

Jolanta Sikorska–Kulesza

PROSTITUTION IN CONGRESS POLAND*

The prostitution we know of from historical sources is mainly urban and seems to be an inseparable element of urban space, inscribed especially in the big city landscape. Trying to formulate its assumptions of a moral and biological nature, we can easily enumerate the factors that turn the town at large, and especially the town undergoing intensive urbanization and a rapid development of industry, into the greatest market of sexual services. Let us note, however, at the very outset, that prostitution also has its own extra-urban history (rural, wandering, wayside prostitution). This problem as regards the 19th c. in Poland has not been examined at all; therefore we cannot give a satisfactory answer to the question of its size and significance¹.

According to data collected by the Ministry of the Interior about prostitution in Russia in 1889, outside the towns in Congress Poland it constituted merely 4.6% of the institutionalized and state-supervised commerce in love². In fact this percentage was even smaller, since it included small centres (e.g. Puławy, with at least one brothel), which on the strength of

* A paper delivered at the 16th Congress of Polish Historians in Wrocław in September 1999.

¹ The only article on rural prostitution in 19th century Poland was written in the 1860s and already represents the value of a source: J. A. Rolle, *Materialy do topografii lekarskiej i higieny Podola. Prostytucja (Materials for the Medical Topography and Sanitary Conditions of Podolia. Prostitution)*, "Przegląd Lekarski" 1869. pp. 305–307, 313–315, 321. See J. Sikorska–Kulesza, *Prostytucja w XIX wieku na Podolu w świetle badań Józefa Apolinnarego Rolle (Prostitution in Podolia in the 19th c. in the Light of Research by Józef Apolinary Rolle)*, "Przegląd Wschodni", vol. V, fasc. 3 (19), pp. 435–452.

² *Prostitutsiya v Rossiyskoy imperii po obsledovaniyu 1-go avgusta 1889 g.*, ed. A. Dubravskiy, Sankt Peterburg 1890 (in the series *Statistika Rossiyskoy imperii*, vol. XIII). All the calculations in the present article, unless annotated, have been made on the basis of this source.

a reform were deprived of town-status, without, however, being deprived of some urban traits.

The official sources do not register rural prostitution; however, this was not because it did not exist. The principle of the state's attitude to prostitution was to legalize it wherever the authorities intended to protect the health of the population. In practice, this led to an interest in prostitution (and intention to keep it up) in centres where the army was stationed.

Whatever the extent of rural prostitution, because of the size and structure of the rural population (the percentage of single males much lower than in the cities) and of more severe, it seems, moral norms (frequently sentencing a harlot to banishment from a village), as well as the possibility of greater control over an individual by the village community, it could not produce a market of paid sexual services characteristic of a town, with all its diversity of forms, brothels, an hierarchical world of prostitutes, procurers, white-slave traders, owners and hosts of brothels and finally the vice squads.

In Congress Poland, just as in all of 19th c. Europe, there was an obligatory system of registering prostitution. The state granted it the right to exist, treating it as a necessary evil. In the name of social order and public health it tolerated prostitution, committing itself to minimize its negative effects.

The foundations of the registration system were created by the Prussian authorities for Warsaw in 1802³. From then onwards, until World War I, there existed an obligation to license houses of ill-fame, to register women engaged in prostitution in

³ *Ordynacya zabiegająca uwodzeniu młodych dziewcząt do życia nierządowego w bordelach, lub innym sposobem za pieniądze, nie mniej przepisy na zatamowanie zarazy wenerycznej w Warszawie obejmująca* (*The Ordinance Counteracting the Seduction of Young Girls into Immoral Life in the Brothels, or the Other Road to Paid-Love, Also Containing Directions Aimed at Stopping the Venereal Plague in Warsaw*), Berlin 1802. Text in: F. Giedroyc, *Zarys historyczny szpitala św. Łazarza w Warszawie*, Warszawa 1897, pp. 209–219. Polish historiography on the subject of prostitution is very small in volume, especially when compared to the rich German, English and French literature on the subject. Apart from out-dated works by F. Giedroyc, W. Zaleski, and J. Macko, written before 1939, and popular works: S. Milewski, *Ciemne sprawy dawnych warszawiaków* (*The Shady Life of Old Varsovians*), Warszawa 1982; chapter *Panny stojące i demimondówki* (*Street-Corner and Demi-Monde Young Women*); on prostitution in Congress Poland see: M. Karpińska, *Złodzieje, agenci, policjanci strażnicy... Przystępstwa pospolite w Warszawie 1815–1830* (*Thieves, Agents, Police Guards... Common Offences in Warsaw in 1815–1830*), Warszawa 1999, chapter *Domy publiczne i prostytucja* (*Houses of Ill-Fame and Prostitution*), pp. 53–70.

