, friendly staff, and system of rewards for personal achievements and good behaviour would be more effective in helping to restore self-respect. The first lay institution of this kind in Poland, the Voluntary Workhouse founded in Warsaw in 1933 on the initiative of the Association of Women’s Civil Work, sought to put the ideals of modern pedagogy into practice. The inmates were free to leave and receive guests with the permission of the management, and they were also paid for their work. It was strongly recommended that they be treated kindly and with respect and to avoid the impression that the reformatory served as a form of punishment.⁴⁸ As in the old style reformatories, the girls

⁴⁶ AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 457.

⁴⁷ Wolkowitz, *Bodies*, 122.

⁴⁸ Halina Siemieńska, ‘Dom Pracy Dobrowolnej (placówka rehabilitacyjna ZPOK)’, *Praca i Opieka Społeczna*, 4 (1936), 378–81, here 378.

were supposed to learn practical skills that would enable them to earn their living afterwards. As Linda Mahood pointed out, in many countries reformers recommended “training in domestic service and other forms of work that were subject to patriarchal supervision or parental discipline.”⁴⁹ This tendency, however, did not find much support among Polish reformers, as surveys indicated that one-fifth of prostitutes had previously been employed as domestic servants and that this environment was seen as the greatest threat, especially for the innocent rural girls who most often took up this job. “Girls from villages or provincial towns, who were subjects of the study, usually left their family home at the age of 13 with the idea of supporting themselves as domestic servants. ... They ended up in a totally strange milieu. A farmer-emigrant who finds a job in a farm abroad or a worker who finds a job in his social milieu does not experience such a feeling of alienation.”⁵⁰ The dangerous urban environment proved to have a poisonous influence. Authors stressed that the striking contrast between rural girls’ everyday life in the country and the bourgeois lifestyle in the city must sooner or later lead to confusion and evoke a strong desire for upward mobility. According to this view, a combination of the vision of a better life and naiveté made provincial girls an easy target, both for *pater familias* and younger male members of the family as well as for professional procurers.

Reformatories, railway missions and female police,⁵¹ established in Warsaw in 1924 and charged with the task of counteracting prostitution and other sex-related offences, were created to protect girls from fall and as a replacement for the former decency police. In effect all this led to the increased supervision or policing not only of professional prostitutes, but of females in general.⁵² Thus the process

⁴⁹ Mahood, *The Magdalene*, 73.

⁵⁰ Surmacka, ‘Wiek społeczny’, 28.

⁵¹ See Stanisława Paleolog, *The Women Police of Poland 1925–1939* (London, 1957).

⁵² On 31 August 1938 a young woman lodged a complaint against exaggerated activities of Catholic Society for the Protection of Women. While travelling during her holiday time she wanted to stay in one of the homes run by the Society and was subjected to compulsory police control. She was appalled by the treatment she had received and accused Society’s activists for causing nervous distress also in her family members who were contacted by the police in order to confirm the woman’s identity. AAN, Komenda Główna Policji Państwowej, sign. 223, p. 78.

was similar to what Linda Mahood described in her monograph on prostitution in Scotland:

The reformist program designed to save women from the criminal justice system resulted in expansion of the entire control system, which began to include more women of a greater age range and type of offences. ... The process thereby became more interventionist, as at the beginning of the nineteenth century a greater percentage of the female working class population became potential clients. ... Finally each institution supplemented rather than replaced existing institutions and each evolved 'experts', who established monopolistic claims over a select population of clients.⁵³

VII

FROM PROSTITUTION PANIC TO REGULATION IN DISGUISE

Health officials' concern with an STD epidemic and their vision of a prostitute as the seat of infection provoked a social response inadequate to the real threat. In the immediate aftermath of the Great War, surveys indeed showed that the number of sexually transmitted diseases was dangerously rising, but they also emphasized that only about ten per cent of the infected were prostitutes.⁵⁴ "Widespread alarm about venereal diseases," noted Ruth Rosen, "may indicate not an epidemic but the public's heightened awareness and magnified fears of VD signs and consequences."⁵⁵ Contemporary press coverage of the issue nurtured the fear of a 'prostitution epidemic', even though, due to the scarcity of reliable sources, it was impossible to estimate the actual number of prostitutes in the country. In 1938 Józef Maćko calculated the number of registered prostitutes at about 13,000, among whom 36 per cent were infected with VD.⁵⁶ But clandestine prostitution was beyond the reach of official statistics and, according to one of the zealous anti-vice campaigners, the actual numbers might have been even twenty times as high as those given by official sources.⁵⁷

⁵³ Mahood, *The Magdalene*, 159.

⁵⁴ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 85.

⁵⁵ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 39.

