

A Short Essay on Jews and Prostitution in New York City: 1880-1914

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Introduction

At the turn of the twentieth century, Jewish affiliation with white slavery became a social phenomenon in major cities in the world, where a number of Jewish women worked in prostitution and Jewish men in white slave trafficking.¹ While it is difficult to measure the exact number of Jewish prostitutes, the estimated numbers are presented in several studies. One such study shows that in Germany at the turn of the 20th century, between 100,000 and 200,000 prostitutes were Jewish, but in 1914, that number increased significantly to 330,000.² In Buenos Aires in 1909, fully half the prostitutes were Jewish.³ In 1912, 19 percent of the prostitutes in one major New York reformatory were Jewish.⁴

This paper focuses on New York City, one of the cities where Jewish affiliation with white slavery became highly noticeable. Between 1880 and 1914,

newly arrived Eastern European Jewish immigrants living in the "zone of transition," the area where immigrants settled first, contributed disproportionately to the criminal and delinquent population - similarly to any other immigrant groups - in the urban centers of America.⁵ In the Lower East Side ghetto, where poverty was a problem, a large number of women became prostitutes out of necessity in order to support themselves and, often, their families. As it is described in several pieces of period literature, including memoirs, prostitutes and brothels were visible in everyday life in the ghetto.⁶ Therefore, the phenomenon of Jewish affiliation with prostitution became a concern for both Jewish immigrants and already established Jewish communal leaders. To make the situation worse, some non-Jews began to label Jews as the cause of white slavery. Jewish leaders initially confronted the issue in order to

¹ Edward Bristow shows by quoting Arthur Mora of Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women in London, that Jews were involved in prostitution rings that networked to almost all parts of North and South Africa, to India, China, Japan, Philippine Island, North and South America, and also to many of the countries of Europe. See *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery 1870-1939*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 1.

² Marion A. Kaplan, *The Jewish Feminist Movement in Germany: The Campaigns of the Jüdischer Frauenbund, 1904-1938* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), 104.

³ According to Kaplan, "statistics for prostitutes were available only for Buenos Aires. In 1903, the city had 42 known houses of which 39 were Jewish owned by Russian Jews. By the end of 1909, these figures had jumped to 199 and 102, respectively. Out of 537 women in 199 houses, 265 women were Jewish." See Kaplan, 108, 111.

⁴ Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1983), 15, 46, 48.

⁵ See Joselit.

⁶ Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (NY: H. Liveright, 1930), 16-35; Irving Howe, *World of Our Fathers* (London, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane, 2000, First Published in 1976), 96-98; Lincoln Steffens, *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1931), 245.

defend their communities against this false allegation. This paper examines Jewish affiliation with white slavery from 1880 to 1914, focusing on the Jewish community's response to its growing involvement in prostitution in New York City.

Though study of Jewish prostitution in America has not received enough scholarly attention, several important works on the topic do exist. More than three decades ago, Edward J. Bristow wrote the pioneering comprehensive study, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight Against White Slavery 1870-1939* (1982). *The Maimie Papers: Letter from an Ex-Prostitute* (1977), edited by Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson, compiles the correspondence between former Jewish prostitute Maimie and wealthy housewife Mrs. Howe. This important primary source spans twelve years' worth of letters chronicling the two women's daily lives and concerns. Several books that focus more broadly on the topic of Jews and crime also mention Jewish involvement in prostitution. *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900-1940* (1983) by Jenna Weissman Joselit and *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* (1993) by Albert Fried both deal with the problem of prostitution in the Lower East Side. In addition to these scholarly works, this paper examines relevant autobiographies and memoirs to assess how Jews living in the Lower East Side viewed prostitution.

The first half of the paper examines the origin and cause of sharp growth in Jewish involvement in white slavery at the turn of the 20th century. Here, I examine why and how Jewish women became prostitutes and to what extent Jewish immigration impacted the prostitution industry in New York City. The second half of this paper examines the response of the Jewish community toward the problem.