those houses or on their own account, to subject them to medical examination⁴ and compulsory medical treatment, if necessary. Endeavours were also made to outline the spatial framework for prostitution. Several attempts made by the authorities of Congress Poland to create a new legal regulation that would suit the needs of the city were crowned by instructions issued in 1843⁵, which started a series of ordinances aimed above all at a redevelopment of medical control and police supervision. In town architecture the boundaries of the world of women of easy virtue were delineated not only by a bawdy-house or a private apartment, but also by a centre of medical control, a hospital with a ward for venereal diseases and by a prison. In the second half of the 19th c. the supervision was exercised by medical police committees attached to the medical departments of *guberniya* headquarters (or to municipal governments); they were created on the model of the Warsaw Medical Police Committee, and from these sources we draw most official information on prostitution.

Women tried to avoid registration. Apart from humiliating medical examinations, the legalization of their trade linked with the obligatory exchange of a passport for a document authorizing them to practice prostitution and testifying to their good health condition, signified a loss of liberty, stigmatized them and condemned them to prostitution in the future. Women who treated prostitution as an occasional occupation, enabling them to earn additional money, by being included in the list of licensed prostitutes, a fact hard to conceal later on, inevitably lost their "decent" permanent jobs or were barred from getting them. This is confirmed by the statistics of those who were deregistered. In 1889 barely 0.9% of women recovered their passports due to taking a different job (3.2% owed their liberation to marriage,

⁴ Compulsory medical examination embraced not only prostitutes in the 19th c. In order to counteract the spread of venereal diseases the police took women suspected of "immoral living", especially those from the margin of society, to be medically examined, by force. E.g. In Warsaw in the 1880s, every year from about 4,000 to 5,600 women were detained and examined, out of whom merely 700–1,200, as a category suspected of professional prostitution, underwent permanent surveillance by the police-medical committee. F. Giedroyć, *Prostytutki jako źródło chorób wenerycznych w Warszawie (w ciągu ostatnich lat kilku)* (*Prostitutes as the Source of Venereal Diseases in Warsaw During the Last Few Years*), Warszawa 1892, p. 44.

⁵ *Przepisy policyjno-lekarskie do zapobieżenia szerzeniu się choroby syfilitycznej w mieście Warszawie* (*Police-Medical Regulations for Counteracting the Spread of the Syphilitic Disease in the Town of Warsaw*), Warszawa 1843.

1.2% died, while 94.2%, according to the terminology used in the source, “disappeared temporarily or completely”⁶.

How many women were embraced by the registration web in Congress Poland? The above-mentioned publication of the Medical Department (the section of statistics and epidemiology) as well as the Central Statistical Committee of the Ministry of the Interior records 2,018 prostitutes in 1889⁷. 962 lived in Warsaw⁸, Lublin with its 102 prostitutes held second place, while Łódź with 57 — a third. Eighty towns had at least one prostitute each, and 31 of them had more than 10 each. The Warsaw, Lublin and Piotrków *guberniyas* focussed 3/4 of the total of registered prostitutes. The concentration of prostitution in the biggest town of a *guberniya* was smaller in proportion to the greater dispersion of people, especially soldiers and hired workers.

Statistical descriptions show that there is a connection between prostitution and the demographic and industrial development of a town; such was the case of Łódź, where the number of registered prostitutes grew five times over 15 years; according to the then opinion the size of prostitution in Łódź equalled that of Warsaw⁹. In the Piotrków *guberniya* the number of prostitutes doubled until 1910. It also grew by half in the Kielce, Suwałki and Radom *guberniyas*, but it dropped in the Kalisz (by 41%), Łomża (30%) and Płock (18%) *guberniyas*. A relatively small growth of prostitution in Warsaw testifies to the satiation of the town in this respect¹⁰. The value of these comparisons is, how-

⁶ F. Giedroyć, *Prostytutki*, p. 23.

