Ezras Noshim and Unruly Bodies: Disciplining Sexual Behavior of Jewish Immigrant Women in Argentina in 1936

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ABSTRACT

Ezras Noshim and Unruly Bodies: Disciplining Sexual Behavior of Jewish Immigrant Women in Argentina in 1936

A thesis presented to the Department of Near Eastern and Judaic Studies

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This thesis is the first-ever analysis of eighteen cases related to Jewish immigrant women who came to Argentina from Eastern Europe (mainly Poland), and who, in 1936, came to the attention of Ezras Noshim, a Jewish organization in Buenos Aires. Prompted by complaints from the community that the women’s behavior violated social norms, Ezras Noshim staff recorded details of the life situations of these women, and took a variety of actions in response to “tame” and “civilize” their behavior. Data from Ezras Noshim’s 1936 annual report have been collected from La Fundación IWO (Institute for Jewish Research) in Buenos Aires and The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) in Jerusalem. Complaints about the women relate to crime and prostitution, to physical abuse, and to husband abandonment. The cases reflect Ezras Noshim’s understanding of the female psyche, body, and sexuality through a framework that defined the women’s behaviors and responses to their circumstances as social and medical pathologies. The women’s problems were subjected to scientific study and their bodies were disciplined by the state of Argentina, physicians, psychiatrists and Ezras Noshim’s members. Often the women were determined to be “mentally ill” and committed to mental hospitals. Through close readings of these case studies we can gain insights into the organized Jewish community’s
understanding of these immigrant women’s behaviors, and their attempts to “civilize” them. We can also hear the echoes of the women themselves—managed by pimps and madames, coping with pregnancy and separation/abandonment from their husbands, and sometimes simply expressing a desire for their own physical and sexual freedom. Throughout the thesis, we can observe a moral agenda and a civilizing mission of Ezras Noshim that valued primarily the sexual purity and honor of Jewish women. And in these eighteen case reports, we can also read the challenges of immigrant women’s experiences, and the differing understandings of the women’s situations, sexualities, bodies, and mental health between the medical and organized Jewish community, and the immigrant women themselves.
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Introduction

In 1936, the Jewish organization helping women, Ezras Noshim, reported that it found an eighteen-year-old Jewish minor, Dwojra Steinbaum abandoned and ill in a tenement house in Buenos Aires. According to the landlord, the girl had lived alone in the house for several months, her rent paid by a stranger who never showed up again. Ezras Noshim later learned that Steinbaum had lived earlier with relatives who had disappeared from the city, leaving her alone in the tenement building. To treat her health condition, the organization placed her in the Israelite Hospital where she remained calm for the first few days. However, one night she woke up screaming and frightened. When the doctor inquired about the cause of her terror, Steinbaum claimed that her neighbor had tried to rape her. Upon further observation, the patient received a diagnosis of mental illness with a sexual origin. Since such “illnesses” were not treated at the Israelite Hospital and Steinbaum’s behavior upset the other patients, Ezras Noshim transferred her to an appropriate mental institution with her expenses covered by the Ezrah Society (Charity Society) and Chevrah Kaddisha (Jewish Burial Society) of Buenos Aires. According to the report, the patient’s health did not improve.¹

Steinbaum was one of the women who came to the attention of Ezras Noshim due to her precarious circumstances. Ezras Noshim was a Jewish organization officially recognized as a separate entity (not directly dependent on the Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women in London) in 1926 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Initially, the organization’s main purpose was to eliminate and fight Jewish pimps, called tmeim (“the impure/uncleans”).

¹ Archival material housed at IWO in Buenos Aires, Argentina
In the following years, *Ezras Noshim* expanded their activities and assisted Jewish women immigrants in family disputes, economic difficulties, and various cases that led to divorce or marriage.\(^2\) Steinbaum’s abandonment by relatives after her arrival in Buenos Aires from Eastern Europe and claims of rape and trauma shed light on the little-known experiences of Jewish female refugees to Argentina during the interwar years. Archival documents of *Ezras Noshim* housed at La Fundación IWO (Institute for Jewish Research) in Buenos Aires and in The Central Archives for the History of the Jewish People (CAHJP) in Jerusalem include 18 cases of Jewish women from Eastern Europe (mainly Poland) who came to the attention of *Ezras Noshim* in 1936 prompted by complaints from the community that the women’s behavior violated social norms. Despite the small sample size, the cases reflect *Ezras Noshim*’s understanding of the female psyche, body, and sexuality through a framework that pathologized social problems such as prostitution, poverty, and crime—an approach that was popular in Poland and Argentina. This thesis examines some of the issues and responses specifically in relation to Jewish women immigrants to Argentina, as they are understood and managed by the organization *Ezras Noshim*. Through close readings of these case studies we can gain insights into the organized Jewish community’s understanding of these immigrant women’s behaviors, and their attempts to “civilize” them. We can also hear the echoes of the women themselves—managed by pimps and madames, coping with pregnancy and separation/abandonment from their husbands, and sometimes simply expressing a desire for their own physical and sexual freedom.

Throughout the thesis, we can observe a moral agenda and a civilizing mission of Ezras Noshim that valued primarily the sexual purity and honor of Jewish women. And in these eighteen case reports, we can also read the challenges of immigrant women’s experiences, and the differing

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understandings of the women’s situations, sexualities, bodies, and mental health between the medical and organized Jewish community, and the immigrant women themselves.

**Literature Review**

General scholarship on Jewish immigrant women in Argentina has mainly focused on institutional matters, migration patterns and fighting white slavery. Most of the literature touches on the topic of prostitution. Haim Avni’s *Clientes, rufianes y prostitutas. Comunidades judías de Argentina e Israel frente a la trata de blancas* was one of the first attempts to give a comprehensive historical view on the problem of Jewish sexual slavery in Argentina. Avni analyzes what he calls “main actors” involved in the prostitution and trafficking in women: “the men whose instincts move them to seek sexual satisfaction, the women involved in it, the pimps, the society in which the prostitution and trade of women was developed, the legal and ethical norms of that society and the associations that fought the white slavers (translation by the author).” He compares the situation in Argentina to similar circumstances before and after the establishment of the State of Israel. Edward J. Bristow’s *Prostitution and Prejudice* also presents a comparative study of Jewish prostitution and the Jewish response to it in Argentina, the US and Brazil. Bristow’s research analyzes thoroughly immigration patterns and the reaction from the Jewish community. Both authors offer very detailed historical analysis. Avni focuses on the situation on the ground in Argentina while Bristow emphasizes the reasons, causes and geography of sex trafficking.

Most of the literature on Jewish prostitution written in Spanish and published in Argentina has been a product of journalism research or literary fantasy. Gerardo Bra’s *La Organización*

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3 Book available only in Spanish and Hebrew
Negra⁵ and Larry Levy’s *La Mancha de la Migdal⁶* include extensive archival material, particularly on the topic of the Jewish pimping organization – Zwi Migdal. However, both books are lacking compelling analysis and historical references. Myrtha Schalom’s *La Polaca⁷* is a novel based on life experiences of Raquel Liberman – a Polish woman and a prostitute who managed to denounce her traffickers. Schalom’s interpretation was also depicted in contemporary Argentinian theater and musical performances.⁸ *The Jewish white slave trade and the untold story of Raquel Liberman⁹* by Nora Glickman presents extensive historical documentation, and Liberman’s personal correspondence and unique photographs. In addition, Glickman devotes one chapter to the topic of the Jewish white slave trade in Yiddish and Latin American literature and cinema.¹⁰

There are still only a few works that propose a feminist agenda and interdisciplinary approach to the issue of Jewish prostitution and Jewish women in Argentina. Donna Guy in *Sex and Danger in Buenos Aires¹¹* tries to integrate gender and the role of female prostitution in concepts of Argentinian citizenship, focusing primarily on the situation in the capital of Argentina between the end of 1800s and mid 1950s. She explains in great detail legal, health, criminal, political and cultural aspects of prostitution in connection to immigration and different national origins. Her analysis helps to situate the Jewish women in that discourse and understand their

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⁹ Book available in English
position in Argentinian society. Julia Rodriguez’s *Civilizing Argentina*\(^\text{12}\) explains the medical model chosen by the Argentinian state in which poverty, crime and prostitution were defined as social illnesses. Her findings and research constitute a base for the theory of disciplining women’s bodies through medical and psychiatric discourse that I will pursue in this thesis.

In *Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation*\(^\text{13}\), Sandra McGee Deutsch uses a wide range of archival documentation and oral history to analyze experiences of ordinary Jewish women in Argentina and not only the most active and visible members of the Jewish community. She presents numerous individual stories from the time period of 1880 – 1955 and dedicates a few chapters to the topic of prostitution and marriage. McGee Deutsch uses, similarly to this thesis, case studies to examine intimate experiences of a wide range of Jewish women. Her work, however, focuses mainly on heterogeneity and different aspects of Jewish women’s lives, outside the sex trade.

This thesis presents the experience of Ashkenazi Jewish women immigrants within the historical context of gender relations and sexuality in Argentina, in a specific time framework and through the lens of the Jewish organization. By limiting the case sample, we can get a better understanding of their individual stories.


