

# Bodies and Souls

*The Tragic Plight of Three  
Jewish Women Forced into  
Prostitution in the Americas*

ISABEL VINCENT



VINTAGE CANADA

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PRAISE FOR  
*Bodies and Souls*

“Investigative journalist Vincent uncovers a little-known slice of Jewish history. ... The story is fascinating ... riveting and disturbing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“One of the saddest and most shameful stories in Jewish history has been suppressed for generations: Between 1860 and 1939, thousands of poor young women from Eastern European shtetls were sold into sexual slavery by the Jewish-run Zwi Migdal crime syndicate, which controlled brothels on several continents. ... Canadian journalist Vincent demonstrates her strength as a writer and storyteller, which enables her to at least partially retrieve this all-but-lost world.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“*Bodies and Souls* is not merely the story of three Jewish women forced into prostitution, as its subtitle asserts, but also a retrospective look at the Jewish white slave trade, an obscene chapter in the history of vice. ... The book sheds light on an obscure page of history that is both tragic and uplifting.”

—*The Gazette (Montreal)*

“Vincent is a sympathetic chronicler, and in uncovering the histories of these unsung women she demonstrates both tact and imagination. Her book, the only one to have tackled the touchy subject, is an informative and compelling read.”

—*London Free Press*

“This is a frightening story of deceit and abuse, but it is also a moving history of these long-forgotten women who weathered all the worst that life could throw at them—and survived. Best non-fiction of the month.”

—*Book of the Month News*



Zoran Milich

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### *About the Author*

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ISABEL VINCENT is an investigative reporter and the author of *Hitler's Silent Partners: Swiss Bank Nazi Gold, and the Pursuit of Justice* and *See No Evil: The Strange Case of Christine Lamont and David Spencer*. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, *Marie Claire*, and many other international publications. She lives in Rio de Janeiro.

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ALSO BY ISABEL VINCENT

*Hitler's Silent Partners:  
Swiss Banks, Nazi Gold, and the Pursuit of Justice*

*See No Evil: The Strange Case  
of Christine Lamont and David Spencer*

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*For Nélida Piñón,*

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*who introduced me to “the other America.”*

*And for my mothers,*

*Irene Vicente and Nada Hodzic.*

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This book took nearly five years to research, largely because it was so difficult to convince people to speak openly about the *polacas*, the prostitutes from Eastern Europe. By the time I began my research in South America, I found that hospital and police archives had been destroyed long ago, some by unscrupulous “historians” and public administrators who no doubt wanted to make sure that the story of these women would stay buried forever.

But while many saw the saga of the Jewish prostitutes only as a source of shame, others clearly saw it for what it really is—a story of strength. And I am grateful to them, above all for sharing that story with me. Alberto da Costa, the faithful accountant and caretaker of the Society of Truth, demonstrated great courage by speaking to me about the nearly two decades that he served the prostitutes, and about his relationship with Rebecca Freedman. Seu Alberto, as he was known to them, is their final witness. And in telling their stories honestly and straightforwardly, he has honoured the memory of the women he respectfully called “the Superior Sisters.” Throughout it all, he remained a consummate professional, and extremely loyal to the women who were so loyal to him and his family.

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Finally, I want to thank Zoran Milich, who has my greatest debt.

## Introduction

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They stopped coming to the cemetery at Inhaúma, a run-down suburb of Rio de Janeiro when the last one died in the mid-1980s. That's when the wild manioc and the hearty weed the locals call jackknife grass began their steady, silent approach—at first peeking through the cracks in the older headstones and then, bolstered by a relentless equatorial sun and steamy afternoon downpours, choking the tombs in a labyrinth of dense vegetation.

A banana plant sprouted outside the small mud-and-stucco building where the women used to wash the bodies and prepare them for burial at the edge of the cemetery, near the plot of land that had been reserved for the children's graves. Inside, the roots burst through the elaborate mosaic floor, shattering the cobalt blue and red Moroccan tiles that are barely visible now, hidden beneath a thick blanket of dirt and rodent droppings.

For years, after the last one died, nobody bothered to maintain the cemetery, which became a paradise for snakes and the drug traffickers from the Wet Rat favela, a nearby shantytown of rubbish-strewn dirt roads and half-finished red-brick houses with corrugated tin roofs. For the small-time drug lords, dressed in long surfer shorts and rubber flip-flops, the abandoned cemetery became the perfect hiding place. They could easily scale its low, crumbling mud walls. They pried open the largest tombs with crowbars, unearthing the grizzly contents—bits of polished, yellowing bones—in order to stash their supplies of cocaine and automatic weapons. The drug dealers rarely worried about leaving their valuable commodities unattended in the graves, which they tagged with graffiti. They knew the authorities would never follow them there.

But after a while even the drug traffickers stopped coming. Perhaps they were spooked by the stories people started to tell about the place. There's a witch buried in the cemetery, they said. Those who could read—although just barely—told the illiterate ones that they had seen her name, inscribed in block letters, on one of the headstones: BRUCHA. In fact, the headstone belongs to a Polish woman named Brucha Blanck. For the drug dealers, many of whom have little more than a primary school education, *Brucha* looks and sounds like *bruxa*, the Portuguese word for “witch.”

