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Innocent and Dangerous: Female Agents of Jewish Emigration from the Late Russian Empire

Starting from the last quarter of the nineteenth century, every year thousands of Jews, Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Germans were leaving Russia to never return. Paradoxically, despite a large quantity of emigrants the Tsarist Empire had never developed clear emigration laws. Consequently, the majority of emigrants were crossing the Russian borders illegally assisted by professional smugglers who were predominantly of Jewish origin and lived in the so-called Pale of Jewish Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland. The success of Jewish illegal travel agents hinged on their transnational extended family connections—they smuggled emigrants across the border with the help of family members who appeared on the Austrian or Prussian side of the border after the Partitions of Poland at the end of the eighteenth century. Moreover, many Jews worked as coachmen in the towns where they lived. Therefore, they had horses and carriages to sometimes smuggle up to ten-fifteen people at a time across Russia's western border at night under cover of darkness.

Even though a coachman was a male profession and Jewish men were actively involved in emigrants' physical transfer to the other, Austrian or Prussian, side of the border, Jewesses also actively participated in practical organization of resettlement. This paper analyses experiences of Jewish women who facilitated mass migration from the Russian Empire in 1881-1914. I argue that women were not only an active migratory element, they also facilitated the departure of others making in this way emigration rates higher. Police reports and internal documentation of the

Jewish emigration organizations held at the former imperial archives uncover voices of women who helped others to emigrate while staying in Russia themselves. Even though the pre-revolutionary Russian-Jewish communities still perceived women as “domestic goddesses” out of the public realm, the archival material reveals a high degree of female involvement in what I call the emigration business. Gur Alroey in his article “*And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land*”: *Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe*¹ has already discovered female agency in mass migration and demonstrated that Jewish female would-be emigrants played a huge role in decision making and then the process of moving abroad. I am taking his point further arguing that Jewish women were active among the agencies sending both Jewish and non-Jewish emigrants away.

During the era of mass migration, those Jews who were willing to emigrate had the two main options. First, they could apply for assistance from the very few government-approved Jewish emigration organizations (such as the Jewish Colonization Association or the Jewish Emigration Society in Kiev). Second, they were able to hire an illegal travel agent, who could help them cross the border secretly under the danger of being detained but with an opportunity to avoid lengthy bureaucratic procedure of obtaining a travel passport. At first glimpse, it seems that there was no place for women in these male-dominated enterprises—the male representatives of emigration associations were involved in dangerous fight against often deceitful male illegal travel guides. Those Jewish leaders who extensively published on emigration issues in the Jewish press in either Yiddish, Hebrew, or Russian were solely male as well.

However, a closer look at the police records and internal papers of the Jewish emigration associations in Russian and Ukrainian archives reveals high involvement of female participants in these structures. First, female swindlers were successful underground travel agents because they

¹ Gur Alroey, “‘And I Remained Alone in a Vast Land’: Women in the Jewish Migration from Eastern Europe,” *Jewish Social Studies* 12, No. 3 (2006): 39-72.

abused the widespread perception of women being naïve creatures and aroused less suspicion. Second, wives of male illegal agents assisted them on a regular basis and often took over the entire business after their husbands were arrested by the police. The lists of emigration swindlers in the Russian police files indicate that women constituted about fifteen percent of the illegal agents. Third, swindlers' wives were successful in getting their arrested husbands from jail. They constantly petitioned to the local authorities complaining that their children were dying of hunger because of the provider's loss. Often bureaucrats had merci on poor women and children and released swindlers who then continued doing what they did before—smuggling emigrants across the border. Finally, many women worked as secretaries and bookkeepers in the government-approved emigration agencies, therefore, helping the emigration business run.

So, how did organization of illegal emigration business work in practice? A peasant from the Grodno gubernia,² Andrei Gorbanov, gives a detailed account of how Jewish smugglers worked in his complaint to the local police office. In July of 1909, several travel agents came to his village. They advertised emigration to America where people allegedly earned 6-10 rubles a day. The agents also promised to take care of everything necessary for departure, including the passport and travel fare, for 125 rubles. At that time his son, Gavriusha,³ had a fight with another peasant, Ivan Artiukh. When Artiukh fell down under Gavriusha's blows, everyone thought he died. Gavriusha decided to escape the arrest in America and got in touch with the agents. They took him to Grodno and left in the home office of a local Jew, Iosif Sokol, who worked where together with his wife, Sima. Iosif took the money and told to wait for two or three days until a guide was ready to accompany Gavriusha to America. Then Sima took Gavriusha to another building, said to wait in a closet, and left him some food. The next night the smugglers family

² Modern Belarus.