⁵⁶ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 55; another anti-vice campaigner claimed in 1938 that only ten per cent of prostitutes were actually registered, Wanda Woytowicz-Grabińska, *Walka z nierządem i chorobami wenerycznymi* (Warszawa, 1938), 19.

⁵⁷ Leon Wernic, 'Sprawa ludności w Polsce a choroby weneryczne', *Zagadnienia Rasy*, 3 (1920), 3-7, here 7.

Although the obvious conclusion was that a registration system was not effective in curbing prostitution and could not stop advances of syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases, the system introduced in Poland in the interwar years, known as neo-regulation, maintained the basic elements of regulation.

'PESTIS MANU FACTA'. EXCURSION

The regulation system was highly unpopular among Polish reformers for the same reasons as elsewhere – its failure to control the spread of STD, its double standards of morality, and the rise of clandestine prostitution. Additionally, in inter-war Poland the regulation was seen as having been imposed by the previous occupying powers, with Russian occupiers seen as particularly corrupt, mainly through the governor's efforts to increase alcohol consumption in Polish society and support for commercial prostitution. Boleslaw Koreywo put it *expressis verbis* when he wrote in 1925:

In fact prostitution in Poland was legalized and even 'privileged' by the Russians. ... The most zealous supporter of prostitution in Poland was Paskiewicz⁵⁸, who, after having taken the reins of government in Warsaw, immediately understood that prostitution is one of the most effective measures on the way to social demoralization, and supported both prostitution and excessive alcohol consumption in his attempt to put to sleep all kinds of noble feelings and to put an end to the city's dwellers' interest in politics. In 1843 Paskiewicz approved the law that introduced control over prostitution. There is no doubt that this law made it easier to get permission to run a brothel. Thus, the Russian authorities forced, so to speak, prostitution onto the Polish society, and this had obvious consequences on the moral conduct of this society.⁵⁹

As another contemporary author pointed out, the law of 1843 also had a political meaning and thus contained contradictory regulations: on the one hand it forbade the opening of public houses (Art. 155) and banned any meeting or gathering in private, under the threat that it would be understood as facilitating prostitution (Art. 156), but at the same time it specified the requirements that needed to be met in

⁵⁸ Ivan Fëdorovich Paskevich (1782–1856) – Russian field marshal and the Governor of the Kingdom of Poland (1831–55).

⁵⁹ Bolesław Koreywo, *Dwie moralności a walka z nierządem* (Poznań, 1925), 6.

order to run a brothel (Art. 158).⁶⁰ In effect, “in Warsaw, prostitutes could walk along the main streets undisturbed and expose themselves in the windows facing the streets. All this was accompanied by drunkenness at an unprecedented rate.”⁶¹

Thus in the Polish context “to be against state regulation was to be against the Russian occupiers.”⁶² Fear of an STD epidemic, however, led to demands that prostitutes remain under organized state control.

* * *

Essentially, while maintaining registration of and compulsory medical check-ups for prostitutes, neo-regulation abolished brothels and, as many writers claimed, was aimed at preparing the ground for a gradual transformation towards complete abolition of prostitution. In fact however, neo-regulation was only a slight variation of the old system of police control.⁶³

On 18 December 1918 the newly-created Polish Ministry of Public Health was entrusted with the task of combating prostitution and the spread of VD. The first move of the health officials was to transform the departments of decency police into sanitary-decency commissions (1 January 1919)⁶⁴, which clearly indicates that within the anti-prostitution campaign medical men and social hygienists were gradually taking the lead and the focus was shifted from morals to health-related issues⁶⁵. This is not to say however that moral concerns were outside their pale of interest. As Ruth Rosen noted:

Unlike many of their counterparts, social hygienists focused primarily on the control of venereal disease, its medical prevention and treatment. ...

⁶⁰ Władysław Zalewski, *Z dziejów prostytucji w Warszawie* (Warszawa, 1923), 21–22.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, 36.

⁶² Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice. The Jewish Fight against White Slavery 1870–1939* (Oxford, 1982), 306.

⁶³ Maćko, *Nierząd*, 86.

⁶⁴ For detailed account on the structure of these commissions and in general legal regulations on prostitution in interwar Poland, see Marzena Lipska-Toumi, *Prawo polskie wobec zjawiska prostytucji w latach 1918–1939* (Lublin, 2014).

⁶⁵ An overview of earlier medical publications on prostitution in Polish lands see: Iwona Zając, ‘Problem prostytucji na ziemiach polskich w świetle prasy lekarskiej’, in Bożena Płonka-Syroka (ed.), *Oczekiwania kobiet i wobec kobiet. Stereotypy i wzorce kobiecości w kulturze europejskiej i amerykańskiej*, (Warszawa, 2007), 33–51.