Still, people say the cemetery is cursed. Some cross the street to avoid passing too near. The more superstitious locals refuse to leave the clay bowls of sweets and manioc flour that are the ritual offerings to the Afro-Brazilian *orixás* or gods in *Candomblé* ceremonies outside the cemetery's imposing iron gates, adorned with a large Star of David, painted with a thick coat of gray enamel. The offerings, which are made alternately to seek blessings or curses from the gods, are regularly left at crossroads throughout Brazil. But there is an unspoken understanding about the corner of Piragibe and José dos Reis Streets, where the cemetery's gate stands. It's strictly off limits, to both mortals and gods.

But it wasn't always the case. As recently as twenty years ago, on the Jewish holy day, small groups of elderly women in floral-print cotton dresses and bright red lipstick left their comfortable middle-class neighborhoods in Rio and boarded crowded buses for the hourlong journey to the cemetery in Inhaúma, a bleak industrial suburb whose name means “black bird” in the language of the Tupi Indians, the original inhabitants of Rio.

The last regular visitor to the cemetery was a woman everyone knew only as Rebecca. She was thin and frail, her face dominated by thick, black-rimmed spectacles in her final years. She arrived once a week in a blue-and-yellow Rio taxi, tipping the local children with sweets in exchange for help removing her walker from the trunk. Rebecca, who was well into her nineties, pattered around the cemetery with some authority, pulling up weeds with trembling hands and ordering the cemetery's custodian, a mechanic named Daniel Rodrigues, to sweep the stone walkways between the graves and rebuild the mud walls to keep out intruders.

But the other mourners never lingered by the graves of the women they called the "sisters"—most of them sturdy, Eastern European matrons who fixed the mourners with steady, even gazes captured forever in the fading enameled daguerreotypes that are prominently displayed on some of their graves.

In contrast, the mourners arrived with their heads bowed to avoid the stares of the local. Some hid their faces behind the umbrellas they carried to shield them from a blistering midday sun. They came in silence, and when they returned to their homes in the most fashionable parts of the city, few of them ever told their friends or their families (if they had any left) where they had been.

"*Piranhas*" some of the locals whispered among themselves whenever they saw the elderly mourners enter through the gates of the cemetery. In Portuguese as in English, piranha is the name of a ferocious Amazonian fish. But in Brazil it is also slang for prostitute.

"YOU WANT TO KNOW who's buried here?"

The question startled me as I made my way through the rows of crumbling gravestones. It was an unseasonably hot morning in July, the beginning of winter in the southern hemisphere. In the sparse shade afforded by a crumbling child's headstone, a dog had just given birth to three puppies. The tiny, hairless beasts, still wet from their mother's womb, were bleating mournfully as they struggled to open their eyes.

"You want to know who these people are?"

I turned my attention from the puppies and looked at Daniel Rodrigues, a middle-aged, sunburned man in long camouflage shorts, his white T-shirt tied around his waist, a diamond stud in one ear. His eyes were bloodshot, and the white hairs on his chest and prominent belly glistened with tiny beads of sweat. Daniel told me he was in charge of the cemetery. For years he has pulled the weeds around the graves, swept the walkways, and fixed the broken headstones. He recently built new mud-and-stucco walls, so high that even the drug dealers can't scale them, he assured me. Still, it's hard work, and he says he can't devote too much time to the cemetery's upkeep. Daniel owns the taxi-repair shop next-door. When the Sociedade Cemitério Comunal Israelita, the organization that oversees Jewish cemeteries in Rio, discovered that he was encroaching on the cemetery's land, they struck a deal with him. Daniel is allowed to use the land for free, provided that he cleans up the cemetery on a regular basis and keeps the iron gates firmly locked. However, nobody from the Jewish Communal Cemetery Society ever makes the journey to Inhaúma to check that Daniel is doing a good job.

"I'm not supposed to let anyone in," said Daniel apologetically the first time I knocked on the gates of the cemetery. "It's off limits here."

But there was something in his voice—a slight quaver of uncertainty, guilt, perhaps—the told me he wasn't serious. As Daniel would confess to me much later, he rarely enforced the cemetery society's rules at Inhaúma. He seemed to let just about anyone in. Not that there are many people coming to pay their respects to the “piranhas, pimps, and gigolos,” as Daniel calls them, laughing heartily. In fact, he is hard-pressed to remember any visitors in the last decade.

Which may be why he is so eager to show me around. There are 797 graves in the Inhaúma cemetery, which was founded in 1916 and abuts a municipal cemetery, located on the other side of the high, whitewashed wall. In contrast to the prostitutes' cemetery, the municipal burial ground is well maintained, tended on a regular basis by work crews from the city. Daniel can't remember the dates he read on the large stone-and-marble memorial plaques that are now covered in spiderwebs and debris in the small, decaying building that used to serve as the cemetery's office. He reckons the last burial here occurred in the 1970s, although he can't say for sure. The cemetery's registry book disappeared several years ago, which is why it is almost impossible to trace many of Inhaúma's dead, most of them prostitutes but some surprisingly, their pimps and exploiters.

Today much of what is known about them is written in Hebrew and Portuguese on the headstones themselves. But as it turns out, even some of the families seemed to know little about their deceased relatives. One grave, for a man named Lazard Klein, mentions that he was born in France. Below his dates of birth and death is a dedication phrased as a question: “Respects from his children and wife?”