³ Nickname for Gavriil.

transported Gavriusha to another location, gave him some papers and told him to now introduce himself as Trofim Keika to everyone.⁴

The Sokols helped Gavriusha to reach the border, told him to crawl in the dark, and finally took him to a random Prussian city, where they left the youngster without any further instructions. Gavriusha demanded that the smugglers fulfilled their promises and got him to America, but Sokol just laughed and left. Finally, the young peasant had to pay Sokol another 100 rubles for just taking him back to his village, where he found out that Artiukh was alive and they made peace. Andrei Gorbanov, the loving father, was seeking revenge for his son who when being under the smugglers family control greatly suffered, got sick, and now had an ill look. Moreover, Gavriusha lost 225 rubles. However, people in Grodno advised the father and the son not to deal with the Sokols since they had both bad reputation and influential connections to operate their dishonest business in the area.⁵

Following the complaint on November 19, 1909, the head of the Grodno investigation department paid a visit to the Sokol family to inquire about their smuggling business. In their private house on Kolozhaiskaia St. he found only Sima, a Jewess of 59 years of age. She denied ever having an encounter with the Gorbanov family and explained that her husband was now living in Nezhin, Chernigov gubernia. As a convict in transit, he ended up there due to the false, as she claimed, charges of involvement in the smuggling business. Sima added that Iosif had to spend the next two years away from her even though he never committed any crime just because some competitors wanted to acquire Iosif's tea business and wrote false accusation letters to the police.⁶ Therefore, despite the fact that both Iosif and Sima were practically equal partners in their

⁴ State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 4, ll. 445-446.

⁵ Ibid., ll. 446-446v.

⁶ Ibid., ll. 449-449v.

smuggling business, only Iosif ended up carrying responsibility for the family's criminal activity. As an elderly, according to the Russian imperial standards, woman, she did not evoke any suspicion from the police regarding the danger she posed as a professional human smuggler working together with her convicted husband.

Some women got involved in smuggling people abroad across the Russian border together with their husbands on the higher, transnational, level, and operated the family business in Russia singlehandedly. A Bialystok resident, Itka Kaz's, husband had left for the United States and was contributing to their business from there. He was sending *Schiffskarten* (German for "steamship tickets") and other travel documents that potential emigrants needed to Itka. Getting to the high level of conspiracy, Itka and her husband were trying to mislead the police that might be looking for traces of illegal smuggling business. Therefore, Itka was using external storage to keep the paperwork whereas her husband was sending packages to dummies, middlemen who were supposed to divert suspicion from herself. When in February 1891 the police officers were inspecting parcels received from abroad in a local Bialystok post-office, they found a package addressed to a certain Udel Vasilkovsky. Being appalled by a large number of *Schiffskarten* enclosed, the police started investigation seeking to determine Vasilkovsky's identity and his involvement into agitation for immigration to America among the local population. Neither the search, nor numerous inquiries led to the conclusion that Vasilkovsky was a travel agent. However, the police got a lead on Itka who was famous as a smuggler among Bialystok residents. Her apartment search, predictably, yielded no results.⁷ Itka's cunning, artifice, and caution left the police no chance to prove her involvement in the smuggling business.

⁷ GARF, fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 2, ll. 28-28v.