Further, I show the difference in response between well-established German Jews and newly arrived Eastern European Jews as well as between Jewish men and women.

Origin and Cause of Jewish Affiliation with Prostitution in New York City

Prostitution is considered the oldest profession in the world, and Jewish prostitutes have existed since the biblical period. In the bible, prostitutes were called *zenut*, which applied to both common and sacred prostitution, and thus, prostitutes were not foreign to Jews. However, during the 1880s, prostitution became a Jewish issue for the first time in modern history. According to historian Edward Bristow, between 1880 and 1939, the Jews played a conspicuous role in white slavery. Not only was Jewish participation prominent, it was historically unprecedented, geographically widespread, and fraught with collective political dangers.⁷

So what was behind this sudden spike in Jewish prostitution in cities all over the world? For one, the impact of emancipation in the modern period led many Jews to discard the traditional lifestyle and assimilate to their surroundings, including the change in sexual morality. Bristow claims that Jewish affiliation with prostitution was rooted largely in Eastern and Central Europe where Jews dominated the international traffic in those areas.⁸ By 1889, Jewish women ran 203 out of 289 of the licensed brothels in the Pale of Settlement where the Jewish population accounted for only 12 percent of the population.⁹ Thus, before Jewish affiliation with prostitution began to be recognized elsewhere, Jewish prostitution in Eastern Europe was already notorious.

There are several theses that explain this

⁷ Bristow, 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

phenomenon. Reformers pointed out that before the 1880s, Jewish prostitution had not been a disturbing factor. They traced its source to the recrudescence of active Russian persecutions of Jews in 1881. The resulting economic hardships and desire to emigrate were seen as two main causes of the Jewish involvement in white slavery.¹⁰ While Jewish girls who traveled with their families were less vulnerable to prostitution, girls who traveled alone to new cities to seek employment were likely to be seen as prey.¹¹

While the first record of Jewish women engaging in prostitution in New York City can be traced back to the 1860s, their numbers were not significant at the time. Only after the 1880s, when the first wave of Eastern European Jewish immigrants began to settle in the Lower East Side, did Jewish involvement in white slavery become notable.

Alongside prostitutes, Jewish madams and pimps existed. According to Sydney Stahl Weinberg, many of these traffickers and prostitutes were Jews particularly from Russia, Romania, and the poverty-stricken province of Galicia.¹² German Jews who had immigrated to the United States decades earlier and tended to live "uptown" did not affiliate with white slavery. The Lower East Side, "downtown," where Eastern European Jews resided was the tempter for crimes including prostitution. Canal Street was filled with brothels, and the local residents frequently saw prostitutes along Allen Street.¹³ Hyma's Saloon at 98 and Lena Cohen's brothel at 156 Allen Street were well-known. Jake Wolf and Harry the Pimp, both

saloonkeepers, became quite successful in the business.¹⁴

The long-term poverty stricken condition in the ghetto was the main cause of Jewish women's affiliation with prostitution - Hasia Diner claims that this work was usually a by-product of female poverty.¹⁵ In this context, crimes such as pick pocketing and prostitution lured with the promise of easy money. A large number of Jewish women were forced into prostitution to support themselves and, in many cases, their families.

In his novel *Jews Without Money*, Michael Gold fictionalizes a typical situation in which a Jewish woman finds herself desperate. Rosie has been working in sweatshops for years to save money, but she becomes ill because of the poor conditions of her sweatshop. When she is so desperate that she is ready to die, she meets a pimp.¹⁶ Since then, she works as a prostitute, made fun of by the neighborhood children. The mother of one of the kids, on the other hand, understands that Rosie has made a difficult, desperate choice of profession only out of necessity.

While some Jewish women of the era were affiliated with prostitution after having been abandoned by their husbands in order to support themselves and their children¹⁷, others turned to the profession after having been raped or seduced. Dance halls and saloons were popular places for young working women to visit after work. There were thirty-one dance halls in the Lower East Side at the time, and admission was only five cents - the same

¹⁰ Kaplan, 108.