Many died before their fortieth birthdays. Their names are strange amalgams of the Old World and the New: Zirel Leize-rovitch Moreira, Bebe Fridman, Manoel Winogrado, Marco Israel. They were born in places that Daniel has difficulty pronouncing, much less imagining. He reads aloud from a few of the headstones the names of what to him must seem like strange and exotic places: Odessa, Lodz, Kraków, Kiev, Bessarabia.

The handful of children's graves, in a far corner of the cemetery, are surrounded by rubbish, and the first time I visited there I saw the bloated remains of a dead dog, baking in the sun. Most of the miniature headstones are so old that it's difficult to read the inscriptions. A little girl whose name I could barely read is buried there. Is it Rivka Markenzon? The letters are faded, but I can make out part of the inscription: “Here lies the innocent Rivka daughter of Adolpho Markenzon and Anna Markenzon.” She was born on October 19, 1911, and died less than three years later. Perhaps, like tens of thousands of others, she died in one of the many yellow-fever epidemics that ravaged the city at the time, just as public-health officials struggled to develop a vaccine. The vaccine started being administered only in 1933, too late to save the first immigrants.

“Some of these people were so rich, they were buried covered in gold,” said Daniel.

But how did they end up here, forgotten, in an overgrown tropical graveyard? What drove them to leave their families and friends in Europe and sail to this corner of the world so long ago?

Daniel shrugged. He said he didn't know.

I FIRST READ ABOUT the prostitutes buried at the Inhaúma cemetery in an article in a small Jewish newspaper in London, although I had heard passing references to them in popular songs and

literature when I was living in Rio de Janeiro as a foreign correspondent in the 1990s.

Brazilian novelist Moacyr Scliar wrote about them in *The Cycle of the Waters*, and in the 1950s the legendary samba composer Moreira da Silva composed a samba for a woman named Estera Glad-kowicer, one of the Eastern European prostitutes, who was his lover. Like so many of the women who came to work as prostitutes in South America, she killed herself and is buried in a special section of Inhaúma reserved for suicides.

Today Estera Gladkowicer and the other Eastern European prostitutes are part of the local folklore in Brazil. Moreira da Silva's samba includes the lyrics "*Ich bin meshugene fur dir*" which is Yiddish for "I am crazy for you." Moreover, the Brazilian slang for "trouble" *encrenca*, is derived from the Yiddish *ein krenk*, "a sick one," which was whispered among the prostitutes about clients who were suspected of being infected with venereal disease.

Stefan Zweig, a Jewish Austrian writer who went to Brazil to escape the Nazi regime before committing suicide there in 1942, became fascinated with the women he noticed working in Rio de Janeiro's red-light district, a down-at-heels neighborhood of shabby colonial row houses near the port. "Jewish women from Eastern Europe promise the most exciting perversities," he wrote in his memoirs of that time. "What fate made these women end up here, selling themselves for the equivalent of three francs?"

Five years ago, when I set out to find the answer, I had no idea that this would be the most difficult investigative work of my career. There is a code of silence—some have used the word *omerta*, borrowing a term usually reserved for the Italian mobster code—surrounding the lives of the women buried at Inhaúma and at cemeteries in São Paulo and Buenos Aires.

I received little more than alarmed, quizzical looks from some historians when I brought up the subject. I did so gingerly, faintly aware of the stigma that still surrounded the subject in South America, always referring to the prostitutes as "those women." Immediately, people knew what I meant, but few agreed to speak to me.

A young Rio historian told me that after she had finished her master's thesis on the *polacas* she received numerous threats from anonymous callers who denounced her for writing about them. Every time I tracked down a name on a death certificate that might be a relative or friend of one of the prostitutes, I was politely but firmly told to leave. In one instance, a woman whose name was listed as the next of kin and main beneficiary of Rebecca Freedman—Dona Becca, the last of the *polacas*, who died in 1984—claimed to have no recollection of the deceased.

"But your name is listed here on this official document," I said to the woman as we stood outside her high-rise apartment in the beachfront Leblon neighborhood of Rio.

"Yes, isn't that interesting," said the elderly woman, who was preparing to take her granddaughter to the beach.

When I consulted police archives and municipal records, I found that many of the historic documents were missing. This is not in itself an unusual occurrence in a place like Brazil, where public institutions are often riddled with corruption and mismanagement. At Rio's National Library, for instance, there are sleek state-of-the-art computers for scholars and students to conduct catalog research. The problem is that most of the library's collection has yet to be entered into the database.

I was pretty much confounded at every turn, and I began to believe the rumors I had heard about the history of *the polacas*: Most of the documentation had simply been destroyed by

well-meaning “historians” who wanted to erase what they considered a black mark on the past.

By the time I visited the Jewish Communal Cemetery Society office in a shabby high-rise on President Vargas Avenue, in the heart of Rio’s business district, I was prepared for what I would hear. Since the organization oversees Jewish cemeteries in Rio de Janeiro, the cemetery at Inhaúma is technically under its control.