Methodology

This thesis uses a unique archive to raise many sets of issues. The 18 individual cases of Jewish women are part of a detailed Ezras Noshim’s annual report from 1936. The documentation includes around 50 pages written in Spanish. Due to privacy restrictions and confidentiality of the documents, the names of the women have been changed. In most cases, the names have Polish origin and this tendency is preserved.

Language is of critical importance in this analysis and the translation prepared by the author is as literal as possible. However, translation practice always poses challenges and limitations. It is inevitably, to a lesser or greater extent, an interpretation itself. Retaining the use of euphemisms and medicalized vocabulary allows us to understand the culture and context of the time. Extensive background information included in the thesis helps to leave the original tone and “flavor” of archival documentation.

By using microhistory as an interpretive approach and by looking at the micro level of social activities, this thesis presents a particular moment in Jewish history. Analyzing this socially marginalized group of people – immigrant Jewish women – allows us to focus on more inclusive understanding of Jewish women’s history, and how the larger Jewish and Argentinian society attempted to manage them. Ezras Noshim’s collection is one of the main sources of documentation on the subject of Jewish women in Argentina. The detailed cases help to understand how women’s behavior was understood by the specific Jewish organization and Argentinian society. This thesis is an attempt to analyze the situation of Jewish immigrant women from Eastern Europe in Argentina through a critical feminist lens.

By choosing to analyze records from 1936, I wanted to emphasize an interesting change in Ezras Noshim’s activities. After prostitution was outlawed by the Argentinian government in 1934,
the organization changed and redirected their primary focus from fighting white slavery and prostitution to solving family and individual problems. They wanted to improve the image of Jews in Buenos Aires and make them more respectable.\textsuperscript{14} The shift in organizational priorities was linked to the changing political arena. The radical right-wing nationalists gained in importance and they did not want to accept Jews who were “inherently pathological and sexually degenerate.”\textsuperscript{15}

In addition, at that time, anti-Semitism was in full swing in Germany and its influence was felt throughout the Jewish world, including Argentina. In this context, immigration requests from Eastern Europe to Argentina that sometimes highly depended on \textit{Ezras Noshim’s} decisions had major consequences.

It is important to stress that there are limitations of this analysis. The case reports themselves were written by case workers who may have particular points of view on the sex trade and women in it. We are also limited by the lack of additional primary sources that may refine or amend our understanding of the primary documents considered here. To understand and evaluate the real meaning of the text, the author is concerned with the credibility and accuracy of the content and information given in the documents. The author might occasionally critically question the competence and truthfulness of this material, or disbelieve the statements made in the records. It is also unclear who produced the report analyzed in this thesis. We do not have the data about the gender, age or occupation of \textit{Ezras Noshim’s} members who interviewed the women and then interpreted their words. This piece of information could definitely change or shift the implications for the final analysis.


Additional primary sources like memoirs, letters or medical records would strengthen the analysis. Unfortunately, there is very limited or no access to these kinds of recourses directly produced/written by women who suffered from multiple discrimination and oppression.

**Immigration: Argentina as a Port of Missing Women**

For the most part, the personal files presented tell the tales of young Eastern European female refugees who ended up living in a place known as a port of missing women. Argentina had a “bad reputation” among Eastern European Jews. The imbalance of numbers between males and females, corruption, weak laws and new shipping routes were just a few reasons why “the road to Buenos Aires” was easy and profitable. Even though Jews had been emigrating to South America from the beginning of the nineteenth century, a significant influx of Jewish immigrants in Argentina happened after the War World I. According to the data from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there were around 55,000 Polish Jews who immigrated to Argentina between 1919 and 1938. Marta Kowalska estimates that in 1939, Jews born in Poland constituted 22 percent of Argentinian Jewry and more than one-third of the Jewish community in Buenos Aires. Fears and anxieties regarding Jewish white slavery and female sexual commerce were linked to municipally regulated prostitution and Argentina’s newly established idea of family, class and nation. In 1934, Polish and Russian women represented 48.6 percent of the total number of prostitutes registered in Buenos Aires (native born Argentinian prostitutes: 43.9 percent). However, it is worth noticing that the data was largely based only on what prostitutes told registrars. In addition, the statistics might be skewed because women immigrants were more likely

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18 Ibid., p. 257-259.
to register than Argentinians. Even though it was impossible to verify the religious affiliation of those women, Jews were often presented as key actors in an organized sex trade that benefited from legalized forms of prostitution\textsuperscript{20}. Argentinians started using the word “la polaca” (Polish woman) as a synonymous to prostitute.\textsuperscript{21}

The international Jewish community became very concerned about the reports of Jewish criminality in Argentina. The Jewish Association for the Protection of Girls and Women, founded in London in 1896, made Buenos Aires its main focus in South America. The organization’s agents questioned women disembarking in Argentina and tried to save them from forced prostitution. Paradoxically, despite the organization’s successful publicity or probably because of it, female sexual commerce in Buenos Aires was largely linked to the Jewish community and exclusively to the Jewish traffickers. This problem was also discussed in the Yiddish press in Poland. “Juicy” and tragic news regarding so called “shitle khupes” (Yiddish: “quiet weddings” arranged by traffickers) and abductions of young Jewish girls and women served as a warning for those considering emigration. Mariusz Kalczewiak argues that Argentina in the Yiddish press in Poland was often portrayed as “filthy, obscene land, polluted with the worst elements of Jewish society.”\textsuperscript{22}

Jewish women did not engage in prostitution more often than other groups in Argentina. For religious reasons (e.g. traffickers performed valid Jewish weddings with two male witnesses and without the presence of the rabbi where the printed prenuptial agreement – the ketubah - already included a name of one of the procurers), they were just more vulnerable to be recruited and subject to men. In addition, the fact that they were Jewish made them more visible in predominantly Catholic Argentina.

\textsuperscript{20} Prostitution was legal in Argentina since 1875 till 1934
Zwi Migdal

Jewish prostitution was a common phenomenon in immigrant era. There were a lot of organized crime groups created by Eastern European Jews who were involved in trafficking Jewish women. One of the most infamous Jewish pimps’ organizations was originally called The Varsovia (Warsaw) Society and later changed its name to Zwi Migdal (1927), to “honor” its funder – Luis Zwi Migdal, and satisfy the Polish Embassy in Argentina, that did not want to associate the organization with the name of Poland’s capital city - Warsaw.\(^{23}\) They officially functioned as a mutual aid society and attracted procurers who wanted to benefit from prostitution and at the same time lead a religious life. The pimps constantly aspired to be a part of the Argentinian Jewish community. They quickly prospered and decided to donate money for the construction of synagogues, community buildings and the development of Yiddish theater in Buenos Aires. In the beginning, Jewish community leaders did not know whether it was ethical to accept procurers’ financial help. Later, however, under the pressure of international Jewish community, pimps became banned from Jewish religious and public institutions. In response, Zwi Migdal’s members decided to purchase land for their own cemetery.\(^{24}\)

The management and administration positions in Zwi Migdal belonged only to men (in contrast to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo in Brazil where women filled executive positions in the Zwi Migdal branch there).\(^ {25}\) In 1920s, Zwi Migdal experienced its biggest prosperity and in 1921 created its branch institution called Ashkenazum that grouped together the pimps from Romania. Zwi Migdal began to lose its power and importance in the 1930s after the public trial of the


members of the organization and a number of legal changes that hampered prostitution in Argentina.

**Ezras Noshim**

Until 1926, *Ezras Noshim* in Buenos Aires functioned as a branch office of the large Jewish organization in the UK (The Jewish Association for The Protection of Girls and Women). Initially, the British organization hired special agents who had to go through the port of Buenos Aires when European ships were anchoring, then get on ships’ decks with permission from the authorities, and introduce themselves to women and girls traveling alone or in the company of suspicious men. They approached particularly women whose names were on the list sent from London. This action was supervised by the port and immigration authorities. Interestingly, the first agent chosen by the British organization in 1901 was not Jewish but Catholic, and had worked previously for the Austrian-Hungarian consulate.  

