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Film Review: The Impure: An Abolitionist Documentary Film of the 19th Century Traffic in Jewish Women

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FILM REVIEW

**THE IMPURE¹: AN ABOLITIONIST DOCUMENTARY FILM OF THE
19TH CENTURY TRAFFIC IN JEWISH WOMEN**

Caroline Norma

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KEYWORDS

Argentina, Poland, Eastern Europe, Jewish, Jews, women, sex trafficking, female sexual slavery, prostitution, cemetery, abolitionist, survivors, migrants

AS AN ABOLITIONIST HISTORIAN, it's unusual but exciting to come across a work of historical inquiry that explicitly promotes an anti-prostitution perspective. Andrea Dworkin's *Scapegoat*, published in 2000, set a standard for the approach, but few have since followed its example. Israel-based director Daniel Najenson is an exception with his 2017 documentary film *The Impure* about the nineteenth century traffic in Jewish women into prostitution in Argentina. The film offers a blueprint for history-telling in service of contemporary abolitionist goals. It comprises not only a work of historical inquiry from an anti-prostitution perspective but, also, a document of women's historical sexual enslavement framed both within unchanged circumstances of prostitution today, and the contemporary abolitionist struggle against them.

The late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century history of the sex trafficking of Jewish women to Argentina is already well documented in the academic literature, and is the subject of a number of filmed pieces. But *The Impure* tells this history newly in light of 6000 letters found in an Ezrat Nashim archive written by victims. The letters are pleas for assistance from Jewish women trapped in prostitution in the large sex industries that operated in Buenos Aires, Santa Fe, and other Argentinian cities from the 1880s into the 1930s. They reveal pimping by husbands, torture at the hands of organised crime gangs, and feelings of despair and disgust at being bought. Their stories are given contemporary weight when Najenson interviews elderly Jewish women in Europe who recollect the kidnapping of childhood girlfriends from Poland, and even their own experiences of attempted abduction.

Through the letters, the voices of victims speaking from the grave lead the film's narrative, as does the well-documented story of Raquel Liberman who heroically attempted to free herself from sexual slavery in Buenos Aires through legal action (Böhm, 2014). The film's protagonist, though, is a *contemporary* abolitionist survivor, Sonia Sanchez, who, at the outset, is shown at a women's rights rally

¹ <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/theimpure?autoplay=1>

setting up an exhibit naming famous Argentinian male sex buyers alongside a brothel pricing-menu. Sanchez is interviewed at the rally for a live radio broadcast where she passionately rebuts the anchor's insistence that the sex industry should be legalised with the reply that "there's no independent, free prostitution, there's only free and independent pimping." This statement articulates the argument the documentary then pursues, which is made through detailed description of the history of prostitution entrepreneurialism in Argentina by its Jewish male migrants.

Sanchez is the conduit through which this history is brought into connection with both the contemporary reality of female sexual enslavement in Argentina, as well its local abolitionist struggle. She is shown reading aloud texts of old laws legalising prostitution in Argentina in 1875, and reflecting on their similarity to regulations today mandating sexual infection testing for prostituted women every 15 days. When Sanchez reads letters from nineteenth-century victims pleading for assistance, she comments that, even in 2015, the same silent response meets women in prostitution in Argentina appealing for help: "No one helps them," she concludes. The film is punctuated with such reminders that its historical content does not depict a situation for women that has been relegated to the past. Ideological defences of this situation are similarly highlighted as persisting into the present: Najenson comments that people initially dismissed his plan to make the documentary because Jewish women in Argentina had "just wanted to make money."

The film's title takes the name of a Jewish cemetery in Avellaneda, remaining today, set up by an association formed among Jewish pimps and traffickers to strengthen their operations in Argentina. The cemetery's name, *t'meim* ("impure ones"), is actually the condemnatory label given to pimps, traffickers and other organised criminals by Eastern European Jewish communities in order to ostracise them and marginalise their activities, which primarily harmed Jewish women and girls within these same communities (Jakubczak, 2016). The Argentinian pimps association (originally called 'Varshe', and later Zvi Migdal) therefore established the cemetery for its members who had no access to local Jewish burial facilities and rituals, but this meant prostituted women ended up buried alongside their tormentors. The cemetery still exists, but is not open to visitors and has become dilapidated and overgrown. Najenson confronts local facility staff over this fact, and their responses show community unwillingness to openly share facts of Argentina's historical sex trade for the local Jewish families it would reveal as having originally made their fortunes through the trafficking of women.

Profit and advantage gained by local migrant communities through the trade in women is highlighted throughout the film, and one interviewee recalls the large-scale cultural industries that fed off it. Interviewees emphasise the normalised and romanticised prostitution buying of the time, but Najenson challenges one interviewee to consider whose perspective is reflected in such claims of historical acceptability, given that victims wouldn't have shared any such view, given what was done to them. This point is later emphasised in photographs shown of naked women being auctioned to Argentinian brothel owners, and in pornographic pictures taken of the women, including in the company of fully clothed men in suits. The thousands of Jewish women sexually enslaved for the financial and sexual benefit of these men is an historical injustice hard to overlook in the documentary's telling, and the numbers of men said to have bought them each day are the ballpark of that reported for the wartime "comfort women" enslaved by the Japanese military in World War II.

The horror of the women's experiences is impressed upon viewers most powerfully, though, when Sanchez is shown reacting to a woman's letter in which physical disgust at a sex buyer is described. Her written description causes Sanchez to succumb to a moment of emotional distress, and reflect on shared feelings about her own past experiences. The common feeling and experience of women, across time and place, of prostitution is captured vividly in this scene, and also in the film's final scene which shows Sanchez and a group of fellow survivors holding a little ceremony at the gravesites of their lost sisters, and afterwards having a group hug as the film's credits roll. Lest this inspiring depiction give us hope for the future of abolitionism and men's capacity to reflect on their long history of enslaving women through prostitution, though, prominent left-wing intellectual Mitchell Abidor concluded a written review of *The Impure* published in *Jewish Currents* in 2018 with the opinion of Sonia Sacher that, 'The film would have been better with a lot less of her.'

The Impure can be viewed on Vimeo at <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/theimpure?autoplay=1>

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