¹¹ Ibid., 109; Sydney S. Weinberg, *The World of Our Mothers: The Lives of Jewish Immigrant Women* (Chapel Hills, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 78.

¹² Weinberg, 78.

¹³ Ibid., 92.

¹⁴ Bristow, 152-153.

¹⁵ Ibid., 150; Hasia R. Diner, *A Time for Gathering: The Second Immigration 1820-1880* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 63; Albert Fried, *The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Gangster in America* [Revised Edition], (NY: Columbia University Press, 1993), 7; Howe, 96.

¹⁶ Gold, 34.

price as a movie ticket. Many young women who worked in factories preferred to go dancing, because it lasted longer than watching a film for the same money. Ironically, these places were perfect recruitment grounds for pimps.¹⁸ According to Elizabeth Ewen, even as the dance halls gave young immigrant women a taste of independence, they also turned them into sexual prey for strange men, causing many women to be led into prostitution.¹⁹

Many young immigrant women who worked in New York also sent money to their parents who remained in Eastern Europe to support them financially. In 1896, the well-circulated newspaper the *New York World* published an article about a Jewish prostitute. Twenty-eight-year-old Lena Meyers, committed suicide in her apartment in New York. She had been sending money to her parents in Krakow on a regular basis. Before committing suicide, she received a letter from her mother asking her, "Lena, why don't you get married? Do you want to be an old maid?"²⁰ Her parents would never dare to think that their daughter was sending money she earned through prostitution. As a result, heartbroken Lena took her own life.

Most prostitutes came to be involved in this business for unfortunate reasons; however, some women were tempted to prostitution by the "an alternative to hardship."²¹ Former prostitute Maimie Pinzer confessed to her friend in a letter that she

"had the easy life that immoral living brings, and... [could not] be moral enough to see where drudgery is better than a life of lazy vice."²²

Jewish Community's Response to Increasing White Slavery

When Jewish prostitutes and brothels became visible on the streets, Jewish immigrants themselves began to consider them a threat. Irving Howe, the author of *World of Our Fathers* (1976) wrote, "the very possibility that some of their own [daughters] might be mixed up with prostitution horrified the immigrant Jews: it ran wholly against the values and inhibitions they had brought across the ocean."²³ At the same time, Jewish parents with young children feared its bad influence on their children. In his autobiography, police reporter, Lincoln Steffens recalls a Jewish mother in the Lower East Side, whose three little girls were huddled at a rear window, from which they could see a prostitute serving a customer. The oldest daughter told her that she would go into the business when she grew up, because it was a good business: easy, and you can dress, eat and live.²⁴ J. R. Schwartz also mentions in his memoir that when he was a young boy, he was able to see a prostitute who lived in the building across the street working from a window of his apartment on Allen Street.²⁵ These examples show how children were exposed to the prostitution in everyday life in Lower

¹⁷ Henry Feingold, *Zion in America: the Jewish Experience from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Dover Books, 2002) [first edition, 1981], 138; Reena Sigman Friedman, "Send Me My Husband Who is in New York City: Husband Desertion in the American Jewish Immigrant Community, 1900-1926," *Jewish Social Studies*, vol. 64, no. 1 (Winter 1982), 1, 7; Weinberg, 78, 92-93, 110.

¹⁸ Bristow, 154; Weinberg, 92-93.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Ewen. *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars: Life and Culture on the Lower East Side, 1880-1925* (New York: Monthly Review, 1985), 197.

²⁰ Howe, 97.

²¹ Weinberg, 92.

²² Ruth Rosen and Sue Davidson eds. *The Maimie Papers: Letter from an Ex-Prostitute* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 1997) [first edition, 1977], 4.

²³ Howe, 96..

²⁴ Steffens, 245.

East Side, and quite naturally it became a moral concern of the Jewish community.