⁷ In comparison to the tone of press articles it seems to be an incredibly small number. However, let us remember that it concerns only legal prostitution. The assessment of the credibility of the data published by the Ministry of the Interior (henceforward MI) and their verification would require a longer exposition. Here we shall only remark that the MI by demanding that police-medical committees (physicians engaged in medical supervision) elicit replies to questionnaires (each containing 22 questions) from every prostitute, might effect the lowering of numbers (especially in big centres) both at the stage of filling the questionnaire and that of its analysis in St. Petersburg (for example in the case where not all questions were answered).

⁸ Giedroyć says that on January 1, 1889, in Warsaw, the register of the police-medical committee included 1,255 women, and on January 1, 1890, 1,420 (F. Giedroyć, *Prostytutki*, p. 20). Thus the difference from the data of the MI amounts from 1/3 almost to a half. In fact this need not undermine the credibility of MI data (cf. note 7), since the records of the committees show a great mobility of prostitutes within a year.

⁹ E. Rosset, *Prostytucja i choroby weneryczne w Łodzi (Prostitution and Venereal Diseases in Łódź)*, Łódź 1931, p. 10.

¹⁰ “Wiedza” 1910, vol. 2, № 30, p. 122; *Różne wiadomości. Statystyka prostytucji (Various Kinds of News. Prostitution Statistics)*.

ever, limited, since from the beginning of the 20th c. the number of bawdy-houses had been dropping and secret prostitution, of its very nature, is difficult to estimate.

In 1889 there were legal houses of ill-fame in 23 centres. Kielce, Piotrków, Płock, Łomża and 11 district towns had one such house each. The towns of Kalisz, Siedlce, Radom, Łódź, as well as the settlements of Puławy and Mariampol had two such houses each. The Suwałki *guberniya* town with its six "houses of ill-repute" held a second place in this statistics. Naturally Warsaw, with 1/3 of all establishments of this kind (17), held the first place¹¹. The only *guberniya* town without a legal brothel was Lublin at that time.

Publicists and social workers were of the opinion that legal prostitution was merely the tip of the iceberg. Many factors favoured the expansion of prostitution which escaped state control. However, it is almost impossible to estimate the number of women who hid their trade from the police. The then estimates of the dimensions of illegal prostitution, frequently described as a natural disaster, were on the one hand based on impressions and on the other were as a rule subordinated to the general thesis of the author (most frequently a physician and moralist in one) prone to exaggerate the problem in order to make his point. Warsaw numbers were from 10,000 in the 1880s up to 50,000 at the beginning of the 20th c. If we take into account the lowest estimates (10,000) and juxtapose them with the number of single women aged from 20–35 (26,000–28,000, data for 1882), it will reveal that every third woman in this age-group practiced, at least temporarily, prostitution¹².

It seems to me that the legendary dimensions of supposed prostitution in Congress Poland were also due to the depreciation of the morals of common people. In fact whole occupational

¹¹ Publicists wrote about Warsaw ("the little Paris") that in "street debauchery" it shows metropolitan traits. The capital of Congress Poland held a high position in the statistics of prostitution in the Russian Empire: second (after Petersburg) in respect of the number of independent prostitutes, third (after Petersburg and Moscow) in respect of the number of all legal prostitutes, fifth (after Moscow, Petersburg, Riga and Odessa) in respect of the number of brothels and of prostitutes working there. *Prostitutsiya*, *op. cit.*

¹² F. Giedroyć, *Prostytycja*, pp. 45 and 10; M. Nietenka, *Ludność Warszawy na przełomie XIX i XX wieku (The Population of Warsaw at the Turn of the 19th c.)*, Warszawa 1971, pp. 97, 238 (my calculations on the basis of data in table 30 and annex 5).

groups were acknowledged as “uncertain in their morals”, and their sexual behaviour, certainly marked by some licentiousness, was considered to be prostitution. Hence the numbers of prostitutes lying outside the system of registration were estimated on the basis of the number of illegitimate children, these numbers also took into account maid-servants and nurses who “indulge in free love”; hence the conviction that “the very bringing together of young factory workers of both sexes in the workshops cannot exist without prostitution”¹³.