In 1926, the organization and the Jewish community of Buenos Aires succeed in variety of cases against white slavery. These achievements awoke widespread echoes in Jewish journalism and the rabbi and the president of *Ezras Noshim* at that time– Samuel Halphon – managed to convince other Jewish institutions in Argentina to support and establish an independent organization that would help Jewish women. Ezras Noshim became an executive arm of the Argentinian Jewish Community against the prostitution that from that moment, had to support itself financially. Throughout the 1930s, *Ezras Noshim* had also another function: to help families

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26 Ibid., p. 170.
27 The archival material of Ezras Noshim includes a variety of letter headed papers with different titles e.g.: The Jewish Association for The Protection of Girls and Women, Ezras Noshim, Samuel Halphon, Consejo Directivo en Buenos Aires, Oficina Central en Londres, La Asociacion Femenina de Socorros Mututos, SOPROMITIS etc.
in the immigration process. The growing prestige of the organization, turned it into one of the most important Jewish institutions, representing interests of the Ashkenazi community.\textsuperscript{28}

**Ezras Noshim: Disciplining Women’s Bodies**

Argentina’s modern history has periods of democracy intertwined with periods of authoritarian regimes. Central to the body politic of the beginning of twentieth century was a medical model that was created in the name of progress, prosperity and civilization. The state of Argentina wanted to save the country by eliminating so-called “degenerates” and undesirable elements. The state viewed social problems like poverty, crime, hysteria and prostitution as threats to national well-being. For the purpose of improving and purifying Argentinian state, physicians and scientists conducted a large number of examinations, diagnosed, and divided citizens into categories based on their behavior, moral depravity, sexual habits or incidents of deviance. State scientists could regulate both the private and the public lives of the population. They ran hygienic programs in homes and in public institutions where citizens were subjected to medical and psychological scrutiny. The main goal of “civilizing” Argentina through science and medicine was to create and protect the next generation of sexually restrained and healthy Argentinians. Medical experts paid special attention to female sexual anomalies and degeneration. They attributed the cause of female deviant behavior or hysteria to their reproductive organs.\textsuperscript{29} Sexuality of both married women and self-identified prostitutes generated a large debate in Argentina that was both admired and feared by European nations and immigrants. These two groups of women defined the boundaries of female citizenship. On the one side of the spectrum, prostitutes who led sexually


depraved lives, could not work without medical inspection or move freely within cities. Sexually faithful wives could easily enjoy those privileges. However, until 1926 married women could not work without the permission of their husbands, nor keep the money they earned.30

Medical experts in Argentina believed that women were more prone to prostitution, caused both by both external circumstances like the exposure to bad morals and also by genetics. Prostitution was legal in Argentina for almost 65 years (1875-1934), essentially to protect its clients and control the spread of venereal diseases like gonorrhea and syphilis.31 In the mid 1930s syphilis claimed the lives of 30,000 Argentines per year and nearly 40 percent of all hospital patients in Buenos Aires suffered from venereal diseases. Physicians believed that a child of a prostitute or a child of a man that had been infected with any kind of venereal disease could be mentally ill, blind, or suffer paralysis.32

European immigration brought a new concept of race superiority. For Argentinian elites “whiteness” was associated with progress and purity of blood. However, the color of skin was not the only element in the idea of race promoted by Argentinian politicians. European cultural hierarchy played also a role in the immigration debate. State scientists and lawmakers viewed southern European cultures (e.g. Italians) as intellectually and culturally inferior. Argentinian psychiatrists believed also that Jews were more likely to suffer from race specific mental illnesses and that they tend to engage more easily in anarchism.33 Considering Jews a distinct racial group that was inherently pathological and sexually degenerate contributed to anti-Semitic discourse.

32 Ibid., p. 244.
33 Ibid, p. 25.
Argentinian criminologists often cited European authors and claimed that Jews were more vulnerable to psychosis and intellectual disturbance.\textsuperscript{34}

**Case Studies**

Case studies of Jewish women described by *Ezras Noshim* reveal why certain Jewish women came to the attention of the organization and how their problems came to be understood.

**Mental illness**

On the old continent, the discussion about the relationship between mental health and race divided Eastern and Western European Jews. A perceived higher incidence of mental illness among Eastern Jews was linked by medical writers and social theorists to biological causes. An Austrian-Jewish activist Bertha Pappenheim wrote “the spas, hospitals, and mental asylums, the institutes for blind and the deaf-dumb, show a higher percent of Galician Jews. Today many of these diseases are labeled hereditary that have their sources in the ignorance of the simplest hygienic rules and the exercise of other activities detrimental to health.”\textsuperscript{35} She was specifically referring to child and nursing care delivered by Jewish women in Galicia. German Jewish psychiatrist Hermann Oppenheim also made a clear distinction, saying that Western Jews, as himself, in contrast to Eastern Jews, were just not exposed to “the circumstances” that trigger the mental illness.\textsuperscript{36}

For models to build a modern Argentinian state, scientists, intellectuals and physicians looked to Europe, particularly France, Britain and Germany. However, Argentinian doctors could not meet the needs of the growing population and failed in the processes of building and expanding a network of psychiatric hospitals. *Ezras Noshim*’s biggest concern was that the public institutions

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, p. 104.
for the mentally ill were severely overcrowded. The organization mentioned at least 4 different institutions\textsuperscript{37} where those young women were hospitalized but only one was actually dedicated to mentally ill women. \textit{El Hospital Nacional de Alienadas} in Buenos Aires was established in 1854 and it was the first psychiatric hospital for women. Its vision, mission, and functioning were based on the French hospital model (e.g. modern legal framework of admitting and releasing patients, French architecture, system of efficiency). Before 1854, women in Buenos Aires who were considered to have some kind of mental illness were placed in the women’s prison instead of the hospital.\textsuperscript{38} In 1934, \textit{El Hospital Nacional de Alienadas} with a capacity of 1600 patients cared for over 3000. Overcrowding was one of the most visible aspects of the limitations of the psychiatric reform in Argentina.\textsuperscript{39} According to Freud’s research, traumatic “memory” and traumatic neuroses first emerged after World War I.\textsuperscript{40} In the interwar period in Argentina there was a fear that the new migrants might have been psychically traumatized by the war. Psychiatric hospitals statistics show that there was an increased number of Eastern European and Jewish patients, and one of the most serious challenge that accompanied this demographic change was how the doctors communicated with the patients.\textsuperscript{41} Jonathan Ablard presented a few examples where language barrier and cultural misunderstanding were the cause of serious and erroneous diagnosis. Because of the

\textsuperscript{37} \textit{El Hospital Nacional de Alienadas in Buenos Aires, El Hospital Melchor Romero, El Hospital Israelita, El Hospital Regional de Provincia de Cordoba}


\textsuperscript{40} Adriana Brodsky, Raanan Rein, \textit{The New Jewish Argentina, Facets of Jewish Experiences in the Southern Cone}, (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013), p.324.

communication gap at least two patients were wrongly reported suffering from insanity and dementia.\textsuperscript{42}

According to \textit{Ezras Noshim}, the records from 1936 show that compared with previous times, there was an increase in mental illness patients among girls and married women. Some of these infirm came to \textit{Ezras Noshim} to make their complaints against “imaginary enemies” and request their protection. The organization claimed that they “immediately noticed the incoherence of their explanations and their misinterpretation of certain facts.” Their suspicions were later confirmed by the diagnostic specialist. Four of these ill women (three girls and a married women) concentrated all their fears on the existence of individuals, who they claimed intentionally tried to force them into a licentious life. According to medical opinion, these “faults in their mental functions” had a probable sexual cause. Another group of patients, married women with children, accused their husbands of infidelity. They insisted that the \textit{Ezras Noshim} intervene to obtain legal and religious separation in their favor. These women, according to the \textit{Ezras Noshim}, expressed themselves in “an unintelligible way, not being able to respond to their guiding questions” about specific acts committed by their spouses. Some of the women were more explicit but created “too frightening and inconceivable of a story for a balanced mind.” The respective husbands declared that their women were suffering continuously or intermittently with attacks of “morbid jealousy” which, according to the \textit{Ezras Noshim}, confirmed the abnormal state of these women. The practitioners maintained that the mental disturbance of these women can also have a sexual background. They thought that the patients should have been isolated and subjected to a methodical cure because in case of a crisis episode that physicians thought could occur at any moment, the physicians feared the women were capable of attacking the life of their relatives. It was very

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid p. 86.
difficult to get a mentally ill person to the State Hospicies, since the capacity of these establishments was very crowded, especially the women’s section. Ezras Noshim despite the adverse circumstances, obtained through certain relations, beds for five women, whose hospitalization was urgent and essential.

Ezras Noshim was concerned that the behavior of women who were doomed to be mentally ill, could be a serious threat to their relatives. Brucha Meryn was a mother of two small children. According to Ezras Noshim, she became very dangerous and suffered from extremely aggressive attacks. Dwojra Steinbaum’s behavior produced “disturbance” among other patients in the hospital, after she was diagnosed with a mental disease of sexual origin. Brucha returned home fully recovered, after staying in the hospital for three months. Dwojra, however, was transferred to a mental asylum but her health did not improve.

Ezras Noshim insisted that those women should have been isolated. Apparently, they were capable of sudden, dangerous and violent behavior towards other people. Hysteria was the most common psychiatric diagnosis at this time that one of the doctor’s described as “one of the varieties of women’s character.” Women who manifested themselves as weak, exhausted individuals, consumed by excess or vices were more likely to suffer from hysterical attacks. Brucha’s and Dwojra’s bodies were subjected to the control of the organization and of the Argentinian state because of the perceived threat they posed to their husbands, children, and other people. Medical and social work authorities also believed that some forms of mental diseases were contagious.

Jewish prostitutes in Buenos Aires often suffered from exploitation, fear and brutality that could have had a serious devastating impact on their mental health. Sandra McGee Deutsch

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44 Ibid, p. 74-75.
suggested, however, that it is possible that some women exaggerated the abuse they suffered to win the sympathy of Ezras Noshim or other organizations. Psychiatry and psychoanalysis had a deep impact on Argentinian society and most particularly in Buenos Aires. Porteños (residents of Buenos Aires) could easily use medical terms in everyday conversation. It became a way of seeing the world through which reality was analyzed. It is possible that Jewish women were also familiar with this medicalized framework. However, it is difficult to expressly decide if any of those women were capable of faking the symptoms and escape prostitution for hospitalization, choices between competing brutalities.