While Jewish immigrants were most concerned about prostitution bringing crime to their neighborhoods, Jewish leaders in cities across the world were more concerned with Jews being affiliated with white slavery. They responded after the International Association was made aware of white slave traffic in 1885. That year, the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls, Women, Children was founded in London. Twelve years later in 1897, the B'nai B'rith Lodge of Hamburg established a Jewish Committee to Combat White Slavery. Except the participation of two women's groups, its entire membership was male.²⁶

Interestingly, there are significant differences between male and female reactions concerning the problem. Female abolitionists considered Jewish prostitutes, victims of the society, and they were much more interested in practical ways to help, such as educating young girls. Marion Kaplan explains:

Although the JFB [*Jüdischer Frauenbund*] at first cooperated with the Jewish Committee, Jewish feminists were not as reticent as their male colleagues: they soon embarked upon a campaign to educate the Jewish community about prostitution, rejecting the traditional notion that innocence was protected through silence on subjects related to sex.²⁷

The Jewish Committee held an international conference, and a survey based on it was released in 1910. According to the report of the Jewish

Committee, the brutal poverty in Eastern Europe was to blame for the rise in Jewish crime. They noted that almost no German Jews were involved in sex traffic.²⁸ It is also interesting to note that although the situation in Germany, Austria, South America, Galicia, Hungary, and France were mentioned in the report, the situation in the United States was not mentioned at all.²⁹ Nevertheless, by 1910, Jewish affiliation with white slavery was becoming a serious problem in New York, so this absence is perplexing. It is likely that some Jewish white slavery abolitionists were already aware of growing white slavery in America by this time. Evidently, Bartha Pappenheim, a founder of the *Jüdischer Frauenbund* and a female social worker who made a great effort toward the abolition of prostitution, was invited to the United States in 1909 by a group of American Jews.³⁰ While she was in the United States, she gave lectures in New York and Chicago, asserting that 80 percent of the Jewish prostitutes in those cities had been sold or led astray through no fault of their own. After hearing her lecture, American Jews realized the importance of her work, and promised her that they would support the JFB.³¹

American Jews themselves responded to Jewish involvement in white slavery. In particular, well-established German Jews noticed the growing number of Jewish immigrants involved in prostitution as early as the late 1890s. The impoverishment of the ghetto and social deviancy worried German Jewish philanthropists. Jacob H. Schiff, a well-known New York banker and philanthropist, wrote in 1901, that he found Jewish deviancy in the ghetto "horrible." He was shocked that while Jewish population was

²⁵ Schwartz, 117-119.

²⁶ Kaplan, 109.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 110.

²⁹ Ibid., 111.

³⁰ Ibid., 103.

³¹ Ibid., 119.

only 14 percent in the city, 23 percent of delinquents in reformatories were Jewish.³² Schiff did not directly affiliate with the movement for white slavery, but he saw its importance within the larger scope of the environmentalist approach to ghetto reform. Lillian Wald, a prominent social worker, also believed that social and moral problems were not created by the immigrants themselves, but created by ghetto conditions.³³

Such leaders as Mayer Sulzberger considered that Jews had as much right to their share of criminals as any other group. Schiff did not agree with this opinion. Schiff wrote in 1901, "Prostitution in our city, one almost can say, has become Semitic — We Jews, who have hitherto boasted of the moral purity of our people, must hang our heads when the question is raised."³⁴ As a result, the leaders of the Jewish community expanded existing agencies and created new ones in the 1900s. Nevertheless, Jewish involvement in prostitution continued.