Another area where women were active among smugglers was helping emigrants who could not afford to pay for the ticket to get on a steamship to America unnoticed. The major port through which emigrants could legally start their overseas journey directly from the Russian Empire was Libava on the Baltic Sea (modern city of Liepaja in western Latvia). For a certain fee, a Libava resident, Mrs. Libovich, and her accomplice, Mr. Brandman, provided Russian travel passports to illegal emigrants and secretly took them on steamships pass ticket controllers. Fare dodgers then got off the steamships already in New York assisted by Brandman's son, who had immigrated to America earlier. In 1907, however, the American police caught, and consequently interrogated, Russian Jewish immigrants suspected of traveling without steamship tickets. When the scared immigrants revealed the criminal scheme, Brandman junior was taken to the court and sentenced to five years in prison. The American policemen contacted their colleagues in the Russian Empire so they could arrest Libovich and older Brandman as well. Although the Russian police initiated a ban for the two smugglers to live in Libava, left unknown is if this prohibition was enacted at the end.⁸

In addition, swindlers' wives were successful in getting their arrested husbands from jail. In 1901, for example, a secret emigration company was revealed in Rovno, members of which, Shimon-Haim Rafman, Sukher Kopylnik, Itsko Makh, and Moshka Niman, were accused in instigating local people to emigrate to America, assisting them in this process, and often leaving them broke on the way, particularly in Germany.⁹ However, at first they escaped punishment because presumably after getting a bribe the court did not find any signs of criminal offense.¹⁰ A year later, nevertheless, it was revealed that the agents continued helping Jewish conscripts,

⁸ GARF, fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 6, l. 288.

⁹ GARF, fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 8 l. A t. II, l. 226.

¹⁰ Central State Historical Archive in Kiev (TsDIK), Fond 442, opis 630, delo 592, ll. 2-4.

German colonists, and criminals to cross the Russian border. This time they received a warning, but nothing more.¹¹ After continued complaints, Makh, Niman, and Rafman were forbidden to live in southwestern Russia for 3 years starting from May 8, 1904.¹² However, the punished agents or their wives petitioned to cancel the penalty that was realized within the following seven months. Makh's wife, Sura Freidl, was particular successful. She petitioned to the imperial governor explaining that her family had no property in Rovno, and she together with her five children would not be able to survive without Itsko's salary. The governor instructed to check the information and the investigation results indicated that Makh's wife and children indeed lived in misery having no means for survival. Having pity on the poor woman and her little children, the governor allowed Makh to come back to Rovno on December 16, 1904, where he could continue the outlawed smuggling activities as before.¹³

The competition among illegal emigration agents was tough and sometimes pretending to be a woman was a winning strategy. Therefore, swindlers wrote denunciation letters to the police accusing each other in all kinds of crimes and deception of poor naïve emigrants. Such denunciation letters were usually signed with a fake name to hide the real identity and motives. And even though the majority of smugglers were males, the denunciation letters would be often signed with the female pseudonym. This way the illegal agents played on the assumption that the police sees women as vulnerable, innocent, and more trustworthy than men. To make the case appearing even more truthful, such "women" first recognized that they were illiterate, playing on the stereotypical female representation which many educated men had, and admitted that although the described events were "her" life story and sad experience, the letter was written by a man.

¹¹ Ibid., ll. 5, 11.

¹² Ibid., l. 12.

¹³ Ibid., l. 67.

At the beginning of 1906, the state police department received one of such letters written by a male scribe and signed by a certain Lyba Guberman, a resident of the Bessarabian shtetl Khotin. Lyba complained that she and other emigrants were abused by a police officer, Kalinin, and a junior captain, Ziatin, from the Novosel'tsy frontier border guard. Fictional Lyba explained that some underprivileged Jews, Duvid Kantsis, Yankel' Morgenteirin, and Shimon Hersh Grinberg, organized a gang under the protection of captain Ziatin in the town of Novosel'tsy. The gang charged fifty rubles for a person for illegal border crossing making the border practically open for anyone who had fifty rubles in possession. Lyba noticed that primarily political and state prisoners were abusing this opportunity and left Russia without any difficulties, whereas ordinary people suffered from the terrible gang. Therefore, Lyba wanted to visit her daughter in Czernowitz that at that time belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Empire. She asked representatives of the mentioned gang for help and did receive a travel permit. However, as an illiterate woman she was unable to check the permit's correctness. Later, Lyba's relatives told her the permit was issued on the name of a certain Alta Krivoshei and not her real name, Lyba Guberman. She made an attempt to return the permit and get her money back. Instead, captain Ziatin beat and kicked her out.¹⁴

The police department in Bessarabia gubernia carefully investigated the case and presented the report to the state police department on March 26, 1906. They concluded that everything described in the letter was a lie. The police officer, Kalinin, issued travel permits only to other officers who investigated criminal cases abroad. The junior captain, Ziatin, was well-known for his opposition to smugglers' criminal activities. Often, swindlers would send denunciation letters against Ziatin only to take him out from their way hoping they would be able to operate more successfully without his watchful eye. Mentioned in the letter Alta Krivoshei died in the Khotin

¹⁴ GARF, fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 6, ll. 196-197.