But there are no documents relating to Inhaúma to be found, said Chaim Szwerszarf, the society’s director, when I first visited. He was a thin, elderly man with tobacco-stained fingers and a razor-sharp mind. On his calling card, which he handed to me later, he wrote in English that his surname means “sharp sword.” “Why are you so interested in that particular cemetery?” he asked me more than once. When I finally told him that I knew about the prostitutes, he seemed almost relieved, although he regretted to inform me, he said, fixing me with a steely gaze, that it was impossible to visit Inhaúma because the cemetery was so run-down. I returned his gaze, but I did not tell him I had already been there twice.

“I would like to write to the families who have gravestones falling apart at Inhaúma, so they could help pay for the upkeep, but there is no one to write to,” admitted an exasperated Szwerszarf, drinking sugary coffee from the kind of tiny plastic cup that is usually reserved for serving mouthwash in dentists’ offices. “You must understand that people are embarrassed. They don’t want to be reminded of the past.”

Slowly, I began to reconstruct that hidden past from archival documents, academic studies, and interviews. When official sources wouldn’t speak, I went to underworld sources. I became a frequent visitor to Vila Mimosa, Rio’s red-light district, where crack-addled prostitutes, their stomachs hanging over skimpy bikinis, walk in stiletto heels through open sewers that spill out onto the main street. At every corner, vendors ignore the sewage as they barbecue skewers of meat and cheese at their lean-to stalls.

One of my greatest champions became a woman I will identify only as Claudia. She was a feisty former prostitute who was trying to go straight. In the mornings Claudia studied for her social work degree at a local university. She spent her afternoons volunteering at the prostitutes’ local association at Vila Mimosa, handing out free condoms and publicizing government-sponsored HIV awareness workshops. At Vila Mimosa Claudia introduced me to some of the older madams and prostitutes. I met one prostitute who was seventy-one years old and had once worked with the *polacas*.

What finally began to emerge from the interviews and documents is one of the darkest chapters in the history of the Americas. From the end of the 1860s until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, thousands of young, impoverished women, most of them from the hardscrabble shtetls of Eastern Europe, were literally sold into slavery by a notorious criminal gang made up entirely of Jewish mobsters. In its heyday, the Zwi Migdal criminal enterprise controlled brothels in places as diverse as Johannesburg, Bombay, and Shanghai. But the centers of their criminal activities were Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and, to some extent, New York City, all of which became the focus of my research.

South America was by far the Zwi Migdal’s most lucrative domain, and by the turn of the last century they had established their headquarters in Buenos Aires. For young women caught up in the trafficking, the rapidly growing Argentine capital was often their first stop in the region, although they arrived by many, often purposely circuitous, routes, in order to

evade international authorities. From Buenos Aires they were clandestinely shipped to brothels in the interior of the country, or to Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo. There are no firm estimates of how many women the Zwi Migdal sent to the New World, but they were enough to establish its most prominent members among the criminal elite.

As with everything else about this story, documentation has been either lost or destroyed. The most complete set of archives relating to the Zwi Migdal was destroyed in the 1994 Islamist terrorist attack on the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA), a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Still, some statistics survive. In Argentina the Zwi Migdal operated some three thousand brothels, most of them in Buenos Aires. In Rio de Janeiro many of the 431 brothels operating in the city in 1913 were controlled by Jews associated with the Zwi Migdal.

Of course, Jewish criminals did not have anything like a monopoly on the white-slavery trade. At the time, other criminal gangs trafficked in women from all over Europe and parts of Asia. According to historians, the Japanese and Chinese played the biggest role in what became euphemistically known as “the Traffic” in women worldwide.

But what made the Zwi Migdal unique, and so successful, was its focus on impoverished Jewish women and girls who were easily duped into religious marriages. When they sailed from European ports, many of the young women who found themselves working as prostitutes in places like Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and New York thought they were going to join their husbands in America. Many of them never overcame the shock of realizing that their “husbands” were pimps, who had “married” several other young women for the same purpose. However, the record also shows that many of the women knew what fate awaited them in America. Some would even become successful brothel owners and recruiters for the Zwi Migdal.

Once they realized the scope of the problem, numerous anti-slavery organizations tried to stop the Traffic. They informed the American authorities and posted their representatives at ports warning young women of the perils of white slavery. Trafficking in women was considered such a grave offense that the delegates who met in Paris to sign the Treaty of Versailles after the First World War declared it an international crime and, under Article 28 of the treaty, urged all member states to severely punish those involved.

But these lofty efforts by the international community were largely in vain. The Traffic was driven by the crushing poverty that pervaded Eastern European Jewish communities at the turn of the last century. Many of the Jewish girls recruited for prostitution hailed from teeming urban ghettos or desperately poor rural shtetls where Jews were also the target of numerous pogroms.

THE PROSTITUTES AND WHITE SLAVERS in Latin America were completely banned by the respectable Jewish community. As one rabbi noted, they could not be served in Jewish restaurants or sit on the governing boards of Jewish institutions. “If [they] would come to a Jewish theater, a Jewish person seated within fifteen feet of [them] would find seats elsewhere, or leave the theater. Any Jewish hostess inviting to her home any member of a family tied up with the Traffic, would find she had no other guests at that gathering, nor at any other gathering in the future.”



Forced into sexual slavery far from home, and shunned by the very community that might have come to their aid, the Jewish prostitutes in Rio de Janeiro formed an extraordinary religious and charitable organization that has no historical precedent anywhere in the world.