Many social hygienists pressed for the dissemination of sexual knowledge and for laws that would make venereal disease reportable. ... Although some of their measures were vehemently resisted by other reformers, social hygienists shared with their opponents an emphasis on a single standard of sexuality and chastity for both men and women, and an exaggerated concern about the sexual practices of the poor. Their perspective was amplified by the Progressive belief in the power of experts to wield new technological and political power wisely for the common good.⁶⁶

This shift in interests was also reflected in a ministerial circular issued in July 1919, which ordered the creation of free polyclinics for all those infected with STD and for possible carriers of venereal infection. This unquestionable leap forward in public health policy was clouded by the fact that medical inspection was still compulsory only for prostitutes or women suspected of practicing prostitution, whereas men were in general exempted from medical check-ups. Although some of the reformers suggested that prostitute's clients be included in the scheme of mandatory medical examinations, only in the Scandinavian countries were both men and women subjected to the same procedure. This "Scandinavian Sonderweg", as Peter Baldwin dubbed it, did not take root in other countries. Although the idea to examine certain categories of men, such as soldiers, sailors or prisoners had been in practice without question for a long time, compulsory inspection of civilians and respectable men was seen as a humiliating procedure.

The treatment of female suspects was quite different. Since any woman whose behaviour did not conform to the approved middle-class values might be arrested as a prostitute, girls who were not promiscuous but simply coquettish often ended up accused of clandestine prostitution. According to the ministerial instruction for physicians and health officers issued in May 1919, prostitutes were divided into two groups: professional prostitutes, for whom prostitution was their only source of income, and 'ambulatory prostitutes', who were employed elsewhere and for whom prostitution was only an occasional diversion. The first category was obliged to turn up for twice-weekly medical inspections, whereas the latter were subject to inspections every two or three weeks, depending on the individual case. Officials were also slightly easier on these 'occasionally fallen'

⁶⁶ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 35.

women. For example, so that they would not lose their regular jobs they were not arrested (unless for criminal activities), even if they regularly avoided medical tests. In addition, unlike professional prostitutes, who were compulsorily subjected to the Wasserman test and preventive treatment against syphilis, they were exempt from these procedures unless there were visible symptoms of disease.⁶⁷ This regulation effectively destroyed any chances to diagnose infected individuals in the early stages of the disease.

The essential difference between the two models of surveillance of prostitution lay in the outlawing of houses of vice and sharpening punishment for procurers. Peter Baldwin observed that: “A central tenet of the old system was that prostitution should be controlled but not prohibited. Many neo-regulationists now sought instead to criminalize acts associated with prostitution, both in the hope of limiting its public manifestation and equally in order to regularize its legal situation.”⁶⁸ Although anti-vice campaigners in Poland sought to pass a uniform law with respect to prostitution and VD, and a few drafts of such acts were submitted to the health council for further scrutiny, there were no legal outcomes of these efforts. Ministerial orders and circulars, as well as paragraphs 203–14 of the new Polish Criminal Code, constituted the legal framework for the surveillance and prosecution of sex offenders. The Criminal Code of 1932 did not prohibit or abolish prostitution. Though not criminalized, it was however pushed into the underground since brothels were outlawed.

In former Russian occupation zone brothels were banned in 1919 and in the Austrian and Prussian districts in 1920.⁶⁹ The order of the Ministry of Public Health and Ministry of Interior of 6 September 1922 confirmed this abolition and precisely defined the term brothel as “any apartment or establishment, in which more than two professional prostitutes live permanently or practice prostitution without living there.”⁷⁰ Despite these official orders, public houses were maintained in many towns and cities. For example – as the police commissar of Poznań explained in 1938 – in the former Prussian

⁶⁷ Zaranek Horbowski, ‘Organizacja i działalność urzędu sanitarno-obyczajowego w Warszawie’, *Zagadnienia Rasy*, 3 (1922), 11–16, here 14.

⁶⁸ Peter Baldwin, *Contagion and the State in Europe 1830–1930* (Cambridge, 1999), 419.

⁶⁹ Daszyńska-Golińska, *Zagadnienia polityki*, 308.

⁷⁰ Halina Siemieńska, *Stan walki z nierządem* (Warszawa, 1933), 11.

district the ministerial circular of 6 September 1922, as well as the sanitary instruction of 12 July 1933, did not formally enter into force because The Sanitary Act of 19 July 1919 had not been introduced in Western Districts.⁷¹ Thus legally speaking, these pillars of neo-regulation were not introduced and the Prussian regulations of 1907 were still in force. However, as Anette F. Timm remarked, the Prussian law of 11 December 1907 had already shifted the emphasis from the police to the medical supervision of prostitution, and prostitutes were free of police surveillance as long as they regularly showed up for their medical examinations. Police took action only in extraordinary circumstances.⁷² To add to this lack of clarity there were local variations of the system. For example in some towns there were designated streets prohibited to prostitutes or time limits when they were forbidden to walk the streets.