Jewish hospital on April 19, 1905 and her permit might have been stolen and used by other people. Finally, the investigator searched for Lyba Guberman and found nobody under such name. Therefore, the investigation concluded, some smugglers fabricated the story with the abused woman in attempt to get rid of the loyal police officers who fought against their criminal activities.¹⁵ A large number of similar denunciation letters, however, indicates that swindlers did believe in success of such fabrications written on behalf of female victims.

Since women were perceived as more innocent and vulnerable than men, they could also serve as guides directing immigrants to certain travel agents. This is an example of detailed instructions how to get to the Galician border town of Skala. A German Jew and a representative of the Austrian steamship line Austro-Americana, Bernard Weinfeld, provided the following note to his clientele:

Go to the closest railways station and get a ticket to Larga on the southwestern railway connection. After getting there, take a coach and travel thirty versts¹⁶ to the town of Kamenetz. Then, go to the Turkish bridge and take a road next to the old fortress, then turn to the right and go straight on the highway. You will meet women on your way. Ask them how to get to Kadchevtsy located in another 12 versts. From Kadchevtsy go to the mill and you will see two roads. Take the narrow path to the right between the wicker fence and take the road further leading to the forest. Avoiding the forest, go to the third house on its right. It belongs to Garas'ko Teplii and has no fence separating the house from the road, just some wooden planks. On the corner you will see a pole with a sign "The village of Kadchevtsy." Next to the sign you will see a stile through which you will be able to get inside the house. Then he [Garas'ko] will take you to my office in the town of Skala.¹⁷

Here seemingly random women were giving instructions which would help emigrants to get to the smuggler responsible for delivering resettlers across the border. Such calculations were meant to take suspicion away from everyone—"random women," the smuggler, and the main travel agent. The plan worked until the police discovered one of such notes and started their investigation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 222-222v.

¹⁶ An ancient Russian linear measure that equals approximately 1 kilometer (0.6629 miles).

¹⁷ GARF, fond 102, D-2, opis 47 (1890), delo 104, chast 6, l. 425.

The legal but much more complicated way to get across Russia's western border would be applying for services of official emigration agencies, such as the Jewish Colonization Association and the Jewish Emigration Society. These organizations were approved by the Russian government for the reasons beyond the scope of this paper and had numerous branches across the Pale of Settlement and the Kingdom of Poland. All their official representatives were exclusively male. The only role that women played in these agencies were in capacity of secretaries and personal assistants. Jewesses in this profession working for the JCA at the end of the nineteenth century, like Helene Asness and Liubow Scheinina, were earning several times less than men, about 30 rubles a month, whereas men's salaries started from 75-100 rubles a month.¹⁸ This indicates that their labor were not counted as valuable as of their male counterparts. Even though these women did not participate in development of the emigration business directly, they played an important part in keeping the statistical records and paperwork, making in this way men's work easier and more organized.

In conclusion, even though in lesser numbers, Jewish women actively participated in the smuggling business and worked side by side with their husbands or even on their own. Jewesses engaged in the emigration business both on the local and transnational levels keeping in touch with their partners abroad. The biggest advantage that women had comparing to their male counterparts was their image of an innocent and vulnerable domestic goddess. Perception of a woman as someone belonging to the domestic realm helped female smugglers avoid punishment for their criminal activities. The police did not perceive female travel agents as potentially dangerous that helped them to escape arrests, unlike their male business partners (husbands or non-related accomplices). The representation of women as merely home keepers was so powerful that male

¹⁸ Russian State Library (RGB), fond 97, delo 17, ll. 3-6.

swindlers chose to write denunciation letters under female names believing that the police would find them more credible. Uncovering female voices in organization of Jewish emigration, therefore, broadens our understanding of one of the biggest voluntary movements in Jewish history.