The organization began as a burial society to ensure that its members would receive proper Jewish burial. By 1916, its members had acquired the plot of land at Inhaúma for their cemetery, and by the 1940s they had bought a building in downtown Rio that they converted into a synagogue and administrative offices. Although its official name, translated from Portuguese, was the Jewish Benevolent and Burial Association, most of its members called it by its Hebrew name, Chesed Shel Ermess, or the Society of Truth. Members referred to one another as “sisters,” and board officials became known as “the Superior Sisters.”

Similar charitable and religious organizations existed in São Paulo, Buenos Aires, and New York, but they were largely run by the pimps. In New York the most important white slaver who owned and operated the brothels where Eastern European prostitutes worked on the Lower East Side, formed the Independent Benevolent Association in 1896. The organization was set up as a trade and burial society, which in its heyday was clearing more than a million dollars in profits from the white-slave trade in New York alone. Today the mostly Russian Jewish mourners at the Washington Park Cemetery, a bleak graveyard under an elevated train platform in Brooklyn, might be surprised to learn that those buried under the stone arches carved with the name of the rather innocuous-sounding Independent Benevolent Association were once among New York’s most feared white slavers and prostitutes.

Throughout the Americas, Jewish white slavers set up mutual-aid organizations in order to ensure continued prosperity and as a way of gaining the prestige they would never be granted in communities of respectable Jews. But the women’s organization in Rio de Janeiro was unique because it was founded not by the oppressors but by the oppressed—the prostitutes who found themselves without any support mechanisms in a new and what must have seemed to them a very alien world. “What’s extraordinary about this story is that nowhere in the world did prostitutes, especially Jewish prostitutes, get together and form their own religious association,” said Zevi Ghivelder, who was one of the first journalists to investigate the *polacas* in Brazil. And they kept it going for more than half a century.

Ghivelder, himself a Jew, stumbled onto the story nearly three decades ago when one of his friends, a Brazilian general he will not identify, called him early one Sunday morning at his home in Rio. The general, who had grown up as a Catholic, was distraught because his mother had died the night before. “She was one of those,” confessed the general in hushed tones over the telephone. Ghivelder knew immediately what he meant and offered to help bury the general’s mother in a Jewish cemetery.

Intrigued, he pursued the story. He interviewed Rebecca Freedman, the last president of the Society of Truth, on her deathbed. Rebecca was extremely religious and an early supporter of the state of Israel. According to Ghivelder, she had two photographs above her bed—one in sepia of her family in Poland and the other of Chaim Weizmann, Israel’s first president.

But just as Ghivelder was about to break the story, his father, a prominent Jewish community leader in Rio de Janeiro, abruptly asked him to stop his research. He offered little in the way of explanation. For Ghivelder, who knew of the terrible shame surrounding the *polacas* in the Jewish community in Brazil, none was necessary. “He told me that as long as

he was alive, he didn't want me to pursue the story," said Ghivelder the first time I met him. "I honored my father's wish."

RETURNING TO INHAÚMA after a long absence, I noticed that the cemetery was in much better condition than on my first visit. I asked Daniel Rodrigues if there was any special reason other than his arrangement with the Jewish Communal Cemetery Society, for what seemed like his newfound devotion to the cemetery.

Rodrigues himself looked a lot more respectable at our second meeting than he had at the first. The camouflage shorts that had made him look a bit like a crazed jungle commando were gone. He was wearing a white, neatly pressed polo shirt, jeans, and sandy-colored suede oxfords. "I don't know," he said. "When you left I got to thinking about these people and how they've been forgotten by the rest of the world."

I began to suspect that Daniel had some kind of attachment to these women that he wasn't telling me about. He must have read my mind because he immediately blurted out that his mother, who had died two years earlier, was a Protestant. He said this twice, and looked me in the eye to make sure that I understood him.

For a long time we stood under an intense midmorning sun, watching the black vultures that the Brazilians call *urubus* swooping silently down on what must have been a pile of rubbish or a dead animal on the other side of the cemetery's walls.

"The longer I'm here, the closer I feel to them," he said, pointing to the graves in front of him. "I just don't know what it is about these people."

## Gentlemen from America

Isaac Boorosky hated the shtetls. He hated the mud, which always formed a hard crust around his patent-leather shoes and splattered his finely tailored trousers. He hated the stench—the slightly sweet smell of moldy hay mixed with human excrement and wood smoke—that assaulted his nostrils and seeped into his clothes. He might have learned early on from his business associates to soak a silk handkerchief in rose water and hold it to his nose as he squelched through the mud, past the mangy dogs and the packs of filthy children dressed in rags, snot streaming from their noses. But the handkerchief trick worked only for a few minutes. Nothing could block out the odors of poverty. They lingered on, invading his pores, thrusting him into the past. Had he really grown up in such a place?

Sometimes it may have seemed difficult to believe that he, Isaac Boorosky, man of the world, had spent his childhood in such a backwater, surrounded by Jewish peasants in their coarsely woven garments and their wooden clogs, their looks forlorn.

These were his people, to be sure, but he was—what was the phrase they liked to use about him now?—an *American* gentleman. Isaac was Russian by birth, but how convenient that his impressive array of travel documents—all of them forged by a colleague in South America—identified him variously as a Brazilian jeweler and an Argentine rancher. It's true he had “interests” in Brazil and Argentina, and even in South Africa. But the source of his lucrative business was still in Russia and Poland—in the miserable shtetls that he so despised.

