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Bodies and Souls
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Q: How is prostitution across the world today comparable to or different from the practices in the time period described in *Bodies and Souls*?

A: The trafficking in women today is very similar to what it was during the time period described in my book. The difference is that pimps are not targeting one religious group and are not going to the trouble of marrying their unwitting victims, although one Albanian trafficker who was convicted in England a few years ago had used the Zwi Migdal method of marrying some of his victims. The same kind of naivete exists among impoverished young women in parts of Eastern Europe, who answer ads in newspapers, are lured with promises of quick money in the West.

Q: While giving a broad perspective on life in the Zwi Migdal's brothels, you focus specifically on Sophia Chamys, Rachel Liberman, and Rebecca Freedman. Why did these three women in particular interest you?

A: The experiences of each of these women illuminated different aspects of the story I wanted to tell.

Sophia was forced into prostitution when she was 13, and is a great example a naïve shtetl girl who really felt as if she was going to have a much better life in America: On the other hand, Rebecca Freedman was a hardened prostitute, and hated to be treated as a victim. I felt her story illustrated the courage and endurance of these women who formed the Society of Truth. Rebecca was the Society's last president, and was completely devoted to the religious cleansing of the bodies of her fellow "sisters" when they died. Rachel Liberman was also a portrait in courage. She was a prostitute who rose up against the Zwi Migdal in Argentina, and was ultimately responsible for their downfall in 1930.

Q: After researching and writing *Bodies and Soul* and finding out the extent of the exploitation, did it color the way you felt about men? Did it affect your feelings about the culture and practices of Judaism? Or: "What are you currently working?"

A: I gained a great deal of respect for the strength of these women—all of them marginalized and most of them illiterate. I was amazed at how they fought so hard to die with dignity. I also gained a great deal of respect for Judaism, although I was quite shocked by how easily a great many Jews turned their backs on these desperate women when they reached out for help. The research did not color the way I think about men. There are good and bad men everywhere, and these guys obviously had no morals and were incredibly ruthless. They were greedy; they treated the women as mere commodities. But most men at that time had little respect for women.

Q: *Bodies and Soul* contains a vast amount of research about the Zwi Migdal, the Society of Truth, and so much more about that region and time period. During your research, you must have discovered many facts about prostitution, life in the shtetls, politics or other topics that were surprising to you but you were not able to use in *Bodies and Souls*. What are examples of other unusual or little-known facts that you uncovered during your research?

A: What was amazing to me was how well known this story was in the Yiddish literature. There is a great short story called "The Man from Buenos Aires" by Shalom Aleichem which tells the story of a pimp returning to his native shtetl from South America: He tells his fellow passenger on the train how important he is, how rich he is, and how great his work is in South America: There are others as well. Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Scum* is a novel about the Jewish involvement in the white slave trade.

I was also amazed at how much was known about the trade among the Jewish community as a whole and their efforts to stop the trade. Today, this whole chapter is something that few Jews know anything about. And yet, there were many historians I ran into in Brazil who refused to discuss this with me even years after the event. I was going to include stories about how they treated me, but ultimately decided to leave them out. One Jewish historian had taken numerous police files of the prostitutes and was keeping them in her office. Others had taken other kinds of files, such as old health records, and either destroyed them or hid them so that no one could ever refer to them. I was not welcomed with open arms by anyone in this research.

Life in the shtetls was also interesting. I learned a lot of from Jews in old age homes about the extreme poverty of Jews in the shtetls. I also learned that the concept of escape and "America" were magical to these people, and this helped explain why so many young women were extremely eager to leave their homes and venture into the unknown.

Q: In the last three of your books—*Bodies and Soul*, *Hitler's Silent Partners*, and *See No Evil*—the theme of injustice and a passion for uncovering hidden truths are markedly evident. Can you tell us why you focus on stories that contain these elements?

A: I think I focus on these stories because they are the most difficult to tell. The research for a journalist is staggering, and at the same time a great challenge. I really wanted to give these marginalized women a voice in *Bodies and Souls*. They are not great figures in history, and this story is a small footnote in the history of immigration of North and South America, but what they did is truly amazing. They built their own synagogue and they established their own cemetery, and they took care of each other. They refused to consider themselves victims. They went on with their lives, educated their children, and when they died, they hoped that they could finally retrieve their lost identities as honest and devout Jews. In many ways their lives were geared to their deaths because it was the only way they could truly be brought back to themselves, and this is why for them, the *tahara* ritual—the Jewish purification of the dead—was so important.