Suicide and dishonor

Ezras Noshim did not reveal if Brucha or Dwojra were also a threat to themselves. However, the phenomenon of suicide loomed large in the Jewish psyche after the World War I. The rate of suicide among Polish Jews, however, remained low in comparison to other populations. Nonetheless, suicide became a new trend that according to social scientists was a response to urban and industrialized life and loosening of gender roles.

In 1936 Ezras Noshim was conducting very complicated inquiries to find the whereabouts of Rita Kliger and her husband, Herszel Blatt. There was a presumption that Rita was a victim of being sold into prostitution shortly after arriving in Argentina. The case of the couple includes a vast correspondence with the Police Headquarters of La Plata, a city in the Buenos Aires province.

Rita came to Buenos Aires from Poland in 1930, having been motivated her trip for marital purposes. She legally married Herszel Blatt and moved between the cities of Rosario and La Plata. In July 1931, the father of the young Rita received a letter from his son-in-law, letting him know,

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without indicating when and how, that his daughter had died. The father, interested in obtaining more details, solicited a report from a relative of the son-in-law, Mr. Schuster. Mr. Schuster was totally unaware of the nature of the marriage but was able to interview Herszel in La Plata. Herszel described that “he and his wife, disenchanted by the setbacks of life, decided by mutual agreement, to put an end to their lives.” To execute that sad resolution, both went on November 3, 1930 at 0:30AM, towards the port of La Plata, and threw themselves into the ocean. Some sailors aboard a Norwegian ship in the vicinity proceeded to rescue them, only being able to save Herszel. Rita had disappeared from the surface. The parents of the young Rita received this information from Mr. Schuster. The misfortune stabbed the heart of the Kliger family, but news began to circulate that the young Rita was alive and had been seen by several fellow citizens, after the date of her supposed suicide, in the brothels in the Province of Buenos Aires. Consequently, there was a suspicion that the husband had resorted to a trick to be able to freely exploit Rita in an infamous trade. For that reason, Ezras Noshim investigated whether if at the indicated time (November 3 or 4, 1930), an attempted suicide by Herszel and Rita had been registered by the police authorities of the port of La Plata, with the fatal outcome for the latter. The Maritime Authorities of the port of this city stated that there were no records nor evidence found of the suicide or rescue of the couple. Ezras Noshim extended other procedures for the purpose of determining the whereabouts of Rita and Herszel, but it not achieved satisfactory results. The couples’ portraits were published in Jewish newspapers around the country and the organization promised to expand their search to other countries in South and Central America. Ezras Noshim reported that they knew that the use of press was an arduous and expensive task but they would not stop until all the resources in their power were exhausted to find the couple.
Rita’s case shows how lonely and vulnerable Jewish women were upon resettling in a new country. As an immigrant bride-to-be, travelling without her relatives, Rita was only at Herszel’s mercy. She probably had to face a variety of challenges adapting to a new society and it is possible that she was totally unaware of other dangers lurking on her in Argentina. However, we have to remember that Jewish men were also a part of the immigrant experience that could result in their psychological and emotional traumas and lead to an attempted suicide or other mental health problems.

_Ezras Noshim_ decided to conduct a very long, expensive and in-depth investigation. It had been almost 6 years after Rita’s supposed suicide when the report was written. Interestingly, only men (Herszel, father, a relative of the son-in-law) were involved in the correspondence and testimony process. It could be caused by lack of female witnesses, women’s inability to write and read or because of women’s undermined credibility.

In Jewish tradition, both suicide and prostitution are treated as dishonors. The Talmud says, "for him who takes his own life with full knowledge of his action, no rites are to be observed. There is to be no rending of clothes and no eulogy."47 Those who commit suicide in full physical and mental sanity are buried separately near the cemetery gate. But Judaism recognizes also a second category of suicide when the person is not responsible for their action (“person under compulsion”) and then all burial and mourning rituals are preserved as for someone who has met a natural death.48 In Halakhah, the dead human body is taboo but there is a notion that the human cadaver needs to be interred as soon as possible and any delay of burial is disrespectful.49

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Yechiel Michael Barilan describes an example that reflects moral authority of the Orthodox rabbis over “unclaimed bodies” in Poland. In 1929, a Jewish corpse was handed over for anatomical study/dissection to the medical school in Warsaw. The Jewish community faced the protest from the rabbis and decided that only bodies that were not claimed within 48 hours would be eligible for dissection. Rabbis, however, did not agree to that either and gave only their permission to the anatomical study of “the scum of the earth”, meaning prostitutes, pimps and criminals.\textsuperscript{50}

Even though prostitution is not a capital offence in Jewish law\textsuperscript{51}, Zwi Migdal had to create their own cemetery and buried pimps and prostitutes in their own religious ceremonies. Similarly, to Argentina, the procurers and prostitutes in New York, Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Johannesburg were buried in grounds separated from “official” Jewish cemeteries.\textsuperscript{52} The cemetery called Avellaneda that belonged to the Zwi Migdal is located in a suburb to the south of Buenos Aires and it is closed to public. Interestingly, the keys to the cemetery, now overgrown with bushes and trees, now belong to the Moroccan Jewish Community of Buenos Aires. Until today, the topic of Zwi Migdal exists as a taboo in some circles in the Argentinian Jewish community and the tombs of Avellaneda remain abandoned with no willingness to protect, restore or preserve them.\textsuperscript{53} It is difficult to clearly decide what would have been a greater dishonor for Rita’s family and the Jewish community of Buenos Aires: her suicide or the fact that she worked as a prostitute.

Elsa Baranowicz came to Buenos Aires at the age of 22, after a 5-year attempt by her relatives to help her to relocate. Once in Argentina, she began to work as a seamstress. She lived

\textsuperscript{51}Ibid, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{53}Based on interviews conducted by the author with the Jewish community members of Buenos Aires [August 2017].
in the house of her relatives who supported her when she was without work in order to protect her from “any contingency that the lack of work originates for young girls.” In that way two years passed and there was nothing to foresee that in the life of the young Elsa there would be an event that would radically change her fate. She encountered “a dishonorable man” for whom “she had a great passion.” After he seduced her, he abandoned her upon learning that she was to be a mother. The young woman hid, until she could, her condition from the relatives. When they discovered her “dishonor” they resolved to disowned her. Without necessary support, the desperate young woman went so far as to intend to take her own life. The intervention of a family (probably not her own family) lavished its protection on Elsa and likely saved her life. The same family that protected her, admitted her to their home, and gave her accommodation and a small salary, in exchange for domestic services, a position/an arrangement that continued for nearly a year. Ezras Noshim stated that “the deep moral sufferings left an imprint on the spirit of that woman, with the consequent weakening of her will.” The latter probably “destroyed her faith in herself and the hope of being able to rehabilitate her life.” All this influenced her to “have no qualms about relating to men freely,” and she did not consider the consequences, until “her degradation became complete.” In 1936, she was a mother of a two-year-old child. Ezras Noshim observed that Elsa would have not been able to change her life, on her own initiative. Her only hope was to find a man who had an interest in getting her out of the mire by turning her into his wife.

Ezras Noshim reported that the number of prostitute mothers was very small compared to those single mothers who had not established their home. However, “the fall of the first is much deeper and is the exponent of a complete degeneration.” The organization expressed the opinion that “the responsibility assumed by a prostitute mother is much more serious than that of a single woman, because, with the desecration of her own place, she violates the sacred principles of the
family, sowing the germ of evil in the bosom of her relatives.” 

Ezras Noshim sought to normalize Jewish women to local gendered norms of femininity because they believed that the Jewish inclusion was dependent on women’s reputation. Monogamous marriage, motherhood, virginity and domesticity were the most important values stressed by the organization. Elsa probably felt guilty for having been unable to live up to her expected role in the society. The idea that she failed as a woman and a member of the Jewish community could lead to serious psychological damage and affected her emotional being to the point that she wanted to commit suicide.

Rywka Liberman was a mother of three children and a wife. She helped her husband with his shoemaker’s work. She allegedly “became melancholic since the birth of the third child.” The state of her mind continued to be more disturbed, resulting in the “imaginary idea” of being persecuted by the police, on the grounds that she was considered, as she put it “a woman of ill repute.” She was assured by the officers that she enjoyed the best reputation among police authorities regarding her behavior and good living. But it did not bring her any result. The doctors insisted on the necessity of her isolation and she was admitted to the hospital thanks to the efforts of Ezras Noshim. Her state of health apparently experienced some improvement. Ezras Noshim continued to monitor the girls and women to ensure that they were leading a “moral and innocent” life. These Jewish women were supposed to follow a conduct similar or even more strict to other Argentinian women.54 We do not know about Rywka’s past. It is possible that she could have been involved in prostitution in the past. However, she might have had a credible fear based only on a changing political situation in Argentina that contributed to anti-Semitic sentiments, especially against Jewish women.

54 Ibid., 123-124.
Rywka felt seen, observed, and judged by multiple instruments of power. Michel Focault developed a social theory of panopticism that is based on disciplinary society of surveillance. Focault describes the effect of the panopticon as follows: “[…] the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. To achieve this, it is at once too much and too little that the prisoner should be constantly observed by an inspector: too little, for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed; too much, because he has no need in fact of being so…. the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so.” Visible power of Argentinian state together with Rywka’s vulnerability, compounded by the frustration of not knowing where “the gaze” is coming from, could lead to obsessive thoughts and fear. In addition, at this time hysteria in women became a common diagnosis among physicians and psychiatrists. State scientists closely studied and observed menstruation, pregnancy, labor, postpartum, lactation and menopause and identified those distinctive periods when female madness can easily appear. The majority of cases, 58%, were said to occur during the postpartum stage and Rywka in fact became “melancholic” after she gave birth to her third child.