Prostitution, classified as part of “the filth of great cities”, was frequently described in the press as the result of inhuman great-city relations. In fine literature a prostitute personifies the evil of the city¹⁴. The city not only creates the scene with its houses of ill-fame, hotels, and digs where prostitutes perform their trade, but also creates the margin of social pathology (“here the weak bend and the strong break”), by unloosing the worst instincts in people and leaving them alone. Unfriendly, even dangerous to the woman, it exposed her to demoralization and finally prostitution. In the city were concentrated with varying intensity all the factors that created the economic law of supply and demand on the market of prostitution.

Quickly developing Warsaw can serve as the model case — with its enormous labour market attracting thousands of people of both sexes permanently or seasonally, with its dynamic and constant growth of population, a great number of single men and women, including the young, and great numbers of the poor, crowded into a small area (the housing problem). Despite political changes, in under-urbanized Congress Poland, Warsaw accumulated the multi-lateral functions of a town; it continued to be the most important centre of education, culture, entertainment, social and economic life.

Let us start with a simple and commonplace statement. In Warsaw there was a great number of males who because of their age and family and financial status were potential clients for prostitutes. In 1882, according to a one-day census, the number

¹³ F. Giedroyć, *Prostytucja*, p. 45; S. Skalski, *Prostytucja w gubernii piotrkowskiej (Prostitution in the Piotrków Guberniya)*, “Zdrowie” 1906, vol. 22, p. 549; B. Margulies, *Prostytucja w Łodzi (Prostitution in Łódź)*, “Zdrowie” 1906, vol. 22, p. 540.

¹⁴ E. Ihnatowicz, *Miasto kryminalne? (A Criminal City?)*, in: *Miasto-kultura-literatura-XIX wiek (Town-Culture-Literature-19th c.)*, Gdańsk 1993, pp. 113-124.

of single men (bachelors, divorcees, widowers) aged over 15 amounted to about 59,000, including about 30,000 in the age-group from 20–39¹⁵. Besides, there were from 31,000 to 36,000 soldiers permanently stationed in Warsaw (the garrison with troops temporarily located near Warsaw totalled over 79,000 in 1884)¹⁶. In small towns the presence of a garrison influenced the number of prostitutes even more than in the capital, and sometimes simply determined their presence. E.g. the commander of the Puławy fortress sent letters to the Lublin governor, pressing him to open a tolerated house as an indispensable institution, while the head of the Janów district justified sending no reports on the medical examination of prostitutes by the fact that they had left the town after the troops left for summer manoeuvres¹⁷.

Side by side with the soldier, a student or even a schoolboy learnt the pleasures of urban life *extra muros scholae*. At the beginning of the 20th c. 40% of students, in reply to the questionnaire concerning their intimate life, admitted that their first sexual experiences were with a prostitute (28 out of 43 in a house of ill-repute)¹⁸. Calculations based on more indirect information say 864 per 1,000 students availed themselves of the services of prostitutes in Warsaw¹⁹.

It is worthwhile invoking on this occasion the stereotype of the destructive power of a great city — the seat of depravation in the life of a young man, who after a few years of study (and revelry) came back to his family physically ruined (by a venereal disease, of course), full of melancholy and contempt for women learnt in a brothel²⁰.

¹⁵ M. Nietyksza, *op. cit.*, pp. 97, 238 (cf. note 12).

¹⁶ F. Giedroyć, *Prostytutki*, p. 9. See also M. Nietyksza, *Rozwój miast i aglomeracji miejsko-przemysłowych w Królestwie Polskim 1865–1914 (The Development of Towns and Urban-Industrial Agglomerations in Congress Poland 1865–1914)*, Warszawa 1986, p. 258.

¹⁷ State Archives in Lublin, Lublin Guberniya Government, Police Department IV 1895:775.

¹⁸ T. J. Łazowski, K. Siwicki, *Życie płciowe warszawskiej młodzieży akademickiej według ankiety z roku 1903 (The Sexual Life of Warsaw Academic Youth According to the Questionnaire of 1903)*, Warszawa 1906, pp. 83–85.

¹⁹ St. Annański (S. Auerbach), *Zagadnienie prostytucji w świetle higieny społecznej (The Problem of Prostitution in the Light of Social Hygiene)*, "Wiedza" 1910, p. 86.