Contrary to expectations, outlawing brothels brought about an expansion of the prostitution underworld and prostitutes were increasingly dependent on pimps and procurers. As in other countries “the relative security of public brothels became increasingly replaced by the riskier, but less visible, act of streetwalking. ... Control of prostitution shifted from madams and prostitutes themselves to pimps and organized crime syndicates.”⁷³

According to the Polish Criminal Code of 1932 acts that debased public morals and impinged on the freedom of sexuality of another individual were criminalized,⁷⁴ nevertheless procurers and traffickers felt quite safe and beyond the reach of the justice system. Prosecution took place on the demand of the injured party, and prostitutes only rarely initiated prosecution procedures, either out of fear or simply because they did not feel forced into prostitution and did not perceive themselves as the victims of their pimps. As Laurie Bernstein argued, “for some of these women prostitution may have been a form of rebellion, one of the few paths that led women in the patriarchal culture somewhere new and exciting. One of the women who registered in 1910 called prostitution her chance to live independently

⁷¹ AAN, Komenda Główna Policji Państwowej, sign. 1285, p. 292.

⁷² Anette F. Timm, *The Politics of Fertility: Population Politics and Health Care in Berlin 1919–1972* (Chicago, 1999), 93–4.

⁷³ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 12.

⁷⁴ Stanisław Czerwiński, ‘Nierząd na tle Kodeksu Karnego z 1932’, *Nowiny Społeczno-Lekarskie*, 3 (1934), 39.

and autonomously.”⁷⁵ It is also likely that many women ‘qualified’ as prostitutes did not consider themselves to be ‘fallen’ or morally debased. Patterns of sexual behaviour in the working classes – the main territory of recruitment – differed from those in the middle classes and women often had sexual relationships with their partners before marriage. Meanwhile, as Kathy Peiss put it, “reformers, social workers and journalists viewed working class women’s sexuality through middle class lenses, invoking sexual standards that set ‘respectability’ against ‘promiscuity’.”⁷⁶

The punishment foreseen by the lawmakers ranged from five-year sentences for procuring, facilitating and furthering prostitution to ten years imprisonment for trafficking in women and forcing them into prostitution, or tricking into prostitution under-age individuals or those incapable of understanding and controlling their activities. Interestingly, if any of these criminal activities referred to family members or were linked to the abuse of authority or relationship based on subordination, the punishments were three and five years respectively.

VIII THE ‘WHITE SLAVERY’ PANIC

Contemporary sources reveal that in the interwar years one of the main concerns of the reformers was trafficking in women. According to the Article 112 of the Paris Convention of 1910 the term ‘trafficking in women’ was not limited to cases of international trade. The Polish Criminal Code, however, provided far more severe punishments for international trafficking than for pandering and pimping on Polish soil. The international trade in women and children was never well-documented, but the contemporary press contributed to the ‘white slave hysteria’ by eagerly depicting any disappearance of a young woman as a white slavery issue, as shown in the following report:

Mysterious disappearance of a young lady” Is she the victim of traffickers?” or “Beautiful graduate student kidnapped” – under these titles every day

⁷⁵ Bernstein, *Sonia’s Daughters*, 139.

⁷⁶ Kathy Peiss, ‘Charity Girls and City Pleasures: Historical Notes on Working Class Sexuality 1880–1920’, in *eadem* and Christina Simpson (eds.), *Passion and Power. Sexuality in History* (Philadelphia, 1989), 57–70.

newspapers conveyed stories of some young woman who, as it turned out later on, found a job as a baby sitter outside her family towns and simply did not notify her relatives. Another daily newspaper informed its readers that local police arrested a gang of international traffickers, whereas in fact the incident concerned one man suspected of facilitating prostitution. In still another town suspicion arose at a mysterious fast moving car, which attracted interest because 'respectable passers-by' testified they heard a women begging for help inside the vehicle.⁷⁷

Historians of prostitution agree that the 'white slavery panic' was way out of proportion to the reality. Ruth Rosen, in her monograph on American prostitution, estimated that no more than ten per cent of prostitutes were the victims of white slavery, while the issue received an inordinate amount of publicity worldwide and the media nurtured the public appetite for stories about unscrupulous traffickers.⁷⁸ In Poland, concern with 'white slavery' translated into policies aiming at controlling the emigration opportunities of Polish women.