**Family**

Jewish women from Poland and Russia often emigrated to South America in attempt to escape intolerable poverty and religious persecution. As one of the rabbis said: “one must have

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seen the misery of the Polish Jewish cities for oneself, in order to understand that a trip to Buenos Aires is not frightening. "^{57} Poverty hurt traditional values, parental authority and family solidarity. Children were often unsupervised and parents could not provide them an adequate standard of living. Parents often became “delegitimized” in their children’s eyes.\(^{58}\) There was a very high number of one-parent families and orphans in Argentina. In the League of Nations report, nine out of twenty-five Jewish prostitutes in Buenos Aires claimed that their family lives had been immoral or abnormal in some way.\(^{59}\) Dwojra Steinbaum, who was considered a minor, was abandoned by her family and had been diagnosed as having a mental condition with a sexual origin. According to Ezras Noshim, there was a correlation between prostitution and her disturbed home life. Syma Rosenberg was 18 years old when her mother died. At that time, her father had already emigrated to Argentina. Ezras Noshim helped the father and intervened in the process of bringing 18-year-old Syma to Buenos Aires. The father was a person without financial resources so Syma began working in a sewing workshop. There was a certain disagreement between the father and the daughter because of “inconvenient friendships” that “diverted the daughter from a good way.” The father decided to get help and advice from the Ezras Noshim. The accusation he made against Syma was extremely serious. The investigation carried out by the organization gave the possibility of proving that the young women did indeed lead “a disarranged life, or rather unbridled, since she had relationships with several men.” Ezras Noshim intervened in many different types of family issues. Even though Syma could support herself financially and was left without parental control, her body was subject to norms established by Ezras Noshim and Argentinian state. To prevent her

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\(^{58}\) Ibid., p. 94-95.

\(^{59}\) *Enquiry into Measures of Rehabilitation of Prostitutes*, p. 124.
from “sexual deviance” she was placed with a family that was supposed to maintain surveillance over her.

Janina Szustak was an orphan and was raised by her aunt in what Ezras Noshim called a “harsh environment.” Since she was not surrounded by caresses during her childhood, her character became “surly and reserved.” With Janina’s education, intelligence and temperament “long repressed by discipline” she easily found a job as a typist. Janina’s regular salary and economic independence influenced her and she did not want her aunt to treat her anymore with the same severity and intolerance. The animosity she felt for her relatives, of whose kindness she had no memories, became worse and Janina left the house of her aunt without anyone noticing. Ezras Noshim reported that this incident did not seem to have major consequences for a girl like Janina because of her “awakened intelligence” and ability to make a living. However, Janina, left to her own free will and far from the tutelage of her aunt, changed her ways of being. She became sociable and voluble, “manifesting a great inclination for various kinds of healthy distractions, typical of youth.” This change awakened her true, so far dormant, temperament. Janina as “the owner of herself and without being able to control her actions,” let herself be carried away by certain circles of friendships with depraved customs, in which sensuality prevailed over everything else. The young Janina, according to what Ezras Noshim proved, did not take long to initiate herself in the sexual life and by the end of the year she changed two lovers. The organization closes her case with an inability to explain the exact reasons for Janina’s behavior and gives two possible interpretations ending with questions marks: “Is this the result of the excessive rigor and spiritual isolation in which the young woman was kept during her childhood and adolescence, an unfortunate regime that has not contributed anything to develop in her the sense of discernment?
Perhaps the cause should be sought in the fact that the girl endowed an exalted character that expanded in a crooked way, to get rid of a long oppression?"

Paradoxically, according to Ezras Noshim, Janina’s intelligence and resourcefulness made her unable to control her actions. She was accused of being too independent and sensual. Ezras Noshim did not like the idea that Janina “owned herself” and was not willing to be shaped. Foucault theorizes the concept of the “docile body” that is subjected, used, transformed and improved60 and can be made out of a formless clay61. He describes a number of places (prisons, schools, the army etc.) where the docile body can be trained, disciplined and manipulated. Janina left the house of her aunt and refused her body to be docile. Her case was closed, even though Ezras Noshim was unable to understand her behavior. The organization failed in disciplining her body and influencing her will.

Prostitution

Almost every case presented in this paper touched on the topic of sex and prostitution. It seems like Ezras Noshim gave a downgraded level of credibility to women that requested help. Laja Justman was 26 years old and worked in a sewing workshop. She lived with her siblings in Buenos Aires. She came to the offices of Ezras Noshim to “reveal a secret” that her neighbors had conspired against her to sell her to the women traffickers. Her relatives reported that her behavior had gotten worse three years ago. She began to believe that her brothers were living with individuals who pretended to profit from her opprobrium. She started begging the Ezras Noshim to save her from her enemies. The organization tended to use the term “imaginary enemies” referring to testimonies given by women and girls. Miranda Fricker argues that those kinds of speakers can suffer a testimonial injustice. The prejudice on the hearer’s side causes them to give

61 Ibid, p. 135.
the speaker less credibility that they would otherwise have given. Ezras Noshim was informed as Laja was committed to a young man and suffered from “an unhappy love affair.” Even though she required a special care, it was impossible to put her in the hospital. Syma Rosenberg for having several lovers, was described as “retarded.” Ezras Noshim apparently believed that a normal woman could not have such sexual desires, and that such behavior can lead to prostitution. The organization considered and evaluated statements given by those women. As historians, we must keep in mind that the records of these interviews might not be completely accurate or completely represent the perspectives and experiences of the interviewees given the cultural assumptions and perspectives of the interviewers.

Fricker also describes a second type of epistemic injustice, called hermeneutical injustice. The most common case is when a woman who suffers sexual harassment cannot fully comprehend her experience and communicates unintelligibly to others. Ezras Noshim mentioned that women expressed themselves in an incoherent and inarticulate manner and interpreted wrongly certain facts. It might be that the organization was not in the position and did not know how to correct their cognitive biases and consider epistemic justice as a virtue and mission. It is highly possible that Ezras Noshim was wrong in its capacity as a giver of knowledge and as a subject of social understanding.

Hinda Perla Gutkowska showed up at Ezras Noshim’s offices to request a certificate of morality in order to bring her 19-year-old daughter from Poland to Argentina. Ezras Noshim learned that Hinda was separated from her husband for several years, worked as a masseur nurse, and had another 14-year-old daughter that lived with her. The interrogation, however, undertaken

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63 Ibid., p. 1-8, 30-40.
by the organization in order to specify details related to the conditions of her life, “casted doubt on
the veracity of her statements.” Having had suspicions about Hinda’s true occupation, Ezras Noshim invited her to be truthful in her testimony, making her understand that sincerity could perhaps be more profitable, “since the Ezras Noshim had the possibility of discovering everything she wanted to hide.” “This insinuation,” as described by Ezras Noshim, encouraged Hinda to expand her story. Apparently, Hinda had arrived in Brazil in 1928, accompanied by her husband and a 6-year-old daughter. After two years of living in Sao Paulo, she separated from her husband and came to Argentina where she worked for a certain time as a masseur nurse. Due to the shortage of work, she had economic difficulties and decided to join the cabaret "Montmarte" as a dancer. She explained that her work consisted in accompanying those who come to dance or entertain themselves, charging for her services a commission on the alcoholic beverages the customer consumed. In addition, she received a daily salary. This allowed her to comfortably cover her expenses. Ezras Noshim did not believe her statements and reported that they “perfectly know the character of that class of dancers, who are nothing but comfort women, who still want to preserve apparently decorum.” Ezras Noshim was interested if Hinda’s 14-year-old daughter knew her mother’s occupation. The organization questioned her as well as Hinda’s landlord and they both answered that Hinda’s absences during the night were due to her nursing night shifts. Hinda begged with tears that the Ezras Noshim would grant her the document to bring her 19-year-old daughter to Argentina. Ezras Noshim stated that “as a mother, Hinda, deserved to be pitied, but the goodwill of the Ezras Noshim was not enough to be able to respond favorably to her request, due to the fact that her means of life were dishonest and the circumstances were not very uplifting for moral integrity of the girls.” In addition, “there was a probability that Hinda would lose the affection to her daughters, in the case they would find out about her occupation.” It is not clear if Hinda
obtained the certificate but she promised to return to “a normal life” and settle with a small business.

José Medina uses the term “insensitivity” when it comes to “being cognitively and affectively numbed to the lives of others.”⁶⁴ For him the core of epistemic injustice is being inattentive and unconcerned by people’s experiences, problems, and aspirations and not being able to connect with them. Medina thinks that there is a need for epistemic resistance in epistemic injustices that are both highly influenced by different theories of oppression. He emphasizes the need for epistemic interaction that consists in capacity to relate and to care for the interests of others. Ezras Noshim used insinuations to threat and push Hinda to reveal more details about her occupation. Hinda, by giving her testimony as an oppressed subject, had to endure not only epistemic deficit but also the epistemic excesses. Ezras Noshim used their excessive authority and self-confidence to enjoy and spoil their epistemic character.⁶⁵ The organization did not believe Hinda and seemed to be insensitive to her difficult situation. By using the position of power, Ezras Noshim treated Hinda as someone unworthy of trust and a bad influence for other people. In addition, it is possible that questioning Hinda’s 14-year old daughter could disrupt the mother-daughter relationship by destroying the authority of the mother by Ezras Noshim.