Still, he never corrected the Jewish peasants when they referred to him as “that gentleman from America” and treated him with the same reverence they would bestow on a nobleman or even a rabbi. His sudden wealth had taught him quickly to play the part of the elegant gentleman. He smoked cigars and drank champagne from crystal goblets, and his hands were always beautifully manicured. In Rio de Janeiro—how far away it must have seemed to him now!—his Spanish tailor sewed him beautiful silk-lined suits, which he was fond of wearing with a black silk top hat.

In what would become his last official portrait—a sketch made by a Rio police officer shortly after his arrest in 1896—Isaac, a solidly built man with fleshy cheeks and almond eyes, is beautifully dressed in a frock coat, matching vest, starched collar, and silk cravat. His hair is jet black and oiled, his mustache perfectly trimmed.

Sophia Chamys had never met a man like Isaac, and years later in Brazil, when she told her story to the police, she could still recall the smell of the lavender oil that he used on his hair and the feel of his silk handkerchiefs against her skin. But most of all she remembered his hands—so refined and smooth, like a child's. In the shtetl on the outskirts of Warsaw where Sophia shared a one-room thatch-roofed house with her parents and younger sister, people had working hands—misshapen, permanently chapped, sunburned, and covered in hardened blisters.

Sophia's father had such hands, from years of working the fields, eking out a living by collecting hay that he sold to local farmers. Already at thirteen, Sophia had hands that were

rough and calloused from helping her parents. Perhaps she instinctively hid them behind her back when she felt Isaac's gaze upon her for the first time.

They met in Warsaw, at Castle Square, under the bronze statue of King Sigismund III, who stood defiantly clutching a large cross on a tall majestic column, overlooking stately royal houses and the fifteenth-century royal castle. The Chamys family gazed up at the legendary king, who spent much of his long reign on a war footing, trying to reconquer his native Sweden. He was, on rare occasions, good to the Jews, introducing legislation that made it possible for them to do business, to work the land. It's unlikely that the Chamys family was familiar with seventeenth-century Polish history, but something about the noble figure of the handsome, wild-eyed king seemed to inspire reverence, even nearly two and a half centuries after his death. Congregating at the statue had become something of a tradition for the Chamys family on these fruitless trips to Warsaw. Perhaps they considered this rendezvous beneath the king a pilgrimage to hope: Things would be different on the next trip to the city; bad luck could not last a lifetime.

Sophia and her family had walked the twenty-five miles from their shtetl to Warsaw where her father had been promised work. But as was so often the case in the unhappy history of the Chamys family, the job never materialized. Standing with their oily cloths and bundles under Sigismund III, the family was preparing for the long walk home when the elegant stranger loomed over them.

Isaac Boorosky approached the bedraggled family, introducing himself to Sophia's father as a successful businessman and a Jew. He told them he was looking for a maid to work in his widowed mother's kitchen in Lodz, which was just a six-hour journey over dirt roads from Warsaw. He nodded toward Sophia. *How old is she?*

Isaac didn't waste any time. After years of training, he knew how to spot a lucrative prospect. He knew to look beyond the ragged, loose garments and the filthy clogs worn by the peasant girls. He quickly saw Sophia's attributes—the milky skin, the outline of budding breasts, the full red lips, the wisps of raven hair peeking out of the dark kerchief. What luck to discover such a specimen in the center of Warsaw! How fortunate that his expensive new shoes and trousers would be spared the shtetl mud. "Eight rubles," said Isaac, barely containing his excitement and removing the money from his pocket. The amount was an advance on Sophia's first six months of service, and Isaac pressed the coins into her father's rough, sunburned hands.

Sophia's father hesitated, even though the money must have seemed a huge amount—the equivalent of a year's wages for the family.

Later Sophia recalled the stab of anger she felt as her father refused the handful of coins. For even at thirteen, Sophia must have been aware that there were few prospects for young women from the shtetls, particularly those on the teeming outskirts of Warsaw. One foreign visitor had described them as manure-carpeted encampments—"the eternal dwelling place of poverty."

Sophia knew that girls from the shtetl ended up exactly like their mothers and grandmothers. They seemed to spend a lifetime covered in soot as they cooked over the woodstove. They left their homes at sunrise to work in the fields, returning at dusk to prepare the evening meal, which many days was nothing more than a thin potato soup of cucumbers and onions in brine mixed with buttermilk—if there was any buttermilk to be had.

Even elderly women worked continuously to survive. One grandmother, who single-handedly supported nine children in a shtetl near Minsk, worked the fields all day. Between Purim and Passover, she took an extra job working in a matzo bakery, kneading dough until past midnight. One of her grandsons recalled years later how she returned home two days before Passover, “her hands as puffed as the dough she had kneaded, her back so twisted she could hardly straighten up without cracking her bones. ... The first night of Passover Grandmother’s groans mingled with Grandfather’s sad chanting of the Passover Haggadah at the seder.”

Although little is known about Sophia’s life in the shtetl, she must have been surrounded by such long-suffering women. What was the Yiddish rhyme—“Helf Ikh Mamen” (Helping mother)—that the girls learned to sing about their mothers?

