Myths, human trafficking, sex work, gender, ethnic relations, and the power of the press take center stage in historian Aleksandra Jakubczak’s book, *Polacy, Żydzi i mit handlu kobietami* (Poles, Jews, and the myth of trafficking of women). In focusing on the reality and lore of the sex trade in and from all three areas of partitioned Poland, this book confronts presumptions in Polish historiography on the topic, which tend to exaggerate the extent of the phenomenon and emphasize the role of Jews in it. Jakubczak offers a fresh assessment based on a careful and critical reading of a range of multilingual archival sources and by drawing on the findings of scholarship outside Poland. This is an impressive and important book, which in relaying the past, also reveals social mechanisms that apply in the present.

The book consists of an introduction and seven chapters, each dealing with a larger theme: narrations of sex trafficking, the concept of “moral panic,” international ideas about prostitution, the role of the authorities, the organized fight against the trafficking of women, local attacks on brothels, and the forging and dismantling of the myth of the extent of the sex trade. This book weaves in historiographical, social, and legal aspects of the sex trade, thereby situating regional history in processes occurring on a macro level. In doing so, Jakubczak illuminates important milestones in the fight against the trafficking of women. She scoured international archives, read newspapers from the era, and tallied the numbers. Her research reveals findings that challenge the common perception in Polish historiography to date. Jakubczak presents a compelling explanation why the press exaggerated the problem of the sex trade from Polish lands and the Jews’ participation. She outlines how the imperial authorities engaged in battling the sex trade, a perspective that opposes the popular belief that centers on cooperation between sex traders and authority figures. She demonstrates that many women used prostitution to their advantage, an argument that counters the view of women solely as victims. In a key finding, Jakubczak explains how a focus on prostitution was re-
lated to the struggle for the survival of the Polish nation.

How and why does a myth enter public consciousness? What role do conspiracy theories play and what are their consequences? Jakubczak shows that the myths of the ubiquity of the sex trade and of the predominance of Jews in it (as both dealers and victims) mirrored societal fears at the time. Myths allowed the population in partitioned Poland to understand massive shifts, such as industrialization, urbanization, migrations, and social-political changes. The conspiracy theories that emerged positioned Jews as the “other” and confirmed their supposed criminal nature.

Through the notion of the trafficking of women, Jakubczak offers an insightful discussion of Polish-Jewish relations and of the antisemitic trope of “the Jew” as an exploiter and stranger. By transferring blame onto Jews, non-Jews could be absolved from the wrongdoing and could point to the destructive influence of Jews in society. In the history that Jakubczak tells, Jews continued to hold the image of merchants, but their role extended to traders of humans who benefited from an international web of contacts to lure women into sex work. In this context, “the Jew” becomes a sexualized predator of Christian women.

Yet, as Jakubczak illustrates in the book, prostitution networks composed of Jews focused on Jewish women. Thus, this history is also about Jewish-Jewish relations. Jakubczak offers an enlightening discussion about the meaning for the Jewish community of the involvement of Jewish pimps, intermediaries, and agents, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of Jewish women recruited for prostitution. Like their non-Jewish neighbors, Jews, too, were susceptible to the “moral panic” that Jakubczak so poignantly explains in a separate chapter. Jewish literature picked up the theme of Jews’ involvement in the sex trade to underscore a key social issue and to encourage reflection. In so doing, the writers inadvertently contributed to amplifying the myth for years to come.

Jakubczak poses new questions and revises the widely held assumptions and interpretations of these sources. This is a great strength of the book.

This book also contributes to the history of sexuality and gender. Jakubczak outlines the reasons for and modes of women’s entry into prostitution. She challenges the common assumption of kidnappings and force as the primary drivers. Instead, she points to women’s agency and to the environment in which women operated at the time. On the one hand, prostitution offered quick employment and greater earnings, especially in the face of the discrimination women faced in factories and the low wages and harassment they encountered as housekeepers. On the other hand, prostitution allowed some women to break free from familial, religious, and societal restrictions; to experience independence; and to emerge as entrepreneurs. Public opinion, Jakubczak observes, could not fathom that prostitution could have been a personal choice. An interesting aspect concerns the role of parents. Some even saw an opportunity for financial advancement for their families and pushed their daughters into prostitution. The involvement of family in the perceived physical and moral ruin of their women and the notion of women’s agency were hard to reconcile for the larger society.

The discourses based on the myth of the prevalence of the trafficking of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Polish territories accentuate the efforts to control women’s sexuality and emphasize the role of women as helpless victims. The larger story, Jakubczak claims, concerned the role and place of women in society, in partitioned Poland, and the role of the state. A focus on the sex trade and “saving” its victims also reflected the egos of members of religious institutions, aristocrats, and members of high society through charity work, as it did the aspirations of those who wished to join a higher social class. This is an important claim that Jakubczak explains in much detail.
Polacy, Żydzi i mit handlu kobietami can be read as a case study of how and why moral panic engulfs a society and what effect an exaggerated scare has on people. The book traces imaginary tropes and confronts them with sources. Jakubczak of course acknowledges that some women were forced into prostitution and that some Jews participated in the recruitment, transportation, and placement of women from Polish lands. She convincingly debunks the idea that trafficking of women was a widespread phenomenon and explains why and how Jews were featured as enablers of prostitution in the public imagination. This is a brave book with bold arguments and strong evidence that will trigger more discussion and invite further research.

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