
The Jewish White Slave Trade in Latin American Writings

Nora Glickman

Polaca (“Pole”) was the generic name applied to all Jewish prostitutes in Argentina, whether they came from Poland, Russia, or Rumania. Between the 1880’s and the early 1930’s, a period when the country was undergoing vast waves of predominantly male immigration, the Jewish white slave trade was of great social significance in Argentina. While brothels were licensed, violations of the law were widely tolerated by corrupt officials in the police customs office. As Robert Weisbrot reports, “The lax atmosphere in which this trade flourished was most visible in the theatres, where hundreds of prostitutes nightly patrolled the balconies in search of customers.”¹ In consequence of all these factors, white slave traders found Argentina to be quite congenial for their operations.

Despite all the publicity that the phenomenon of Jewish white slavery in Argentina has received, it is still not fully understood. Prostitutes were extremely reluctant to testify, for fear of reprisals from their slavers. The traffickers, for their part, did all in their power to keep their activities secret; and the laws protecting minors against the trade were seldom enforced. Statistical data on Jewish prostitution in Argentina are scant and unreliable.²

Since the white slave trade is, by its nature, clandestine, most authors who have written on the subject knew it only by hearsay or were able to gather just enough information to mention it in their stories without shedding any real light on the phenomenon. Some authors who claimed to be writing serious studies of white slavery actually relied mainly on their imagination, but even impressionistic accounts of this kind can sometimes enlighten us about the nature of historical events in ways that history cannot accomplish. Other authors, however, were more concerned with first-hand documentary evidence. Such is the case with Albert Londres and Julio Alsogaray.

Albert Londres

Le Chemin de Buenos Aires (1928), by the French journalist Albert Londres, falls between the categories of documentary reporting and the novel.³ Londres purports to be writing a factual account, but he appears to have filled some gaps in the narrative creatively. Hence one must exercise skepticism about his work.

Traveling as an investigator for the League of Nations, Londres followed the voyage of women who were destined for prostitution from their places of origin in Europe (Paris, Marseille, Warsaw), across the ocean to Buenos Aires. His account is valuable because he describes both the women “who do not die by it,” and the men “who live by it”—the traffickers, or “caftens,” who represent themselves officially as fur merchants; “Well,” Londres remarks, “human skins are pelts too, I suppose!”⁴ Most strikingly, Londres reports on the business terminology used by the secret gangs that recruited these women in Europe. The slavers’ organization was known as “the centre”; the women were called “remounts” (a term meaning “fresh horses” and normally used for animals); underage girls were known as “lightweights,” while those arriving in Buenos Aires without papers were known as “false weights.”

Londres drowned while traveling in a French ship “that burnt in the Atlantic, as it was bringing a human shipment of 300 women destined to practice prostitution in this part of South America.”⁵ In the prologue to the Spanish translation of the book, the critic Andrés Chinarro suggests that the fire was of suspicious origin.

Londres is moralistic about this “old problem,” which, in his view, began with hunger and poverty in Europe. In exposing these conditions, he goes down “into the pits where society deposits what it fears or rejects; to look at what the world refuses to see; to pass my own judgment on what the world has condemned.”⁶ Londres does not have much faith in repressive measures, such as official decrees and bans against the white slave traffic, for “they simply serve to absolve from responsibility the officials who are supposed to contend with it.”⁷

Despite Londres’ claim to inform the reader and to document with impartiality important details of this traffic, his portrayal of the Jewish pimp is a caricature:

Those dark Levites, their filthy skins making the strangest effect of

light and shade, their unwashed locks corkscrewing down their left cheeks, their flat round caps topping them like a saucepan lid. . . . I shuddered: I felt as though I had fallen into a nest in which great mysterious dark birds were spreading their wings to bar my retreat.⁸

Londres focuses chiefly on the non-Jewish *francesas*, or French prostitutes, who were the most highly valued group of prostitutes. But he also devotes significant sections to the *polacas*, the Jewish prostitutes, and the *criollas*, the native Argentinians. On the popular scale of values, French women are the “aristocracy”; then come the *polacas*, and finally the lowest social group, the “serfs” or *criollas*. What the customers did with them seemed to follow a pattern: “Throw over the Creola, sharpen their claws on the Polack, and try for the Franchucha.”⁹

Londres aims to destroy the sentimentality usually associated with prostitution. He sees the tragedy of this profession, and he claims that the responsibility falls on everyone involved: “Until recently it was maintained that these women were exceptional cases. Scenes from a romance; the romance of a girl betrayed; an excellent story to make mothers weep: but merely a story; *the girl who is unwilling knows where to apply* [emphasis added].”¹⁰ Londres is probably referring here to women’s-assistance institutions such as Ezrat Nashim, based in London, which helped prostitutes who showed interest in rehabilitating themselves.