*Every Monday Mother washes,  
I help her with the washing.  
This-a-way and that-a-way  
I help her with the washing.  
Every Tuesday Mother irons,  
I help her with the ironing.  
This-a-way and that-a-way  
I help her with the ironing.*

The rhyme enumerated a different chore for each day of the week. The drudgery ended for only a short time—on Saturday—when Mother was finally allowed to rest.

For a girl like Sophia, there was no escape from the same kind of drudgery. Her parents were poor, even by shtetl standards, and could do little to improve their lot in life. They could not afford to send their daughters to school. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was little in the way of education for girls, even among wealthier Jews. Some of the luckier ones were educated at home schools known as *chedarim*, where they were taught basic arithmetic, some writing, and so-called women’s prayers in Yiddish. But formal education was reserved for boys, who studied Hebrew so they could read religious texts. After the 1860s, increasing numbers of Jewish women did begin to study at modern schools, but this occurred only in the major cities and only for the girls of well-to-do families.

The luckier shtetl girls, those from families of merchants or tailors, could apprentice as seamstresses or shopkeepers. But in the end most young women in the shtetl simply repeated the cycle of drudgery experienced by their grandmothers and mothers. Usually, in their late teens, they ended up marrying one of the impoverished young men they glimpsed on the other side of the curtain in the *shtibl*, “the little room” where religious services were held in many of the more backward shtetls. With its clay floors, mildewed walls covered in spiderwebs, and thatch roofs, the *shtibl* took the place of the synagogue in small towns where a rabbi was considered a luxury.

Every important event in the life of shtetl Jews—weddings, bar mitzvahs, and High Holidays—were celebrated in this damp, dimly lit little room. On Fridays, when the mouthwatering smell of baking challah filled the small communities, the men headed for evening prayers at the *shtibl*, always located in the richest man’s house. In the shtetl, wealth was a relative term, often measured by the number of rooms a man had in his home, or the

number of times he could afford to buy a chicken for the Sabbath meal. Most people could rarely afford such a delicacy and had only one room, heated by a wood-burning stove. The room served as the kitchen and the bedroom, even for families with several children. A man who had more than one room (usually a merchant or a tailor) was considered rich by his neighbors.

Under such circumstances, people worked to survive, rarely to prosper. For although some shtetls were surrounded by plentiful crops and herds of cattle and sheep, shtetl dwellers were rarely able to keep any of the profits of their labor. Most of the crops and livestock were earmarked for the landlords, the royal court, and the police, who often took much more than their share of “taxes.”

“I may have to beg to feed my daughters,” Sophia recalled her father telling the handsome stranger in Warsaw. “But I will never be separated from them.”

Isaac refused to give up. He was solicitous and charming, assuring Sophia’s father that he would watch over Sophia as if she were his own daughter.

*Like my own daughter.*

The words might have sounded vaguely ominous to Sophia’s father, but he chose to keep his fears to himself. Perhaps sensing the man’s suspicions, Isaac handed him a card with his mother’s address in Lodz. It was an open invitation for the family to visit Sophia whenever they found themselves in the city. No doubt, Isaac knew the amount of sacrifice involved for the Chamyses in traveling even the shortest distance. He had been poor once too. He knew what it was like to have no shoes, to live in filth, to scrounge for discarded objects in open sewers.

No, he would be safe from their scrutiny in Lodz. It was unlikely the Chamys family would ever make the journey. They were so poor they couldn’t afford to take the train or travel by cart. They would have to walk if they wanted to see Sophia, and the trip would surely take them several days.

Finally, through heart-wrenching sobs, Sophia’s father nodded his acquiescence. Of course he had misgivings—the kind that lodged themselves at the pit of his stomach and made him feel queasy. He knew it was wrong to hand his daughter over like this, even to this obviously refined, worldly man.

Had he heard the rumors of Jewish girls being taken into white slavery by fellow Jews? Young, beautiful girls like Sophia never heard from again? Was it the stuff of urban legends crafted by wary peasants like himself who had an innate fear of the big city? Or was it another tall tale invented by the anti-Semitic authorities to dredge up hatred against the Jews—another pretext for a bloody pogrom? Did Jewish strangers really prey on the daughters of the poor, and sell them into bondage? It was hard to believe.

Yet in the early 1890s, when Isaac Boorosky first encountered the Chamys family in the center of Warsaw, details had begun to emerge of a large Jewish white-slavery ring. The traffickers and their victims were based in Galicia, then one of the most impoverished provinces of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where Jews lived in subhuman conditions and faced epic famine. From 1880 to 1914 some five thousand Jews in Galicia starved to death every year.

In 1892 the province became well known as a global center of white slavery. Twenty-seven Jewish traffickers were convicted at a two-week trial in the Galician capital, Lemberg. The

traffickers had organized the sale of mostly Jewish girls to brothels in Constantinople. Fourteen-year-old Feige Aufscher, an orphan, was one of the victims and a star witness. She testified that she had been kidnapped by a Jewish pimp named Mendel Goldenberg. He had promised to marry her and obtain work for her as a housekeeper. Instead, she and other girls ended up in a series of brothels in Constantinople, forced to service dozens of clients a day. When foreign consular officials tried to search the brothels for the kidnapped women, the traffickers hid them in nearby caves. Somehow Aufscher had managed to get a message to the authorities, who were able to liberate her and the others. The trial was frontpage news in all the Polish newspapers. But it's unlikely that Sophia's father followed the news reports. While he read Yiddish and Hebrew with some difficulty, he could barely communicate in Polish. In the shtetl, people spoke Yiddish. Polish was considered the language of the elite.