**Earnings and economic independence**

Prostitution in Argentina offered a significant source of income. Brothel owners, pimps and madams created a lucrative venture that was often financially beneficial also for female

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⁶⁵ Ibid., p.24.
prostitutes themselves. Their earnings from sex work were very often sufficient to “retire” from prostitution and allowed them to start their own business.\footnote{Sandra McGee Deutsch, \textit{Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation. A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955}, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 115-116.}

	extit{Ezras Noshim} described the case of Paula Kowalska as the one with “the happy ending.” Paula was 32 years old when she arrived in Buenos Aires in 1926. She was already married and came to Argentina with her husband. The couple separated after a short time because of incompatibility of characters. The woman, young and “inexperienced,” had in Buenos Aires several fellow countrymen, among them also ones that belonged to “the tenebrous world.” Paula, a seamstress by profession, was in a position to make a living but her compatriots led her to the wrong path and “dazzled her with the lavish life they led.” She began like many others, in the vile trade in one of the houses of Rosario, where she remained until those establishments were closed in 1930. Back in Buenos Aires, she continued to prostitute herself until mid-1935, when she decided to withdraw from her “denigrating occupation.” With the savings that she managed to raise, she established a tailoring workshop, an occupation that provided her the means of living.

In many cases, prostitution could offer better income than other jobs intended for women at that time. Paula had skills and profession but decided to join her fellow countrymen in sex work. \textit{Ezras Noshim} blamed her age, inexperience and bad influence. There is, however, a possibility that some women entered prostitution willingly and/or for pure financial profit. Some prostitutes could make large sums of money if they did not directly depend on the pimp and did not have to share their wages with madams or brothel owners. Others had to pay a percentage to their procurers but still earned more than they would have done in different low-skill jobs.\footnote{Sandra McGee Deutsch, \textit{Crossing Borders, Claiming a Nation. A History of Argentine Jewish Women, 1880-1955}, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 115-117.} Nora Glickman quotes an Argentinian superintendent, Ernesto Pareja who reported in 1937 that “Jewish prostitutes had
no moral qualms, and their desire to obtain money was frequently the source of their degradation.”
In this statement, he compared them to other European prostitutes (Catholic/Protestant) whose behavior was motivated by long periods of poverty.\(^6\) His distinction and understanding of the problem was based mainly on racial aspects and the idea that Jews are considered to be a different and inferior race.

*Ezras Noshim* praised Paula for her willingness to “rehabilitate” herself. Interestingly, the organization never denounced the source from which Paula earned her savings as if selling her body was considered a real profession. It is unknown if financial autonomy let Paula be admitted into a “respectable” and mainstream Jewish society in Argentina. Many women could not fully leave, ignore or disconnect with their previous occupation. One of the most famous examples of how a Jewish woman was struggling with the past after gaining economic independence, is the story of Raquel Liberman (Liberman’s story is not a part of the cases found in the archives by the author).

Raquel was born in Berdichev, Kiev in 1900. When she was 19, she married Yaacov Ferber and a year later she gave birth to their first son. Raquel and her husband lived in Warsaw where they worked as a seamstress and a tailor. In 1921 Yaacov decided to travel to Argentina to join his sister who had been living there for a few years. He was hoping to earn enough money to bring his family and start a new life. In 1922, Raquel came to Buenos Aires with her two sons and she found out that Yaacov had no stable income and suffered from tuberculosis that was probably the cause of his death, one year later. Raquel became a widow with very little qualifications to find a job in a provincial village of Tapalque where she lived at that time. Raquel decided to leave her children with entrusted neighbor couple and go to the capital of Argentina alone. She did not speak Spanish.

and for that reason she tried to connect with the Yiddish speaking community in Buenos Aires. There is little knowledge about the circumstances and reasons that led Raquel to enter prostitution. She worked in sex trade for four years and gave a percentage of her earnings to her “caftan” pimp (the reference to the caftan – the traditional robe of Eastern European Jewish men), Jamie Cissinger, in exchange for his protection. She managed to put away savings and received help from her compatriot in keeping the money safe. Raquel had enough earnings to abandon prostitution and open an antique shop. Unfortunately, after finally regaining freedom, she started receiving physical threats and pressure from the Zwi Migdal traffickers. In 1929, she decided to report it to the police for the first time but her denunciation was not successful. At this point, the Zwi Migdal members managed to trick her into marrying one of their traffickers. Raquel did not know that the religious ceremony with Jose Salomon Korn, nicknamed Bolshevik, was actually held in the central office of the organization. Very soon Raquel realized that she had been fooled and her new husband was a pimp. Korn took away all her belongings (according to police investigation - 90,000 pesos) and forced her to work in one of the brothels in Buenos Aires. In addition, the Zwi Migdal sent Raquel’s papers to the court indicating that she was a prostitute by profession so she would not lose her authorization. Raquel did not give up and decided to seek help from Ezras Noshim and the Police Inspector, Julio Alsogaray who was investigating the Zwi Migdal for years. She filed again a formal complaint and testified against the traffickers. Her public denunciation helped to convict over a hundred Zwi Migdal active members. Even though the victory in court did not manage to jail or deport most of the pimps nor close up all of the brothels, Raquel became a symbol for the struggle of victimized women and the trial increased public awareness of the problem of forced prostitution. Interestingly, Raquel protected her family throughout the whole process by keeping her legal marriage in Poland and the birth of her children a secret. In public opinion, she
was considered to be a woman who arrived alone in Argentina. Tragically, Raquel did not fully enjoy her “freedom” because in 1935 she died of thyroid cancer.\textsuperscript{69}

Paula’s story resembles Raquel’s experience. In Paula’s case, however, the political situation was slightly different (prostitution was illegal at that time). In addition, the organizations like the \textit{Zwi Migdal} were slowly losing their power and influence. Also, despite the class and gender borders, Jewish women started entering new professions.\textsuperscript{70}

\textit{Ezras Noshim} describes Paula’s case as a happy one as if opening a tailoring workshop was enough to fully “rehabilitate” herself. The organization did not mention any long term emotional consequences of prostitution and did not offer any other resources for Paula’s recovery. This superficial understanding of prostitute’s rehabilitation could lead to deeper and more severe ramifications related to trauma. Nora Glickman conducted interviews with Raquel’s relatives and came to the conclusion that especially her children “did not succeed in freeing themselves of their mother’s shady past.”\textsuperscript{71} It can mean that multiple generations can transmit the damage of trauma and stigma throughout the years, often silencing the pain. On the other hand, Sandra McGee Deutsch mentions a Polish journalist who noted that “a number of families had made fortunes in selling sexual services and then quietly sought admission into normal society.”\textsuperscript{72} It is possible that in Argentina today, the descendants of both victims and perpetrators of prostitution, live closely together knowing or not knowing about their ancestors’ past.

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Certificate of morality

In 1936, Ezras Noshim issued 221 certificates of morality requested by people who wanted to bring their relatives from Europe to Argentina. According to Ezras Noshim’s report, the certificate had to prove the good reputation and impeccable background of the applicant. Together with an independent police certificate, those were the required documents requested by the General Immigration Authority and the Consulate of Poland.

In 1930s, there was a growing need for new countries willing to accept Jewish refugees from Europe. Argentina at that time, however, became more stringent in their admission requirements and regulations. Until 1934, passengers in transit, family members and farmers did not have to pay immigration duties. After a new bill was passed, new immigrants had to pay a money deposit until they proved their “honesty, solvency, and good health” as well as “good political and judicial conduct and no disruption of the social order.”73 In 1936, Argentina declared its willingness to absorb primarily new immigrants from the Netherlands and Nordic countries because of their “racial superiority” and Argentina’s interest in Protestant settlers, as the only good alternative to non-Catholic immigration. In 1937, Jewish organizations observed that there were new obstacles and a bias against Jewish immigration. Many of the applications submitted by Jewish residents of Buenos Aires were rejected by Argentinian authorities. There was a systematic discrimination policy against communists and there was a tendency to identify Jews with this political ideology.74

Zosia Zylberszac wanted to obtain the certificate of morality in order to bring her younger sister from Poland to Argentina. She presented to Ezras Noshim her letters of recommendation,

74 Ibid., p. 139-141.
signed by well-known merchants and those that formally guaranteed her good moral condition. *Ezras Noshim* stated that they were not usually guided by the written recommendations because even though they came from people worthy of faith, they were not based on the knowledge that the signatory had about the person. *Ezras Noshim* studied Zosia’s personal information and learned that her married status did not match the one she had indicated on the form. Apparently, Zosia had been married for 8 years by religious law, with a morally disqualified individual who lived for several years at the expense of the woman. She publicly exercised an infamous trade, from which, apparently, she had not withdrawn altogether although there were certain indications that the couple was trying to rehabilitate themselves. In the opinion of *Ezras Noshim*, a 32-year-old Zosia should have separated from her husband in the process of regenerating, and moved away from everything that formed her past. The organization, especially wanted her to separate from the ones who could cause her degradation. Even though Zosia’s case and her willingness to rehabilitate herself sounded promising, her request was denied because *Ezras Noshim* did not want to take legal and ethical responsibility for moral integrity of Zosia’s 25-year-old sister.