²⁰ See e.g. E. Wyrobek, *Alkohol i prostytucja a choroby weneryczne. Gruźlica i samobójstwo (Alcohol and Prostitution Versus Venereal Diseases. Tuberculosis and Suicide)*, Kraków 1910.

The stereotype of a prostitute — a victim of males, besides charging them with the sexual exploitation of women, contains a thread of the general responsibility of men for prostitution — the thread of a seduced and later abandoned, so-called decent girl (naturally coming from the lower classes) who as a result of being crossed in love, losing a job, out of despair or even hunger sinks to the bottom of society. This is the fate of Katya Maslova in Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, and a similar mechanism is described by the Polish writer Gabriela Zapolska in *O czym się nie mówi* (*What One Doesn't Talk About*). Also the press was full of such accusations of males. In fact 60% of students started their adult life in the family home — with a maid-servant (37 per 55), a nurse, a governess (3), or a country girl (5)²¹.

The destructive role of a town in the life of women may be symbolized by the fate of newcomers from the country who finished their path to "the promised land", (a factory, a workshop, a house employing servants), in a house of ill-repute or literally on the street (Kaśka Kariatyda, the title-heroine of Zapolska's novel)²². Although in 1889 a half of the prostitutes described themselves as townswomen, yet about 40% came from the peasantry — from 1/3 in industrialized (Warsaw, Piotrków) up to 50 and 70% in rural (Kalisz, Łomża, Siedlce, Kielce) *guberniyas*, where it was much harder to get a normal job.

Even a large city was not able to absorb and to ensure a permanent and tolerably-paid job to all the women who sought it. Low earnings, even if they satisfied elementary needs, were not enough to put by a sum necessary for surviving a period without work, which could be easily lost not only during a crisis or unemployment, especially as such girls had no qualifications (80% of those examined in 1889 were illiterate). Domestic service, dominated by the newcomers from the country, was not a stable job. At least from 1817 onwards maid-servants were on the list of the main suspects of prostitution, which in practice meant that they could be freely caught in the street at dark and taken for a medical examination²³. This most numerous group of working

²¹ J. T. Łazowski, T. Siwicki, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

²² See I. Gubernat, *Miasto Zapolskiej* (Gabriela Zapolska's Town), in: *Miasto, op. cit.*, pp. 213–225.

²³ The Central Archives of Historical Records in Warsaw, *Komisja Województwa Kaliskiego* (Kalisz Voivodeship Commission), call number 1697e.

women was at the same time the most exploited and threatened with loss of work. In 1889 over half of all prostitutes (53%) mentioned domestic service as their previous job. On the other hand the data of the Medical Department do not confirm the ill repute of women working in clothing industry and factory workers in general. In 1889 merely 14% of prostitutes came from clothing industry workers (7.4% were previously seamstresses), and 3% from factory workers.

The world of working women who lived in straitened circumstances was under the constant observation of procurers, pimps and similar people who drew the greatest profit from prostitution and took advantage of difficult situations in the life of women to incline them towards prostitution. At any rate, credulous girls unaware of danger could come straight from the station and land in a local house of ill-fame if they trusted an unknown person who offered attractive work. Therefore the societies of assistance to women which on the Western European model started to arise in the Polish lands at the beginning of the 20th c. among other tasks organized watches at the railway stations.

The great wave of emigration in search of a livelihood in the second half of the 20th c. also facilitated international white slavery. The press continually raised alarm that Congress Poland, the Austrian sector of Polish lands called Galicia and the south-western *guberniyas* in Russia supplied brothels in various parts of the world with thousands of girls (in 1909 "Społeczeństwo" journal cited the number of 10,000 women annually from Congress Poland and 12,000–15,000 from Galicia; this was perhaps also a way of discouraging women from emigration). Warsaw was supposed to be the centre of the annual meetings of white-slave traders. A well-organized network of agents, applying various methods of persuasion, penetrated the whole country in search of young girls, thus preying on human misery and credulity. A large city in this case played the role of "the promised land".

In the last quarter of the 19th c., above all due to socialists and the women's movement, a prostitute was shown as the victim of misery and ignorance, and became the object of social remorse. Indeed, the connection of prostitution to material misery seemed obvious and found confirmation in more objective sources.