The National Council of Jewish Women was one of the most important abolitionist organizations, working to shield women from prostitution. Besides the issue of prostitution, the issue of unwed mothers was also considered problematic. As a result, the organization took over the management of the Home for Wayward Girls on Staten Island in 1906, funded by a \$10,000 donation from Jacob H. Schiff's wife Therese Loeb Schiff.³⁵ American Jewish activist Sadie American and the organization played an important role in combating white slavery. Their interest was in

suppressing Jewish involvement in the white slavery to benefit women victims rather than fighting against anti-Semitic claims around the issue of white slavery.³⁶ The National Council of Jewish Women sympathized with the prostitutes, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and saw them as victims of the most vicious predators.³⁷

It is important to note that there were also responses by non-Jews on the issue of Jewish affiliation with white slavery. One of the first ones was in 1899, when Frederick Shackleton, a pastor of a Forsyth Street church, complained that solicitation was openly practiced from the stoops of tenements near his congregation. The New York State Legislature also responded to the issue. In 1894, the Lexow Committee and in 1899 the Mazet Committee were appointed by the New York State Legislature, digging up quantities of material concerning crime, police corruption, and prostitution on the East Side.³⁸

From *The Jewish Woman in America* (1976) edited by the Charlotte Baum, we can learn that the Jewish community as a whole was agitated by the issue of white slavery. According to Baum, "Knowing that anti-Semites were quite prepared to publicize - and exaggerate - the number of Jews in the white slave traffic strengthened their feeling of communal responsibility to clean up this blot on the honor of American Jewry."³⁹ In fact, some accusations of Jewish involvement in white slavery were exploited by anti-Semitic figures for propaganda. For example, in the early twentieth century, George K. Turner had

³² Naomi W. Cohen, *Jacob H. Schiff: A Study in American Jewish Leadership* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England Press, 1999), 84.

³³ *Ibid.*, 94.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁵ Charlotte Baum, Paula Hyman, and Sonya Michel eds. *The Jewish Woman in America* (New York: New American Library, 1975), 170.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 173.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁸ Howe, 97.

³⁹ Baum, 170.

published articles which blamed Jews for the growth of prostitution in New York City and Chicago in the popular magazine *McClure's Magazine*. In his 1907 article, titled "The City of Chicago: A Study of the Great Immoralities," he claimed that Jews dominated in white slavery. In 1908, Theodore Bingham, the Police Commissioner of New York City published an article which claimed that half of the criminals in the city were Jewish.⁴⁰ A year later, Turner published another article called "The Daughters of the Poor," and once again claimed prostitution in New York City was a Jewish issue. He asserts that:

About twenty-five years ago the third great flush of immigration, consisting of Austrian, Russian, and Hungarian Jews, began to come into New York. Among these immigrants were a large number of criminals, who soon found that they could develop an extremely profitable business in the sale of women in New York.⁴¹

In response, American Jews defended themselves in various ways. The Yiddish newspaper *Die Wahrheit* published daily lists of prostitutes convicted in night court, and found out that only 27 percent were Jewish. In the period, about one-third of the population in New York City was Jewish.⁴² Considering the percentage of Jews in Manhattan in this period, it proved that Turner's claim was wrong.⁴³ The downtown Yiddish press questioned the accuracy of Turner's article and noted the absence of

hard evidence to support the charges. On the other hand, the uptown Jewish community was somewhat less defensive according to Baum. For example, after the Turner's article appeared, uptown Jew Judah L. Magnes, said in his address at Temple Emanuel that prostitution was "but rare among us."⁴⁴ In fact, many Jews responded to the issues of white slavery defensively and tried to deny it. However, Sadie American resisted the Jewish community's denial of the problem by announcing the reality of Jewish involvement in white slavery.⁴⁵ Eventually, investigators were hired by the Kehillah, an overarching body of communal self-governance, which was established by a coalition of uptown and downtown Jews in 1910, to look into the charge.⁴⁶

In response to Bingham's accusation, American Jews asked him to substantiate his accusation, and being unable to supply details, he apologized for his accusation. Here too, "subsequent New York county statistics indicated that only 16.1 percent to total convictions were Jewish and, given the city's ethnic population, Jew were only half as likely to be convicted or criminal activities as were non-Jews," according to Leonard Dinnerstein.⁴⁷

Though Jewish immigrants were often blamed for the rise in white slavery in cities such as New York and Chicago — and certainly newly arrived immigrants in the ghetto contributed to the growth of prostitution — Francesco Cordasco and Thomas Monroe Pitkin's study shows that in New York, most of the prostitutes were not immigrants but native born. According to the study, in New York City in

⁴⁰ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Antisemitism in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 72.