*Ezras Noshim* rejected only 6 requests made to obtain the certificate of morality in 1936. Zosia’s case was one of them. She and many other Jewish women at that time were impacted, controlled and disciplined by different systems of power that were complexly interwoven. Their experience cannot be simply understood in terms of being Jewish and of being a woman considered independently. The analysis needs to include the interactions between their multiple identities.

The theory of intersectionality was first introduced and elaborated by the legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. She centered Black women in the analysis in order to contrast the multidimensionality of Black women’s experience and explain a problematic consequence of the
tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories.\textsuperscript{75} Intersectionality has its grounding in Black feminism but it can also easily travel to other disciplines in the humanities and it can be a useful tool in addressing other marginalized communities and other manifestations of social power.\textsuperscript{76} Zosia was a person subordinated by an intersectional approach. She was defined by her country of origin, sex, race and occupation. As an immigrant, she was not a full citizen in Argentina. Her Polish origin was undesirable and her Jewishness was treated as a separate race. Her sexuality and gender were expected to follow certain paths of morality. Zosia suffered from simultaneous, multiple and overlapping discrimination from the outside and within her own community. The interlocked ways of oppression influenced not only her life but also the life of her relatives.

In 1936, Jews constituted around 46% of all the immigration from Poland to Argentina. Three years before the outbreak of World War II, Poles, and especially Polish Jews, started searching for a new home and anxiously waited to be included in the immigration quotas. \textit{Ezras Noshim} could not have anticipated that the decision about issuing certificates of morality could influence to a lesser or greater extent someone’s life in Europe. Even though Argentinian state was rejecting many of the immigration applications, not obtaining a certificate from \textit{Ezras Noshim} completely put to an end a chance to bring Zosia’s sister to Argentina.


Table 1. Polish Immigration to Argentina 1934-1938

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Immigration From Poland to Argentina</th>
<th>Jewish Immigration from Poland to Argentina</th>
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<td>1934</td>
<td>2056</td>
<td>1472</td>
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<td>1935</td>
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</tr>
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<td>1936</td>
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<td>2750</td>
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<td>1937</td>
<td>8470</td>
<td>2433</td>
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In rare cases, the Polish consul could waive the need for such documentation but they would have had to be personally responsible for that decision. Nevertheless, the immigration commissioner had the power to veto and refuse entering Argentina even after the immigrant had reached the port of Buenos Aires. It is understandable that *Ezras Noshim* did not want to risk its reputation by giving a mendacious certificate that would not correspond with other documentation prepared by Argentinian authorities. It is, however, tragic that Zosia’s sister, as a consequence of being unable to obtain a certificate to join her sister, and with no other place to escape from Poland, consequently die in the Holocaust.

*Marriage and Divorce*

Certain religious practices arising from traditional Jewish marriage and divorce laws led to the misery of Eastern European women. After wars, pogroms, and other forms of oppressions, many Orthodox Jewish women found themselves separated from their husbands. They were often unable to confirm if their husbands were dead because such a determination needed to be attested by at least one Jewish witness. The husbandless-women were often considered outcasts by their

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own communities, and as agunot (agunah - an abandoned wife), they could not marry again. Such women were very vulnerable, left without any resources and many had engaged in prostitution before arriving in the New World. Ezras Noshim, together with the Polish consulate in Buenos Aires, often advised and assisted families in cases when the husband was usually in Argentina or in unknown location, while his wife and children in Poland searched for him. They also helped in coordinating the process of divorce. Cypa Sobkowskı caused the Ezras Noshim a lot of “inconvenience and annoyance.” According to the records, she turned out to be a “highly unbalanced person.” She arrived from Montevideo to Buenos Aires with her husband. After their arrival, her husband left her, accusing her of adultery. She did not have children on her own. Pretending that she would accept a “get” (the Jewish divorce document), under the conditions that the Ezras Noshim considered disadvantageous, the organization found her a working position. Keeping the matter in suspense, they hoped to reconcile the marriage. When they began to deal with the husband and his relatives, Cypa adopted “a strange attitude, causing scandals in in the domicile of the husband.” Ezras Noshim claimed that she disrupted their plan for family reunification. Cypa’s character became aggressive and she was not in a position to perform any work. She kept “bothering” her husband. One day he disappeared to an unknown destination because of the desire “to free himself from the discomfort of the women.” She frequently visited the offices of the Ezras Noshim and loudly claimed that the organization had hidden him. According to the Ezras Noshim, she was not really a mental patient but someone who was “spiritually wounded in her most vulnerable point (marriage).” As she “exhausted their patience,” they managed to find her husband in the city of Asuncion (Paraguay). Ezras Noshim sent her to

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that city where she became calmer and where she started working in a candy factory. Even though she was not together with her husband, he helped her materially.

Cypa represented a very common case among Jewish women immigrants in Argentina. She could not support herself without the help of her husband. She could neither start a new life without his permission. Even though her life conditions were threatened, Ezras Noshim considered her behavior as annoying for both the organization and her husband. Although the marriage seemed to be over, Ezras Noshim tried to do everything possible to reconcile the broken relationship. Interestingly, despite the fact that Cypa’s case was put into category of mentally ill women in the annual report, her situation was not really treated seriously in that way. Ezras Noshim wanted cases to be resolved quickly and women who posed a challenge to their ideas of a proper solution were deemed problematic.

Marianna and Josek Lehrer got married in Argentina. The marriage appears to have been stable during its first years. Josek, however, began to neglect work and spent his days in the cafes. Marianna, to attend the needs of the family, was forced to work, but was unable to earn enough to maintain the home in its entirety. According to the neighbors, the abnormal situation led to continuous brawls and disputes, during which Josek, on more than one occasion, told Marianna, unabashedly, that she was financially responsible for the whole household because he was not willing to work. Despite feeling deeply indignant, Marianna initially decided not to separate from her husband because she had confidence that Josek was momentarily diverted and, would soon return on the right path. But the husband's pretensions became more and more insistent, and he began to inflict brutal punishments on Marianna. Josek’s behavior reaffirmed the desire of Marianna to separate, but she met the tenacious opposition of the husband, who by violent means, tried to keep her by his side. Marianna decided to go to Ezras Noshim in search of advice. The
people of Ezras Noshim affirmed that it is “a healthy intention” not to be separated from her husband, and Ezras Noshim promised her all necessary moral support. In the confrontation carried out between the spouses in Ezras Noshim’s office, Josek was not able to refute the accusations made by his wife, and remained very recalcitrant about taking care of the welfare of his family, as well as leaving his family free. Josek’s attitude led to the adoption of the necessary measures to remove him from the house, which was done through a complaint presented to the policeman, who ordered his arrest on the grounds of attempted corruption. For lack of sufficient evidence, the Court ruled for his acquittal. Marianna took advantage of her husband’s absence and moved to another location with all her furniture, goods and other possessions.

In this case, Ezras Noshim did everything in their power to separate the spouses, despite initial Marianna’s resistance and unfulfilled hope to reconcile with Josek. Amy R. Friedman argues that male refugees suffer often from “heightened male vulnerability” that combined with the additional stress of resettlement in a new culture can lead them to resort to domestic violence. In this way, they can reestablish control and regain power. Josek’s brutality was probably the reason that pushed Ezras Noshim to remove him from the Lehrer’s household and “set Marianna free.” We do not know, however, if Marianna managed to receive get (the Jewish divorce document) from Josek.

Interestingly, Rabbis and Jewish scribes in Buenos Aires could not agree and perform the divorce procedure without a written permission from Ezras Noshim. The organization had power in religious circles and in 1936 carried out an extensive campaign against what they called “a

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pseudorabbi” who performed a variety of Jewish ceremonies that were in conflict with elementary precepts of Judaism.

**Traffickers and madams**

Traffickers sometimes tricked women into sex work but most of them entered prostitution consciously, if not necessarily happily. To meet economic needs or support the family, often women became prostitutes through their relatives or lovers. The institution of marriage could legally protect couples involved in sex work and close the door on possibility of major intervention from *Ezras Noshim*. Chana Lustiger was a mother of two male children and she lived with her husband. *Ezras Noshim* knew that she was working as a prostitute and they were interested in knowing the circumstances and causes “that impelled her to give herself up to an infamous trade.” They believed that in many cases the depravity may have mitigating reasons but there was “no justification for her.” Her decision was not economically motivated because “her fall was not primarily caused by the precarious economic situation nor the desire to live with more ease.”