One factor which cannot be left out of account was the climate of hostility to the slavers and their women in the Jewish community of Buenos Aires. Despite the pressure the slavers exerted and their economic influence, Jewish institutions rejected them as *tmeyim*, or “impure ones,” and thus they were forced to create their own guild, the Zewi Migdal.¹¹ Those whose families insisted on burying them in the Jewish cemetery were placed alongside the suicides and the beggars, in a corner facing the wall. The ostracism of the Jewish community made it harder for Zewi Migdal leaders to conceal themselves when they were under investigation.

Julio Alsogaray

The Jewish communal institutions by themselves could not have eliminated the white slave trade, but in 1930 a major campaign

against the slavers was mounted by Julio Alsogaray, deputy commissioner of police in Buenos Aires. Alsogaray's efforts had a great impact in terminating the trade. He then wrote a detailed report, *Trilogía de la trata de blancas* [White slave trade trilogy] (1931), in which he defined his struggle as that of "a Lilliputian against Hercules."¹² As a result of the police crackdown, several hundred members of the Zewi Migdal were arrested and convicted, and severe sentences were imposed by the presiding judge, Manuel Rodríguez Ocampo. The testimony of a victimized woman, Rachel Lieberman, was instrumental in Alsogaray's success. The Jewish community as a whole was legally exonerated of blame.

Another factor of major significance was the 1930 coup d'état, which brought to power a more conservative government, led by General José F. Uriburu, which restricted immigration and raised barriers against the naturalization of foreigners already living in Argentina. Uriburu drastically restricted the slavers' operations between Europe and America, forcing most of them out of Argentina.¹³

This period was characterized by a general xenophobia directed against minority groups already living in Argentina. Even before 1880, when the physical presence of the Jew was almost nonexistent in Argentina, certain authors expressed exaggerated fears of the dangerous influence of Jews in their country. Anti-immigration conservative writers linked the white slave trade with the corruption and debasement of Argentinian morality; they vented their anger, not only against the slavers, but against all Jewish immigrants. Some of their works give a distorted picture of the Jew because of racial prejudice and the prevailing Christian myths based on Judas and the Wandering Jew. The stereotypes of wealthy bankers were influenced by anti-Semitic European writings, such as the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Edouard Drumont's *La France Juive*.¹⁴ As the critic Gladys Onega points out in her book *La inmigración en la literatura Argentina: 1800-1910*, "xenophobia has served in our country... as a pretext for the defense of the most conservative and antisocial values and interests."¹⁵

Julián Martel and Manuel Gálvez

Juan María Miró (1867-1896), known by his pseudonym Julián Martel, published in the major conservative newspaper *La Nación* (August 19, 1891) a fictional account which he labeled a "social study" and

which later became the first chapter of his novel *La Bolsa* [The stock exchange], now a classic of Argentinian literature. *La Bolsa* introduced an anti-Semitic theme which has influenced nationalistic authors up to the present day.

In Martel's view, the Jews embodied the faults and vices of all foreigners. They controlled the world of financial speculation. They were the "extortionists," the "vampires of modern society," who struck easy deals and reaped exorbitant profits, and who promoted corruption among "naive public officials." The "diabolical" characters were, consequently, also responsible for the slave trade. Martel's Jewish figure, Filiberto Meckser, is an odious stereotype, both in his repulsive appearance and in his sinister character: "...dirty teeth, pale complexion, small eyes, lined with red filaments that denounced the descendants of Zebulun's tribe, a hooked nose as in Ephron's tribe, dressed with the vulgar ostentation of a Jew who could never acquire the noble distinction that characterizes Aryan men."¹⁶ Posing as a jewelry dealer, Meckser manages "to cover up his infamous traffic and to give an appearance of respectability to his continual trips abroad."¹⁷ The real purpose of these trips, the reader knows, is to procure prostitutes. Without mentioning its name, Martel refers to the Zewi Migdal, presided over by Meckser, as a "club of human flesh traffickers, located next to the police station, which the police had never dared disturb."¹⁸ Martel's anti-Semitism, uninfluenced by contact with flesh-and-blood Jews, ignored the campaign launched by the Jewish community in Buenos Aires to wipe out the Zewi Migdal.