In the end, Sophia's father agreed to take the elegant stranger's money. He might have tried to shrug off his suspicions. Surely this was the lucky break the Chamys family had wished for—to find work for their eldest daughter in a proper gentleman's home in the big city. Perhaps he believed Isaac's repeated promises to look after Sophia. *Like my own daughter.*

But at last, with that reluctant nod from Sophia's father, the deal was done. Sophia was sold to a stranger in a public square in broad daylight in the civilized center of Europe. Deep in his heart, Sophia's father must have known that he was indeed selling his daughter. Perhaps it was the dark realization that led to his wrenching sobs during the negotiation. Sophia's father must have known that some shtetl parents sold the services of their daughters to men and women from the city, that some even bargained for the highest price they could get for the girls. "They buy girls from their parents, by *contract*," observed one reporter of the "businessmen" who preyed on impoverished young girls. "A contract bitterly discussed, properly signed, and handsomely embossed."

But with respect to Sophia there was no contract; the gentleman's word seemed enough. *Like my own daughter.*

After the reluctant nod, everything seemed to happen in a hurry, like a scene from a melodrama, a silent film. Isaac took his leave, and he whisked Sophia away. At that moment Sophia must have realized that her life was going to change forever. What went through her mind as she prepared to leave her family? Was this stranger, with the beautiful almond-shaped eyes, her savior? Was this the Messiah?

Or was he a devil?

But there was little time to think and even less time for tearful good-byes. The man was clearly in a hurry as he guided thirteen-year-old Sophia Chamys through the crowds of pedestrians in Castle Square.

AT THE TURN OF THE LAST CENTURY, men like Isaac Boorosky belonged to a cadre of well-organized Jewish pimps who scoured the impoverished shtetls and urban ghettos of Eastern Europe looking for girls and women to sell into prostitution around the world.

Over the years, these men became such regular fixtures in the lives of Eastern European Jews that they were immortalized in early twentieth-century Yiddish literature. In his short story "The Man from Buenos Aires," Sholem Aleichem describes a meeting on a train

traveling through the region. The unnamed narrator finds himself sitting beside Motek, salesman who lives in Buenos Aires but is returning for the first time to the small town where he was born, partly to show off his newfound wealth, but mostly for business reasons.

“His face was smooth and round, and heavily tanned, without a sign of a beard or mustache,” the narrator says of the sophisticated-looking but rather dubious character he meets in his third-class compartment. “He had small, unctuous, laughing eyes.... He had on a snow-white elegant new suit made of real English broadcloth, and a pair of smartly shined shoes. On his finger, he wore a heavy gold ring with a diamond that blinked with a thousand facets of the sun.”

But what sort of merchandise did he sell, this businessman from Buenos Aires? When the narrator puts the question to Motek, his answer is characteristically enigmatic: “‘I supply the world with merchandise, something that everyone knows and nobody speaks of. What do you deal in?’ (He burst out laughing.) ‘Not in prayer books, my friend, not in prayer books.’”

In real life, such characters preyed on poverty. They arrived in the most miserable backwaters, armed with gifts of coffee, chocolate, or cheaply made garments—luxuries that were unattainable for most Eastern European Jews. Like Isaac Boorosky and Sholem Aleichem’s salesman, they were impeccably dressed and spoke vaguely of their business holdings abroad. Some said they were ranchers, others that they owned jewelry stores or garment factories. They told the shtetl elders that they were looking for young girls to work in their factories, or, as in Isaac’s case, that they needed another person on their domestic staff.

But most often the elegant strangers said they had returned to their own roots in the shtetl to search for suitable brides. Of course, it was an outright lie, but it was calculated to allay the fears of ignorant and suspicious peasants who knew little of the world outside the isolated communities.

The introductions probably occurred following Friday prayers at the *shtibl*, where the trafficker would confess his predicament to the men of the community. Women in America, a catchall description for both North and South America, were simply not as beautiful or as virtuous as the Jewish girls from my shtetl, the trafficker might say to the approving nods of the men, as they wrapped up their *tefillin* and prepared to walk back to their homes for the Sabbath meal. Perhaps some of the shtetl men even invited the respectful strangers to join them for dinner. Maybe they even happily introduced them to their teenaged daughters, who might have blushed at the sight of a handsome stranger in their midst. Did their hearts beat faster as they lit the Sabbath candles and passed the steaming challan?

“A respectable Jewish girl,” says Motek in Sholem Aleichem’s story. “I don’t care how poor she is. I will make her rich. I will shower her parents with gold, make her whole family wealthy.”

The prospect must have appealed to many shtetl families. For men like Isaac Boorosky were smooth talkers, who sold a vision of paradise. For many Jews, especially those in small, isolated shtetls where they lived in constant fear of starvation or of being massacred in a pogrom, these men who came offering Jewish girls what seemed like decent jobs or proposals of marriage must have seemed like modern-day saviors. “Believe me, those poor souls are waiting for me as though I were the Messiah,” confesses Motek, the man from Buenos Aires.

In some instances even the most deeply religious Jewish families found themselves



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