Two organizations created in 1923 – The Polish National Committee for Combating Trade in Women and Children and The Central Office for Combating International Trade in Women in the Ministry of Interior – joined forces in an effort to limit emigration opportunities for young women and developed a system of surveillance of women who travelled alone or were accompanied by suspected individuals. Their postulates were put into practice when a ministerial circular of 27 August 1924 ordered that young women between the ages of 14 and 30 were required, when applying for a passport, to submit documents explaining the purpose of their journey, either from their relatives or a future employer. This circular helped initiate the creation of a net of harbours and railway station missions, creating an arena of activities for members of various charitable organizations. However, since recruited girls often travelled in the company of their 'male predators', a large proportion of women tricked into prostitution by a promise of marriage or well-paid work must have escaped the attention of these charitable women. In 1932 a report on a railway station mission's achievements stated that there were no more cases of international trade. It is, however, more likely that the reduced number of cases was the result of immigration restrictions introduced in many

⁷⁷ AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 244, pp. 12, 216, 229, 246.

⁷⁸ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 145.

countries, the most famous being the American immigration laws of 1921 and 1924.

Nonetheless the Polish campaign against ‘white slavery’ may have brought about some results. As historian Edward Bristow noted, “some degree of progress was possible in Poland because the government took the prostitution question seriously ... and responded to the problem of migratory prostitution more strenuously than any other in the world. This was due to the beliefs of the neo-abolitionists, to the hundreds of women who had gone into French brothels soon after the war when the Polish economy turned downward, to the wish to appear progressive, and finally to the desire to make emigration as safe as possible so that the Jews would not be deterred from leaving the country.”⁷⁹ Jews were traditionally accused of being the source of various social evils, including organizing commercial vice.⁸⁰

‘PESTIS MANU FACTA’ – EXCURSION 2

I feel obliged to mention – wrote Jan Maurycy Kamiński in 1875 – that among the prostitutes in Warsaw there is a considerably high rate of prostitutes of Jewish origin. Similarly in Vilnius, where among 150 registered prostitutes in 1873 there were 71 (47.33 %) Jewish, 60 Catholic, 10 Protestant and 9 Orthodox-Catholic. This data, quoted in the first edition of this book, triggered discussion in *Izraelita* and we were informed that this was the result of a stricter moral code and the fact that once fallen, Jewish women had no other choice, as they would be forever social outcasts and rejected by their families. ... The question remains, however, why the majority of pimps and brothel runners are of Jewish faith, a fact that may be confirmed by all our correspondents in provincial towns.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 306–7.

⁸⁰ See Robert Blobaum, ‘Criminalizing the “Other”. Crime, Ethnicity, and Antisemitism in early Twentieth-Century Poland’, in *idem* (ed.), *Antisemitism and its Opponents in Modern Poland* (New York, 2005), 81–102; *idem*, ‘Panika moralna w polskim wydaniu. Dewiacje seksualne i wizerunki przestępczości żydowskiej na początku XX wieku’, in Anna Żarnowska and Andrzej Szwarc (eds.), *Kobieta i rewolucja obyczajowa. Społeczno-kulturowe aspekty seksualności. Wiek XIX i XX* (Warszawa, 2006), 265–75; Keely Stauter-Halsted, ‘Moral Panic and the Prostitute in Partitioned Poland: Middle Class Respectability in Defence of the Modern Nation’, *Slavic Review*, lxxviii, 3 (2009), 557–81.

⁸¹ Jan Maurycy Kamiński, *O prostytucji* (Warszawa, 1875), 137–8. On Jewish prostitution in interwar Lublin, see Mateusz Rodak, ‘Prostytutki żydowskie

According to Robert Blobaum, in the late nineteenth century legalized brothels in the Polish Kingdom and Galicia were, to a large extent, run by Jewish owners. However, “due to the increase in clandestine prostitution Jewish involvement in organized prostitution diminished year-by-year quite rapidly ... and on the eve of the First World War illegal prostitution far exceeded the licensed one.”⁸² Nonetheless contemporary media painted a picture of unscrupulous Jewish pimps and procurers lurking for innocent girls and tricking them into commercialized vice. Hostile attitudes were also nurtured by fantasies of collaboration between Jewish pimps and Russian occupiers, as reflected in the account of Bolesław Koreywo:

Jews used the upheaval caused by the 1863 uprising and the poverty and evictions of Polish officials, and as a result the old Warsaw neighbourhood, which previously had been inhabited exclusively by the Polish intelligentsia, had been turned into the seat of Jewish brothels. This was the period when the prostitution business blossomed, to the great satisfaction of Governor Berg, who considered the untrammelled growth of prostitution to be particularly advantageous for the Russian policy.⁸³

Jews were accused not only of organizing prostitution and thus corrupting the Polish nation, but also of international trade in women and children, which obviously additionally nurtured anti-Semitic prejudices. As Edward Bristow pointed out, the turning point in the use of the issue by anti-Semites was the famous 1892 white slavery trial in L'viv, where about 27 traffickers were accused of procuring 29 girls to go to brothels in Constantinople, Egypt and India. Despite the fact that 20 of the 29 women were Jewish, the trial was recounted so as if only gentile girls had been victims.