Chana’s husband, Szymon, was a hairdresser by profession and provided for the family. Although it seemed to the organization that he could have continued supporting the family for years, he took part in some kind of criminal activity. Being married with children legally protected Chana and *Ezras Noshim* expressed their strong dissatisfaction with that matter. They reported that “any act committed to the detriment of society is repressed by law and it is simply a lack of foresight by the legislator that this form of crime committed by a mother is almost unpunishable.” They knew well that they could not count on the legal force but they could not remain indifferent and wanted to rehabilitate both Chana and Szymon through moral instructions and exhortation. *Ezras Noshim* decided to intervene by first obtaining more information about the Lustiger family. This resulted in identifying some of the close relatives of the woman, residents of Buenos Aires, whom they
thought they could use as “effective assistant.” The Lustiger couple was called to Ezras Noshim’s offices and questioned separately. They tried, with contradictory statements, to appear as honest people, but Ezras Noshim “recognized their character as dark, before the evidence that was in their possession.” They established in a clear way the guilt of the Lustiger spouses and threatened them by sending a request to the state authorities to expel Szymon Lustiger from the country. Apparently, Szymon’s criminal activity mentioned before was him being a trafficker. This warning together with the moral teaching of how devastating their behavior was for Lustiger’s children caused a willingness to change and rehabilitate. Szymon made a solemn promise to immediately resume his work and provide the support to his family. Ezras Noshim subsequently checked multiple times on the Lustiger and they reported that Chana remained at home at night, and that her husband resumed his job. It is possible that Chana and Szymon genuinely wanted to “rehabilitate” themselves and Ezras Noshim’s activities truly influenced their way of thinking.

Sandra McGee Deutsch argues that sexual experimentation also may have attracted a number of women to enter prostitution.\(^{80}\) It is also possible that some women entered the sex trade voluntarily as a means of achieving wealth and power. Hanna Cynamon Rozencwajg was 30 years old and had arrived in Buenos Aires in 1928 with her husband. She was a street vendor, an occupation that allowed her to attend the needs of her household, while there was only one child. With the birth of the second and after the third child, the expenses of the family increased, which imposed greater financial demands on the husband. However, his enthusiasm and energy were decreasing because his earnings were insignificant, and the family began to suffer deprivation. According to what Ezras Noshim was informed, the situation was so difficult that the woman resolved to face the situation, admitting a man into her house as a tenant, who soon became her

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lover. The relations of the woman with this last one did not last, and her "tenants" changed continuously. In this way, “the degeneration/decadency” of the woman began, which eventually resulted in prostitution. For two years she was attending one of the brothels located in Pedro Mendoza. She was financially maintaining her family which included her three children and her husband, who had also become a sex trafficker. *Ezras Noshim* intended to proceed and rehabilitate the couple but Hanna and her husband changed the address and left for unknown reasons. The organization, however, promised to continue with “the pertinent inquiries.”

In 1930s Polish authorities had a list of 590 suspects involved in the human trafficking in Argentina. Some of the traffickers were just easily attracted to the easy money and some were pushed into “the brothel business” after their failed start in Argentina. According to Edward Bristow, however, most of them consisted of “lumpen elements from the ghettos of Europe either with previous criminal records or some experience in prostitution.”

*Ezras Noshim* reported that Fajbusz Nussbaum was denounced as a trafficker who helped bring women from Poland to Argentina. It was presumed that such a trade could at that time be carried out only in a clandestine manner, and the embarkation could be done only with the help of people on board. *Ezras Noshim* questioned a mature woman who had embarked on the French steamboat "Eubee" and arrived in Argentina with a passport that did not contain any visa. This fearful woman did not want, despite all efforts, to reveal the names of the people who had taken part in her trip or to reveal those who had sponsored her on board. Since it was “a respectable lady” that had relatives in Buenos Aires, she did not fall within the powers of *Ezras Noshim* in regard of legality of the trip. However, she could be an object of reprobation and even be a reason to resort to coercive measures if the people on board received clandestine passengers destined for dishonest ends. *Ezras Noshim* could not

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confirm the veracity of the complaint because they did not have enough evidence. They wanted, however, warn the authorities of the French Navigation Company about the suspicions that existed.

The case of Fajbusz Nussbaum shows that trafficking was a very complex endeavor that involved the cooperation of many people from different countries and institutions. Their “technique” made it difficult for *Ezras Noshim* to find necessary evidence. Traffickers’ cooperating parties felt threatened or possibly loyal and did not want to reveal traffickers’ names. It is interesting that the age was a factor in what cases *Ezras Noshim* was willing/was allowed to undertake. It is unclear, however, how “the mature lady” was even able to enter the country without a visa. Maybe her age and physical appearance compelled respect and compassion that allowed her to elude some of the legal immigration requirements.

When the Argentinian authorities started prosecuting male traffickers, women/lady pimps/madames started gaining more power and influence in the prostitution rings. For women, it was easier and less suspicious to enter the country with other women as companions. In addition, new Jewish women immigrants could identify with their experience and they might have appeared as more trustworthy than men. It came more easily for madames to convince them to become prostitutes.  

Following a complaint, *Ezras Noshim* learned that a woman in charge of a house was trying to divert her young tenant from “the right path” by lavishing her protection and friendship and giving her some “wicked advice.” The proceedings that were carried out by *Ezras Noshim* allowed to establish that the woman to whom the denunciation alluded was called Ruchla Bauner and her tenant Sura Szrer. The young Sura lived in very friendly relations with Ruchla and was

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influenced by her, Sura began without realizing it, to neglect her work in the fabric factory, where previously she had worked assiduously. Ezras Noshim reported that another series of unfavorable indications were added, which made them suspect “the true intentions” of Ruchla towards Sura. Ezras Noshim decided to intervene and protect “Sura’s moral integrity.” The young woman complied with the warnings of Ezras Noshim and decided to immediately to move to another house, in order to escape from the influence of Ruchla.

It was not explicitly stated whether Ruchla was a madame but her “friendly” attitude raised concerns. She became close with Sura and gained her trust. It is possible that it was Ruchla’s “technique” to “recruit” new prostitutes and Sura almost fall into her trap. Madames often tempted young women by presenting fantasy scenarios where prostitutes’ clients fall in love and then decide to marry them. And since the clients were often not Jewish, it could lead to their full integration into Argentinian society.  

**Conclusion**

Jewish leaders and organizations in the newly formed state of Argentina guarded, disciplined and controlled women through a medicalized perspective setting. They believed that enforcing “moral behavior” would eliminate possible stigmatization and would make Jews more accepted in Argentina. Women who followed customary gender roles and practices could “save” community honor.

The thesis presents Ezras Noshim’s cases of Jewish immigrant women from Eastern Europe whose behaviors were linked to loose morals and other expressions of “mental disturbance.” Their problems were subjected to scientific study and their bodies were disciplined

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and defined by the state of Argentina, physicians, psychiatrists and Ezras Noshim’s members. Prostitution, desire for sexual freedom, pregnancy, and husband’s separation/abandonment were often deployed to justify those women’s actions. Throughout the thesis, we can observe a moral agenda and a civilizing mission of Ezras Noshim that valued primarily the sexual purity and honor of Jewish women.

Ezras Noshim had a jurisdiction over Jewish immigrant women and had the authority to intervene in most of the cases. The organization strictly cooperated with the Argentinian government, police, and other members of the Jewish community, both locally and internationally. This thesis presents eighteen different cases that touched on variety of intertwined topics. Ezras Noshim put eleven of these cases under the category of prostitution and white slavery, two under “cases of inclination to a disorderly life observed in minors,” and 5 under the category of mentally ill women. From what we can understand and explicitly know from the records, eleven of these women were married at some point in their lives and six were single. Among all of those women (married, single or of unknown status), six had children.

Ezras Noshim’s ambitions to regulate and discipline Jewish female bodies furthered the agenda of the Argentinian state to create a healthy body politic. Paradoxically, however, their efforts to give voice to women and to help them rehabilitate their lives also possibly reinforced Jews’ bad reputation by raising public awareness of problems related to Jewish women, prostitution, and promiscuity. Argentina was not the only country where Jews took a strong stand for reasons of public image and morality. In Its neighboring Brazil, the Jewish community also formed different societies and organization for the protection of Jewish women and girls. Even though the records show a low number of Jewish prostitutes in Brazil (In 1936 a study of ten
thousand prostitutes, showed 17 percent coming from Eastern Europe\textsuperscript{84}, Brazilians often referred to all prostitutes and pimps as “polacas” (Polish women) and “cafetoes” (the reference to the traditional robe of Eastern European Jewish men). Jeffrey Lesser quotes the description of Frida Mystal, who was murdered by strangulation: “Polish by birth, this Jew conserved the peculiarities of race (probably Frida as a person who performed religious practices) even while a prostitute.”\textsuperscript{85} Jewish prostitution was controlled by the Zwi Migdal and public opinion often mentioned Poland as the source and main center of prostitution.\textsuperscript{86} Brazilian politics also targeted women and men who threatened the public order. Similarly, to Argentina, Brazil’s civilizing mission viewed the idea of mental and medical hygiene as crucial in both public and private spheres.\textsuperscript{87}

Preserving the community’s image often mattered more than the individual women’s pain and suffering. Women, however, lacked the language to name their pain and they did not know how to articulate the trauma of their experiences or to provide the kind of narrative that the organization would find credible. \textit{Ezras Noshim} often questioned credibility of female prostitutes or sexually compromised women who requested assistance. The status of women in the Jewish community remained inferior to that of men and their words were often neglected and marginalized. However, from \textit{Ezras Noshim}’s records we can learn about the voices of Jewish women even when they were mediated and interpreted through organization and not in accordance with \textit{Ezras Noshim}’s agenda.

\begin{itemize}
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