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Uprooting the Seeds of Evil

JEWISH MARRIAGE REGULATION, MORALITY CERTIFICATES, AND DEGENERATE PROSTITUTE MOTHERS IN 1930S BUENOS AIRES

BY MIR YARFITZ

IN 1936, a Polish-Jewish immigrant “massage nurse” and dancer came into the Buenos Aires office of the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women to request a favorable morality certificate. The Jewish Association determined, via its knowledge of the cabaret where she worked, that she was actually a prostitute, and refused to grant her the certification of morality that she would need to legally bring her 19-year-old daughter from Poland to join her and her younger daughter in Buenos Aires, an extralegal document required in the mid-1930s by various Argentine authorities who dealt with Jewish immigrants. Although she begged for this gatekeeping certificate “with hot tears, that only a mother

could shed,” the Association refused “based on the fact of her dishonest livelihood, a less than edifying circumstance for the moral integrity of her girls.”¹ The 38-year-old insisted that her daughters, “like the owner of the house where she had been living for a year, knew that her nighttime absences were due to her profession as a nurse, corresponding to night shift work.”² She claimed that when her elder daughter arrived, she had been planning to leave prostitution and establish a small business that might enable her to live modestly. While the Association prevailed in its refusal of the morality certificate, it strongly encouraged her to pursue this new career path, and agreed to reconsider if her intentions proved “firm

and sound.”³ Notes on the case further state that her “maternal feelings provide the basis for the consideration of the possibility of her rehabilitation in a short time.”⁴ This prostitute’s motherhood provided a point of leverage for the reform association to pressure her to leave prostitution. While in this case, reformers viewed maternal feelings as a sign of rehabilitation potential, other prostitute mothers were judged to be not only beyond hope of redemption, but endangering future generations and thus the broader community with hereditary degeneration.

In the midst of an industrial and immigrant boom at the turn of the century, Argentina’s intellectual and political leaders sought solutions

The international Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women was founded in London in the 1890s to fight against what had suddenly become substantial Jewish involvement in cross-border prostitution. The Jewish Association's local branch, the Esras Noschim (Hebrew for "Women's Section") was established in Buenos Aires in 1901, the first office outside of Europe and by far the most active local agency...

to new social problems in such emergent disciplines as criminology, sexology, and anthropometrics. The Italian school of criminology led by Cesare Lombroso heavily influenced Argentine views on the origins and treatment of criminality. Lombroso and his disciples examined the physical characteristics of criminals, which they argued could be passed along with their antisocial behaviors from one generation to the next. Acquired characteristics could become hereditary, creating new generations "born to crime."

Although criminology replaced the religious metaphors of classic penal science with biological language, moral evaluation remained central. In this scheme, women were responsible for both the biological and moral propagation of the species, forming the nation's future citizens.⁵ Argentine municipal authorities, along with Lombroso, supported the legal regulation of prostitution, in which a state-sponsored brothel system controlled the spread of venereal disease through regular examination and quarantine. Argentina adopted this system in 1875, and maintained it until 1936. Lombroso's influential book *The Female Offender* claimed that the exaggerated sensuality of prostitutes destroyed the "spirit of self-abnegation inseparable from the maternal function," thus making the very existence of the prostitute mother

was something of a paradox in this intellectual schema.⁶ This theoretical gap into which the child-rearing prostitute fell created a conundrum for agencies that interfaced with their actual existence.

One mechanism by which these ideas affected Argentine society beyond the theoretical can be identified in the 1930s efforts of a leading Jewish reform association to eradicate the long-term effects of the local notoriety of organized Jewish pimps and prostitutes. The international Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women was founded in London in the 1890s to fight against what had suddenly become substantial Jewish involvement in cross-border prostitution. The Jewish Association's local branch, the Esras Noschim (Hebrew for "Women's Section") was established in Buenos Aires in 1901, the first office outside of Europe and by far the most active local agency, due to the prevalence of prostitution in the city of mostly single male recent immigrants, and high-profile Jewish involvement in the organizational end of the industry. Although Jews were not the only ethnic group managing the city's legal brothels and clandestine places of assignation, they were the most organized and visible both as pimps and opponents. A group of Jewish pimps, madams, and prostitutes had established a legally incor-

porated mutual aid and burial society named after the city of Warsaw in a Buenos Aires suburb in 1906, and in the face of ostracism from the rest of the Jewish community, created its own cemetery, synagogue, health benefits, and charity structure parallel to that of other immigrant voluntary associations. Later called the Zwi Migdal Society, this institution prompted outrage among co-religionists on both sides of the Atlantic, who called the group's hundreds of members "*teme'im*," or unclean ones, and forbade them from entering the main Jewish burial grounds, synagogues, or the Yiddish theater and other arenas of communal life. A 1930 court case against the Zwi Migdal, which garnered international headlines, finally dismantled the pimps' society, and most members fled the country.