Jews were being associated with prostitution, which was represented as just one aspect of their inherent criminality and degeneracy. It was the Lvov

w województwie lubelskim w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym. Analiza środowiska', *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, 3 (2006), 379–90.

⁸² Blobaum, 'Panika moralna', 271.

⁸³ Koreywo, *Dwie moralności*, 6. In 1862 Tsar Aleksander II granted equal rights for Jews in the occupied part of Poland and removed residence restrictions, which enabled Jewish people to acquire real estate in the city centre. As this closely coincided with the failure of the January Uprising of 1863, followed by massive arrests, evictions and deportations of the Polish intelligentsia to Siberian camps, it nurtured anti-Semitism and hostile attitudes towards the Jewish population in general.

process, however, that promoted white slavery to the status of a more-than-occasional weapon for Austrian anti-Semites. Newspapers' coverage of the topic did not mention that the majority of those trafficked by the Lvov gang were Jewish. The connection between Jews and prostitution was notorious in Vienna, out of all proportion to their real involvement.⁸⁴

The First World War disrupted the international white slavery nets. Besides, Jewish involvement in commercial prostitution diminished in those countries where Jews could profit from economic advances equally along with other segments of society. This was not however the case in Eastern Europe, where Jews suffered from unprecedented poverty.⁸⁵ Thus, conditions for commercial prostitution were maintained and Poland was seen as the main source of supply for traffickers. Bolesław Koreywo wrote that:

The brothels in Romania, Greece and Turkey existed thanks to the supplies from Poland. At the same time in ... Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay the term 'prostitute' came to be associated with a woman from Poland. Even today people in Argentina call a prostitute 'una polaca', as most of them were brought from Poland. ... It is horrifying that the majority of the prostitutes are recruited from underage girls, between 8–15 years, and the highest number of underage prostitutes has been noted in Poland (70 per cent, whereas in other countries the numbers are not higher than 50 per cent).⁸⁶

The author did not forget to mention that Jews were responsible for this profitable trade in women and children. Jewish involvement in commercial prostitution was also obvious to Józef Maćko, the author of a popular monograph on prostitution, who stated that:

Trade in women and children in Poland has been almost exclusively a Jewish-dominated business. ... The traffickers first seek to procure Jewish girls, and only if unsuccessful do they operate in other nations. ... Although foreign statistics list a high percentage of Polish women in foreign brothels, this can be explained by the fact that Jewish girls, being Polish citizens, once abroad eagerly declare themselves as Poles. In fact the Polish contribution to the foreign brothels is not as alarming as the press coverage tends to indicate.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 80.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, 286.

⁸⁶ Koreywo, *Dwie moralności*, 9.

⁸⁷ Maćko, *Prostytucja*, 382.

The most common method used by Jewish traffickers to bring Jewish girls to foreign brothels was a 'false' marriage. Indeed, marriage law in the part of Poland previously under Russian occupation made it easier for the traffickers to trick Jewish girls into prostitution. According to the law of 1836, religious regulations played a decisive role and religious marriages had a constitutive value; a marriage certificate issued by a registrar only confirmed an already existing marriage. Although regulations of the Civil Law stated that in Jewish communities only rabbis were entitled to perform religious ceremonies, Jewish religious regulations did not place any restrictions as to the status of a person in charge of a marriage ceremony. Therefore – as explained by Julia Silbermintz – among Jews from poor families a quite common practice was a so-called 'stille chippe' (silent marriage). In such cases any adult Jewish person could be in charge of the ceremony, but there was no marriage certificate and, as a consequence, no traces of change of marital status in the documents, and traffickers could marry as many times as they wished to.⁸⁸ Julia Silbermintz stated in alarm:

The worst thing is that in this way traffickers gain access to innocent, honest girls who, through marriage, only want to improve their living standard. ... A huge percentage of prostitutes in brothels in Argentina and Brazil consists of foreigners, among them many wives sold by their religiously-married husbands. In brothel jargon they are called 'the green' because of their lack of experience.⁸⁹

Moreover, even couples that got married by rabbis often did not receive marriage certificates because, according to the law, the rabbis did not have the status of state registrars. The procedure demanded that after the ceremony the rabbi and the married couple should visit the state registry in order to obtain confirmation of their marriage. They often did not follow these regulations, with obvious legal consequences. In fact, if the state had recognized the rabbis as state registrars, as was the case with Christian priests, the problem would have been solved.