Other Argentinian authors, although as conservative as Martel, did not share his opinion of Jews. The most important of these was Manuel Gálvez (1882–1962), who, despite his reservations about Jewish immigrants, praised Jewish efforts to eradicate the bad elements from their midst by denying them entry into their synagogues and burial in their cemeteries.¹⁹ In his novel *Nacha Regules* (1922), which depicts the miserable state of prostitutes in Buenos Aires, Gálvez's sympathies are obviously with the "*polacas*... who were sold in public auction, who were brutalized and deeply hurt."²⁰

Samuel Eichelbaum and David Viñas

Ten or twelve years later, a more romantic view of the *polaca* emerged in the writings of liberal, socially conscious authors who showed the

prostitute as a victim. These include Samuel Eichelbaum and David Viñas, whose sympathy for the *polacas* and sensitivity to anti-Semitism were probably associated with their own Jewish origins.

Samuel Eichelbaum's drama *Nadie la conoció nunca* [No one ever knew her] (1945) is, in a way, a criticism of the cultural attitudes of the privileged class.²¹ It portrays the anguished life of Ivonne, a *polaca* crushed by society, a true victim of social circumstance, and an outcast. Ivonne hides her real identity behind a French name, which serves partly to improve her professional status as a prostitute and partly to protect her from persecution. The joviality of the first act of the play turns serious when Ivonne hears a group of young Argentinian aristocrats—her clients and her lover, Ricardito—boast of having shaved the beard of a Jewish immigrant, publicly degrading him.

In her own living room Ivonne witnesses a playful reenactment of the shaving, performed by the perpetrators. Responding to this racial insult, she strikes one of the offenders, thus demonstrating that she still retains some feeling for her origins. The realization that they had done this for amusement shocks Ivonne into recovering her Jewish identity. It also brings back memories of her father, murdered during the Tragic Week of 1919, when a pogrom broke out in the streets of Buenos Aires. Recalling similar pogroms in Russia, which had caused her to emigrate to Argentina, Ivonne expresses her remorse in a confession of her errors: "I am glad . . . that my father did not live to see me leading this life of debauchery. I thank my stars that I never had to face him looking like this. Even worse, today I feel the emptiness of my whole life, like a terrible revelation."²² As a redeemed heroine, Ivonne sees herself as a representative of all Jewish women. She feels compelled to behave with dignity "because now, in each one of us, in our words and our deeds, the [Jewish] race prevails."²³ Her curse is that despite her understanding, she is too weak to change and will remain a prostitute.

David Viñas (b. 1929), like Eichelbaum, links violence with casual amusement. In his novel *En la Semana Trágica* [During the Tragic Week] (1974), he exposes the thoughtless brutality of the *guardias blancas* (white guards), who went on a rampage of murder and destruction against the Jewish community in 1919.²⁴ Violence that week was an entertainment for well-to-do youth, who alternated between whoring with *polacas* or *francesas* and beating up defenseless Jews.

In a later novel, *Los dueños de la tierra* [The owners of the land] (1974),²⁵ Viñas's protagonist, Vicente, remembers that he and his fellow law students used to leave the courthouse and amuse themselves "with the *polacas* or with the Jewesses, who after all were the same thing."²⁶ When he compares the different sorts of whores he has encountered, Vicente finally decides that, contrary to public opinion, "one Jewess is worth four Frenchwomen anytime."²⁷ Significantly, both Viñas and Eichelbaum create male protagonists who, despite their expressed hatred for Jews, eventually fall in love with and marry Jewish women; yet this resolves none of their internal tensions.

Mario Szichman and Moacyr Scliar

During the 1970's literary accounts of Jewish prostitution became more realistic, their scope more ambitious, and their characters more three-dimensional. Cases in point are the Argentinian novelist Mario Szichman and the Brazilian Moacyr Scliar. Szichman writes in a bitter, sarcastic vein. His autobiographical novels, linked to his Jewish heritage, are cynical, less conciliatory than those of earlier authors. Dora, a continuing character in several of Szichman's novels, is a hardened, resourceful, unscrupulous woman who becomes a prostitute in Buenos Aires to save herself from starvation: "I discovered that the world belonged to men, and since I could not conquer it with my head, I used my *tujes* [backside]."²⁸

In her Yiddishized Spanish, Dora does not make any distinction between obscenity and refinement, as long as she gets what she wants. She has no qualms about openly acknowledging the link between crime and prostitution: "There was a certain *polaca* who whistled at the client, and lured him into the passage. . . . there they would take away his ring, his watch, his wallet."²⁹ Dora cynically models herself on the melodramatic heroines of tangos and milongas, as she retells the story of her life: "I don't go rolling around from here to there as I used to. There is luxury in my room. I spend as much as I wish. And no one reminds me that once upon a time I was the mud of the delta, the easy ride who was mocked on nights of carousing and of champagne."³⁰