In the wake of this dénouement, Esras Noschim harnessed its community influence to intercede in the creation of all new Jewish family units: no Jewish marriage would be conducted by Argentine rabbinic authorities without an Esras Noschim-authorized certificate of morality accredited for both parties. Concerned with its reputation, the Jewish community granted this organization jurisdiction over families and rabbis to investigate and certify individuals' moral character, and to block certain undesirable unions from taking place. To receive a morality certificate, prospective newlyweds

had to provide information that included references from local relatives, non-related coreligionists who had resided in the country for several years, and moral guarantees from two commercial firms. Esras Noschim's report to the Jewish Association's London headquarters for the first half of 1934 stated that out of 119 requests, 27 morality certificates were denied based on the discovery that applicants were already married, lack of "moral guarantee," or for "failure to fulfill the legal and moral requirements... lack of sufficient data, verification of married civil status, doubtful morality, or for the couple's resistance to obtaining the obligatory Civil Registry identification card."⁷ As seen in the case described initially, the morality certificate also became necessary for relatives to bring minor children into the country. Esras Noschim thus took on a gatekeeping function for the Buenos Aires Jewish community, providing moral certification to guarantee a "clean" future generation, free of the taint of the *teme'im*.

Concern with the moral purity of future generations of Argentine Jews also motivated Esras Noschim's response to prostitute mothers. While some of the cases summarized in their records describe fallen but salvageable women, prostitute mothers generally emerge as beyond reform, dangerous to their children and to the broader community: "Fortunately,

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the number of prostituted mothers is very small compared to those who have not established homes. The fall of the former [prostitutes with children] is much deeper and is the prototype of a complete degeneration. The responsibility assumed by a prostitute mother is much more serious than that of a single woman, because with the desecration of her own home, she violates the sacred principles of family, sowing the seed of evil in the breasts of her relatives.”⁸ Esras Noschim thus distinguishes between prostitutes who do and don’t have children, placing blame for the degeneration of future generations on these unfit mothers.

Unlike in the case used here as an opening anecdote, motherhood was not generally viewed as a possible exit route from the moral degradation of prostitution, especially when individuals fit the criminological analysis of unrepentant degenerates. A mother specified as not having been forced into prostitution by her hairdresser husband (thus demonstrating her own agency and becoming beyond the possibility of reform) was threatened by Esras Noschim with loss of legal custody over her children, and other relatives were brought in by the agency as auxiliaries to increase the pressure, as they lacked legal authority to take this action.⁹ The association also supported a man’s 1931 petition to the Defender of Minors to take custody of a 14-year-old girl whose mother was report-

edly a procurer (*proxeneta*).¹⁰ As criminologists recognized the influence of both heredity and environment, the only hope of preventing the seeds of evil sown by prostitute mothers from being reaped in prostitute daughters and other deviant offspring was to remove the source.

Unlike in the eugenics movement in the United States, in which generally white, highly educated, Christian reformers discouraged reproduction among African Americans and non-Anglo Saxon immigrants deemed “unfit,” Jewish social reformers in Argentina attempted to delineate the boundaries of membership within their own community. Esras Noschim’s morality certification system and particular concern with prostitute mothers as a degenerative influence on future generations revealed deep anxiety with the legacy of the substantial local connection between Jews and organized prostitution. It should be pointed out that this agency’s approach was not necessarily embraced by all members of the local Jewish community. The Poilischen Farband, a large association of Jewish immigrants from Poland, in 1933 accused Esras Noschim’s principal employee of condescending to clients, being physically violent, taking actions in secret, and generally acting “as if someone had appointed him guardian of our morality.”¹¹ Another point of debate remains how prostitute mothers understood their own choices. They certainly emerge from between

the lines of these cases as fighting for their right to bear and raise children. But their voices are overshadowed by community shame, which continues to hide the family names of those involved in prostitution a century ago, preventing admission to the ruined cemetery of the Zwi Migdal Society and forbidding researchers before myself access to the archival collection in which this very data hid.

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Notes

1. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, p. 20. IWO Archive, Buenos Aires, Esras Noschim (EN) collection, box 3, label 291.
2. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, p. 19.
3. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, pp. 20-21.
4. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, p. 21.
5. Julia Rodríguez, *Civilizing Argentina : science, medicine, and the modern state* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); p. 117.
6. Cesare Lombroso and Guglielmo Ferrero, *The Female Offender* (Wm. S. Hein Publishing, 1980/1895), p. 153.
7. Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women – Esras Noschim – Informe Primer Semestre de 1934. IWO: EN box 3, item 5, pp. 10-11, 16, 55.
8. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, p. 5.
9. Memorias de la “Ezras Noschim” de Buenos Aires Ano 1936, p. 5.
10. EN box 3, item 30.
11. EN box 3, item 11.