The organization that was mainly responsible for the trade in women from Eastern Europe, and especially from Poland, into brothels in South America was Zwi Migdal (Great Force), named after

⁸⁸ AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 532, p. 39.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 40–1.

its leader. The origins of this group can be traced back to 1906, when procurers founded a charitable society 'Varsovia' in Buenos Aires. Its statute did not differ from that of other charitable societies and it was officially registered. After a schism that took place in 1927, some members (mainly Romanians and Russians) joined a new organization 'Asquenasum'. In the same year – as one of the contemporary journalists reported – the local Polish consular body learned what the true activities of 'Varsovia' were and officially opposed the use of this name for the organization of pimps and procurers. In 1929 the society renamed itself as 'Zwi Migdal' and continued its activities undisturbed until 1930, when police commissar Jose Alsogaray managed to arrest many of the traffickers and bring them to court. Zwi Migdal ran approximately 1000 brothels, 254 in Buenos Aires alone, in which around 3000 prostitutes were fated to work.⁹⁰ The organization united somewhere between 434 – 450 traffickers, but only 112 were charged with being members of the banned association and stood trial. According to Art. 126 of the Argentinean Criminal Code, only forced prostitution was punishable, and since the victims of the traffickers were reluctant to testify, the case was dismissed in October 1932.⁹¹

Out of the 112 arrested members of 'Zwi Migdal', only 12 were recognized as non-Polish citizens; the rest had either declared Polish citizenship or – as the Polish consular officer in Buenos Aires stressed – were wrongly recognized as Poles on the basis of a birth certificate, even though they arrived in Argentina before Poland regained independence.⁹² "Although there was no special press coverage of the Polish immigrants in Buenos Aires," continued the officer, "the fact alone that the names and citizenship of the accused were published in local newspapers was utterly unfavourable for the Polish colony."⁹³ Polish authorities felt visibly uncomfortable about the fact that the blame for international trafficking in women could fall on Polish immigrants and thus observed, with a certain satisfaction, that "due to the active involvement of Jewish associations

⁹⁰ Maria Holewińska, 'Prostytucja w Argentynie', *Praca i Opieka Społeczna*, 4 (1936), 373–5, here 375.

⁹¹ AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 244, p. 180.

⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 175.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

in this case, public opinion was well informed that it was all about Jews, who recently are being somehow more easily distinguishable from the Poles.”⁹⁴

Similarly as in the USA where, as Ruth Rosen noted, “the crusade against prostitution both fueled and was fueled by anti-immigration sentiment”,⁹⁵ so too in Poland the campaign against white slavery fueled and was fueled by anti-Semitic prejudices. When The Polish National Committee for Combating Trafficking in Women and Children (PNC) was created in 1923, controversies arose as to the involvement of Jewish delegates. One of the influential members and future president of the Committee (from 1926), Dr. Witold Chodźko, stressed that all religious groups should be represented “otherwise it will be commented upon abroad”⁹⁶, and two Jewish members – Stanisław Posner and Julia Silbermintz – were finally admitted. This move, however, did not lead to a cooperative and undisturbed coalition and, as historian Edward Bristow observed, “there followed years of bickering, a fine example of the limits of good faith in the Poland of that day. Should Jewish women be present at the Warsaw train station? Should Julia Silbermintz be permitted to enter the lofty presidium of the PNC? Should delegates be accepted from the newer provincial committees? Should mixed hostels be used for all the females sent by railway missions? Józef Maćko had particularly strong feelings on this latter issue, and he told the PNC that the Jews do not take prostitution so seriously and they might send agents to the hostels to recruit.”⁹⁷

The circular of the Ministry of Interior regarding trafficking in women (of 27 August 1924) clearly indicates that the above-mentioned hostile attitudes were not imaginary. The circular declared that the “central PNC for Trafficking in Women in Warsaw admitted representatives from all nationalities and of all religious beliefs; however, in provincial towns in the event the cooperation within one organization appears to be impossible, separate Jewish committees should be created.”⁹⁸ According to Bristow, hostile attitudes towards Jewish reformers were present elsewhere as well, and governments

⁹⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁹⁵ Rosen, *Lost Sisterhood*, 44.

⁹⁶ Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 306.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem.*, 307.

⁹⁸ Maćko, *Prostytucja*, 421.

were reluctant to give any support, since – as one Lithuanian foreign office officer put it – “Jews will not give away their own people even if they committed unpleasant offences.”⁹⁹