Dora's determination to succeed as a madam is based on her conclusion that prostitutes who are uncooperative and unenthusiastic about

their work can never get ahead. "I knew what was in store for me . . . and wasn't going to let myself fall just like that. . . . to be a *curveh* [prostitute] was just a step in the business, to become what I am today."³¹ Since she must be a prostitute, Dora is determined to be a good one. Her cynicism dominates her conversations with her clients, as she portrays herself as a victim of corrupt social institutions while at the same time she is performing her job. Dora claims that prostitution "is a monstrous slavery, tolerated by society, regulated by the state and protected by the police." When one of her clients warns, "They will infect you with horrible illnesses, you will fall ever lower . . . that is what awaits you if you don't change your life-style," Dora replies, "Sí, sí . . . I want to be different. And you will help me; you who are so good. How do you prefer, up or down?"³²

Dora fully agrees with Ema, her friend and model of a madam, that "we Yidn are not like goyim; there is always the *moral issue*." The "moral issue" is not so much moral as it is a desire to maintain ethnicity—to maintain Jewishness in a Catholic world. But as a madam, Dora does not pretend to be naive or even cynical any longer. She judges harshly the institutions that publicly absolve from responsibility those girls who consider themselves victims of society.

"They always talk of the losers," Dora thought, "but they forget the others. Just because we are just a few, maybe? But can all be generals in a battle? . . . I'd wish just one of them [women] would come to me and tell me she was forced to do it. Just one. They beg us to give them work. Sometimes they have to be kicked out. And what's worse, they always come back. They are all stupid and greedy. And they wear everything they own. They don't even have five *tzent*. One has to teach them how to walk, how to behave. How many come out of it married: Liars, selfish, unkempt. One has to watch them with everything. Or they get fat, or ill, or careless."³³

Although Dora pretends to be indifferent to the rejection of the *polacas* in the Yiddish theatre, and to their segregation in the Jewish cemetery, she takes comfort in the fact that they are still part of the Jewish community.³⁴

Moacyr Scliar's novel *O ciclo das águas* [The cycle of waters] (1976), like the rest of the literature reviewed here, makes use of the historical data on the subject of prostitution in Argentina as a point of

departure.³⁵ Scliar sets his novel in Porto Alegre, Brazil, where the white slave trade withdrew after being driven out of Buenos Aires. In *O ciclo das águas* Scliar presents nostalgic reminiscences of the shtetl existence: the dire poverty of Polish families, and the naiveté of parents who entrusted daughters to unscrupulous men, believing the claims to pious orthodoxy and the false promises of marriage made by the *caftens* and their agents. Esther Markowitz starts as an innocent child in Poland. After her arranged marriage to a Jew who turns out to be a pimp, Esther is introduced to the brothel life in Paris, where all her contacts and clients speak Yiddish, as well as French and Polish. She is first humiliated and then seduced by the wealth and the easy life that surround her. Scliar seems to follow Albert Londres' description in the unfolding of events, turning his euphemistic terminology into dramatic action: "A *husband* dies, his *widow* is doing well, he assigns her to one of his trusted lieutenants."³⁶ In this novel, when Mendele dies, his "widow" Esther is assigned to "Luis el malo," or Leiser, the Latin American chief of the Zewi Migdal organization.

The title of the novel, which may be translated as "The Cycle of Waters," symbolizes the rebirth of Esther in her illegitimate son, Marcos. This parallel between the chemical composition of the waters and the human reproductive cycle runs through the novel, for it is through Marcos that Esther regains her respectability. She sends her son away from her "house" in order to have him brought up as a proper Jewish boy, has him circumcised, and sees that he attains Bar Mitzvah. It is through Marcos that Esther expiates her guilt for having been a prostitute and for having failed her father, a *mohel* (ritual circumciser) in Poland. Throughout her life, Esther learns to cope with the unjust, painful realities of the world. Whether she is portrayed as the victimized woman struggling for independence and respectability, as the attractive "Queen Esther of America," or as the Frenchified Madame Marc (née Markowitz), Scliar's heroine never completely loses her dignity. She emerges from her painful trials as a proud, sensitive, woman.

The fetid waters drunk by the children of Santa Lucía, a slum in Porto Alegre, become a revealing metaphor for Scliar. Despite the danger of contamination, despite the infected environment, the children of Santa Lucía grow up healthy. Marcos becomes a professor of biology. Studying in his laboratory, he views the polluted waters through a

microscope, discovering each impurity and reporting it to his students. Marcos himself, born of a woman infected with syphilis, escapes unscathed and free of disease.