⁴¹ George K. Turner. "The Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York City as a Leading Center of the White Slave Trade of the World, Under Tammany Hall," *McClure's Magazine*, vol. 34 (1909), 47.

⁴² Baum, 174.

⁴³ Bristow, 162.

⁴⁴ Baum, 171.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 174-75.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 171-72.

⁴⁷ Dinnerstein, 72.

1909 and 1911, over 75 percent of all women convicted of prostitution were native born.⁴⁸

The Jewish participation in prostitution began to decrease during World War I as a result of Jewish self-policing system. Bristow explains, "not only was this due to the simmering down on the pre-war white-slavery hysteria; it was mainly because young Jewish men and women, unthwarted in these open societies, had better ladders to climb."⁴⁹ Historian Henry Feingold also agrees with Bristow that the issue of Jewish prostitution disappeared as a community issue after 1914. He shows that "the number of Jewish women arrested for sex offenses fell from 18 percent before the war to 11 percent in 1924 in New York City. He suspects, "the monitoring activities of Kehillah probably gave New York City a lower number" in Jewish affiliation with prostitution.⁵⁰ Although the number of Jewish prostitutes and pimps clearly decreased, even in the early 1920s, forty-seven among 300 pimps identified themselves as Jewish.⁵¹

Conclusion

This paper has examined the causes behind and reactions to the temporary spike in Jewish prostitution during 1880-1914 in New York City. Poverty in the Lower East Side ghetto filled with recent arrivals from Eastern Europe served as the backdrop for the phenomenon. However, Cordasco and Monroe Pitkin's study shows that in reality, most of prostitutes in New York were non-immigrants.

The reasons for choosing prostitution as a profession varied among women; some were deceived by pimps and some chose it in order to support their living. Gradually, the issue of Jewish affiliation to

prostitution became recognized by Jews in New York, but it was taken more seriously when the prostitution was labeled as a Jewish problem by some non-Jews. Growth in Jewish prostitution was routinely used as an anti-Semitic propaganda.

The response of the Jewish community to the issue differed between well-established German-Jews and newly arrived Eastern European Jews. Prostitution was not a direct problem of uptown German Jews, since German Jewish prostitutes did not exist — most of them were already well-established. They were however, concerned that white slavery would be labeled a Jewish problem. As a result, the uptown German Jewish philanthropists attempted to address the issue by creating organizations. When Jews were accused by George K. Turner and Theodore Bingham, the Police Commissioner of New York City of being the cause of growing white slavery, uptown Jews were not so keen in fighting against the accusation. On the other hand, the downtown Yiddish press played a significant role in protesting against the accusation.

There was also gender difference in the response against the Jewish prostitution. While the majority of abolitionist organizations' members were male, Jewish women actively responded to the call to abolish prostitution. The National Council of Jewish Women worked to shield women from prostitution. In 1906, the organization took over the management of a Home for Wayward Girls on Staten Island. Women like Sadie American actively combated against white slavery through education and practical help. Female activists' and organizations' motivation in suppressing Jewish involvement in white slavery was to protect

⁴⁸ Francesco Cordasco and Thomas Monroe Pitkin, *The White Slave Trade and the Immigrants* (Detroit: Blaine Ethridge, 1981), 60.

⁴⁹ Bristow, 283.

⁵⁰ Henry Feingold, *A Time for Searching: Entering the Mainstream 1920-1945* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 49.

⁵¹ Bristow, 283.

women victims rather than fighting against antisemitism, which differentiated them from male abolitionists. Jewish prostitution began to decrease during World War I as a result of Jewish self-policing, such as the monitoring activities of Kehillah. The responses to the issue of Jews and prostitution serve as an example of the Jewish diversity in America at the turn of the twentieth century.