In 1889 the statistical registered prostitute was 21 years old (38% were in the age-group from 20–25). She worked in a brothel

until reaching the age of 30 at the most, and outside of it even until being 50 (a half of those unorganized were over 25 years of age). She was childless and unmarried (but 8% had children to support). A half of those questioned practiced prostitution for a period of several months to four years. 21% made first steps in their career before turning 16, a further 30% between 16 and 18.

Information about their family background, the structure of their families and their material status allows one to think that these women were brought up in the street, deprived of the adults' care, left to themselves probably since their childhood, and were living in utter penury. Probably some of them were illegitimate children. In 1889 84.5% had no parents, 75% no siblings, 18% no relations at all, 42% had one grandparent. Psychologists would associate prostitution with unfulfilled emotional needs. To aggravate the picture of a single woman completely left to herself in an urban environment let us recall that about 40% of them were of peasant origin, (in some *guberniyas* even 3/4), and in general 36.7% were permanent inhabitants of a *guberniya* different from one where they lived during the census.

Questioned about the material situation of their family 3 in 4 chose the definition "poor" (in the Plock *guberniya* as many as 96%, in the Łomża *guberniya* 84.3%, in the Warsaw *guberniya* 82%), which obviously is not an objective category, but in juxtaposition with previous information cannot be treated as a subjective sense of penury. Prostitution was the first ever occupation only for 30% of them. A large majority earlier tried some other job, normal for their milieu. However, they could not count on much — 80% could not read and write.

They were also questioned about the age and circumstances of starting their sexual life. The answers testify to early sexual initiation. 40% experienced it before the age of 16, 78% between 13 and 18. For 26% their first intercourse was the result of a rape. A psychologist might again speak of the influence of an early sexual initiation, especially negative experiences, on the pathological development of emotionality²⁴.

²⁴ The picture emerging from the data of 1882 is confirmed by the study of small groups or the description of how individual women slid into prostitution. S. Wertensteinowa sums up two-years' observations of 45 prostitutes who took shelter in the poor-house of the Jewish Society for Women's Protection in 1905 — "neuropathic, inert daughters of alcoholics with a bad inheritance. A few of them became degraded out of misery, outright hunger, but many more, out of

Only a part of this milieu, clearly professionally defined, could be embraced by investigation. Apart from secret prostitutes also those serving the richest clients (the so-called camellia ladies) remained outside the scope of official investigation; women who practiced paid-love but because of their way of life could rather be classified as vagrants than prostitutes, were not registered, either, but only from time to time, as a result of a police round-up, underwent medical examination.

The credibility of the data established by the Ministry of the Interior may arouse various doubts; the value of this source is also limited by the fact that we cannot examine the relations between various data. The assessment of reality with the aid of mean results, especially in such a short article as mine, is of necessity arbitrary. Underlying the numbers, there can be various situations in life that have nothing in common with the circumstances of taking up prostitution, which circumstances the author of the source wanted to examine by means of questionnaires. Personal predispositions and pathological traits of which we know nothing might also determine choosing such a path (if we can to a certain extent, or at all, speak of a choice)²⁵.

At the same time one cannot disagree with the thesis that gained ever more popularity at the end of the 19th c., namely about the economic and environmental conditioning of prostitution (e.g. the 10th International Congress of the Federation of Abolitionists in Geneva in 1908 was devoted to the connection of prostitution to the economic situation of women). The numbers I quote confirm this view. The material misery of the plebeian strata with all its consequences as well as the great stratification of social wealth seem to be the main source of thousands of women's resorting to prostitution in the second half of the 19th c.

(Translated by Agnieszka Kreczmar)

overwork, exhaustion, loss of will and their association with depraved women and with a pimp, who pretending to be a flancé, coerced the unfortunate woman to vice. Girls who were seduced or raped, frequently by the so-called polite, educated men, slid into the abyss most often, rejected by their families, overwhelmed by shame and convinced that there was no decent life ahead of them." S. Wer t e n s t e i n o w a, *Z tragizmów życia (From the Tragedies of Life)*, "Prawda" 1917, № 13.

²⁵ In the 19th c. there was a very strong psychological current explaining the etiology of prostitution by the biologic-psychological traits of women (a popular theory of the Italian psychiatrist Lombroso about the so-called born prostitute).