Esther's illegitimate son stands as a spokesman for middle-class values and human rights. He is deeply concerned about the corruption of Brazilian politicians who neglect the poor, about the stagnant university system which does not educate, and about land speculators who trample on the weak and disenfranchised. These social ills, in Marcos's opinion, are far worse than prostitution.

Conclusions

It is worth noting that with the exception of the journalistic reports presented by Albert Londres and Julio Alsogaray, none of the writers mentioned in this study had first-hand experience with the white slave trade. Their tales about prostitution reflect their personal ideological convictions. The various approaches to the portrayal of the *polaca* show the different perspectives that each author chose.

The figure of the *polaca*, used as a means of illuminating social conditions in Europe, also appears in the writings of several European Jewish authors: Isaac B. Singer, Sholem Asch, and Sholem Aleichem.³⁷ In Old World settings these authors use the *polaca* to illustrate the traditional dilemmas and paradoxes of shtetl life, but they romanticize the prostitute when they project her into the New World. Sholem Asch's prostitutes, for example, imagine being married to black princes in Argentina. Singer's characters, on the other hand, fantasize that these women will pay for their sins with venereal disease.

It is in Latin American writings that one finds the most convincing and complete portraits of the *polaca* in all phases of her career—from naive immigrant to successful society madam. A composite picture of the Jewish prostitute emerges from these literary portrayals. The literature shows that there was triumph as well as suffering, resilience as well as despair, among the *polacas*.

Nora Glickman teaches Spanish language and literature at Queens College of the City University of New York.

Notes

1. Robert Weisbrot, *The Jews of Argentina* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1979), p. 59.
2. Ernesto Pareja, *La prostitución en Buenos Aires; factores antropológicos y sociales; su prevención y represión; policía de costumbres* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Tor, 1937); Adolfo Bátiz, *La ribera y los prostíbulos en Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Aga Taura, 1961); Ernesto Bott, "Las condiciones de la lucha contra la trata de blancas en Buenos Aires," *Oceana* 9, 2 (1916); Luis Saslavsky, *Psicoanálisis de una prostituta* (Buenos Aires: Falbo, 1966).
3. Translated by Eric Sutton as *The Road to Buenos Aires* (London: Constable, 1928).
4. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
5. Albert Londres, *El camino de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Aga Taura, 1927), p. 7 (no translator's name given).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 244.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 245.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 166.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 241.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
11. Zewi Migdal, an organization composed of Jewish immigrants from Poland, was held responsible for the white slave trade. It was first called "Warsaw" but later took the name of its leader.
12. Julio Alsogaray, *Trilogía de la trata de blancas* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1933).
13. Weisbrot, *Jews of Argentina*, p. 63.
14. Edouard Drumont, *La France Juive* (Paris: Margon & Flammarion, 1885).
15. Gladys Onega, *La inmigración en la literatura Argentina: 1800-1910* (Santa Fe, 1965), p. 132.
16. Julián Martel [pseud. of Juan María Miró], *La bolsa* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Huemul, 1951).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
18. *Ibid.*
19. Manuel Gálvez, *Amigos y maestros de mi juventud* (Buenos Aires: Editora Kraft, 1944), p. 180.
20. Manuel Gálvez, *Nacha Regules* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1968), p. 28. The title of the book is the name of the protagonist.
21. Samuel Eichelbaum, *Nadie la conoció nunca* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones del Carro de Tespis, 1956).
22. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
23. *Ibid.*
24. David Viñas, *En la Semana Trágica* (Buenos Aires: José Alvares, 1966).
25. David Viñas, *Los dueños de la tierra* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Librería Lorraine, 1974).
26. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Mario Szichman, *Los judíos del Mar Dulce* (Buenos Aires: Galería Síntesis 2000, 1971), p. 134.
29. Mario Szichman, *La verdadera crónica falsa* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1972), p. 26.

30. Szichman, *Los judíos del Mar Dulce*, p. 136.
31. Mario Szichman, *A las 20:25 nuestra señora entró en la inmortalidad* (Hanover, N.H. Ediciones del Norte, 1981), p. 120.
32. Szichman, *Los judíos del Mar Dulce*, p. 135.
33. Szichman, *A las 20:25 la señora entró en la inmortalidad*, p. 33.
34. Ibid.
35. Moacyr Scliar, *O ciclo das águas* (Porto Alegre: Editora Globo, 1978).
36. Londres, *El camino de Buenos Aires*, p. 169.
37. Isaac B. Singer, *Passions* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Books, 1951), p. 14; Sholem Asch, *Motke the Thief* (New York: Putnam, 1935); Sholem Aleichem, "The Man from Buenos Aires," in *Tevye's Daughters* (New York: Crown, 1958).