Thus it can be seen that the rising anti-Semitism made it more difficult to join forces in the campaign against trafficking in women, and the Jewish Societies For the Protection of Women was crippled by a lack of finances. Although the Welfare Act of 1923 stated that the anti-prostitution campaign was to be carried out by local governments in cooperation with social organizations subsidized from the state coffer, the Jewish Societies for Protection of Women did not obtain regular financing. Out of the budget allocated to the anti-prostitution crusade, three-quarters of the sum was allocated to the Polish National Committee and one-quarter to the Polish Catholic Society For the Protection of Girls. The only support that was received by the Jewish Society For the Protection of Women in Warsaw was a small subsidy from the Municipal Welfare Department. Nevertheless, despite financial hardships the Jewish Society run a refuge for about thirty girls, aged 14–21, who came from poor social backgrounds and were at risk of ‘falling into disgrace’; took care of women migrating in search of a job; and organized rehabilitation programmes for prostitutes who were willing to take up a ‘respectable’ job. Sometimes they were placed in ‘surrogate families’, who were paid a salary for the care they provided. Beginning in 1936 the Society also provided free meals for unemployed women.¹⁰⁰ These multiple activities of the Jewish organization did not influence state officials however, and the Society received only occasional subsidies from the state.¹⁰¹ Paradoxically, these numerous activities may have nurtured beliefs that prostitution was ‘Jewish business’ as it happened in Argentina, where, as Donna J. Guy pointed out “despite the JAPGW’s progress [in curbing prostitution], or perhaps because of it, organized prostitution was increasingly linked to Jewish immigrants residing in the city.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 304.

¹⁰⁰ AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 656, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ For example, in 1932 the Society was granted 500 zloties. For comparison, The Polish Catholic Society for the Protection of Girls received 11,000 zloties. AAN, Ministerstwo Opieki Społecznej, sign. 195, p. 160.

¹⁰² Donna J. Guy, *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires. Prostitution, Family and Nation in Argentina* (Lincoln and London, 1991), 18. JAPGW stands for Jewish Association for Protecting Girls and Women.

IX CONCLUSIONS

It is a common opinion that in the early twentieth century, prostitution was criticized either as an abuse of poor, working-class women or as a morally corrupting social phenomenon, foreign to standards of middle-class decency. However, historians of the field agree that in the first years of the century, concern with prostitution was often motivated by anxieties beyond the sphere of morality – namely, by the fear of biological decline. Prostitution was seen as the main channel of transmission of STDs, in particular syphilis, and therefore as a threat to the health of the entire population.

During the nineteenth century, advances in bacteriology allowed to identify the causative agents of sexually transmitted diseases. Due to its dysgenic potentiality, syphilitic infection remained the most feared of all contagious diseases. Syphilis was transmitted not only ‘horizontally,’ but perhaps also ‘vertically’ across generations, via congenital infection.¹⁰³ It is not surprising, then, that reformers and researchers with various political backgrounds directed their attention to the question of what was the primary cause of prostitution: poverty, hereditary pathology or alleged actions of an outside enemy. Arguably, accusations against an alleged out-group enemy were a symbolic attempt to defend the dignity of Polish women: had they not been tricked into prostitution, they would not have fallen into disgrace. The phantasy that ‘our women’ were in danger, abused by unscrupulous traffickers, stoked public fears and attracted attention for an expanding popular press.

In 1972 Stanley Cohen coined the term *moral panic* to describe exaggerated reactions of the media and the public to real or imagined threats, with reference to the case of the youth disturbances in Clacton in 1964.¹⁰⁴ Incidences of moral panic usually occur in difficult times and are linked to society’s fears, provoked by radical

¹⁰³ The two terms referred to in Alan Petersen and Robin Bunton, *The New Genetics and the Public Health* (London and New York, 2002), 45.

¹⁰⁴ Indicators of moral panic include a heightened level of concern over the behaviour of certain groups and the consequences it causes for society, a common agreement that the threat is real, an increased level of hostility toward the group in question, disproportion in public concerns, and volatility. Erich Goode and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral panics. The social construction of deviance* (Malden, 1994), 33–41.

changes in the established social order and values. “Such fears,” noted Robert Blobaum, “were particularly strong in multi-ethnic societies, in which the dominant group felt demographic pressure from the ‘other’ groups and at the same time experienced an increasing and more visible professional involvement of educated women within its own community,”¹⁰⁵ the latter associated with a birth rate decline. Early decades of the twentieth century witnessed significant changes in family life, which undoubtedly created a high level of confusion and anxiety, evoking fears of imaginary threats.

Prostitution is one of the symbolic arenas where these fears played out. Venal sex was often seen both as the cause and the effect of different undesirable social phenomena, most notably alcoholism, drug addiction and child neglect. This contradictory picture – prostitution as the root or the fruit of various social ills – finds its counterpart in the dichotomy between explanations stressing hereditary factors on the one side, and the environment on the other. Additionally, at a time when so-called scientific racism emerged, old accusations against Jews of intentionally corrupting the Polish people – among other things through facilitating alcohol consumption¹⁰⁶ – gave way to arguments grounded in the natural sciences and medicine, arguments that redefined old fears of ‘The Other’ as a biological threat to the life of the nation itself.

proofreading James Hartzell

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¹⁰⁵ Blobaum, ‘Panika moralna’, 268.

¹⁰⁶ Joanna Beata Michlic, *Poland’s Threatening Other. The Image of the Jew from 1880 to the Present* (Lincoln and London, 2006), 37–8.

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