



UNIVERZITA
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**DAUGHTERS OF NIGHT STREETS:
THE PHENOMENON OF PROSTITUTION
IN SLOVAKIA IN THE YEARS 1918–1938**

A Summary of Doctoral Thesis

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Introduction

The present dissertation deals with the phenomenon of prostitution in the interwar period. The primary aim is to develop research about the phenomenon of prostitution through analysing medical, political and social discourses during the interwar period in Czechoslovakia. I focus on the territory of Slovakia in the years 1918-1938. The dissertation presents an interdisciplinary and comparative study focused on prostitution, sexuality, and sexually transmitted diseases. I approached the chosen topic from an interdisciplinary point of view as the issue of prostitution touches many academic areas and institutions as well as everyday life. I present a view of this phenomenon as seen in the statements of experts, politicians, institutions and persons involved in prostitution. In my work, I follow the mindsets of various groups of society, ranging from politicians, prostitutes, doctors and social workers to artists.

Historiography

A systematic and comprehensive approach to prostitution in the interwar period was underreported in Slovakia. The

topic is one of the subjects less studied by medical and social history in Slovakia. Nevertheless, researchers in the Czech Republic have focused on the history of prostitution and created important studies. A significant publication on prostitution in Slovak historiography is *Hriešna Vydrica* by Anton Baláž.¹ Anna Falisová analysed organisations' activities aiming to prevent the spreading of venereal diseases and focused on medical discourse about prostitution in the 20th century.² In 2015, Ján Konopka published his diploma thesis *Prostitution in Slovakia in the 1920s and 1930s*, where the author focused on articles in periodical newspapers.

Czech historiography provides a comprehensive view of the history of prostitution. In 2002, Milena Lenderová published the book *Chytila patrola... aneb prostituce za Rakouska i republiky*.³ It is the first significant study in

¹ BALÁŽ, Anton. *Hriešna Vydrica*. Bratislava: Marenčin PT, 2010, 190 s.

² FALISOVÁ, Anna. Spoločnosť proti pohlavným chorobám na Slovensku v medzivojnovom období. In *Forum Historiae*, 2011, roč. 5, č.1. 8 s.

³ LENDEROVÁ, Milena. *Chytila patrola... aneb Prostituce za Rakouska i republiky*. Praha: Karolinum, 2002, 226 s.

researching the history of prostitution in the Czechoslovak environment. The work represents the first comprehensive summary of information on selling "love" and the social status of prostitutes from the 19th century to 1938. Conditions in Slovakia are described primarily in the context of the number of brothels and registered prostitutes. Despite this fact, the publication provides detailed information that has also been provided in the Slovak environment. A comparison of the historical development of prostitution in individual parts of Austria-Hungary and Czechoslovakia reveals very similar, sometimes even identical features of this multi-layered phenomenon. In recent years, this publication has become an inspiration and a source for the creation of works focused on a selected area of the problem. Blanka Soukupová states in a sociological magazine that the work is valuable primarily for providing an overview of printed and iconographic sources. Milena Lenderová looks at the phenomenon of prostitution through the lens of cultural history and historical anthropology.

Foreign literature is abundant in sources on the phenomenon of prostitution. A fundamental work on the history of prostitution by contemporary historians was published in 2022 in the monothematic specialist journal *European Review of History*, where 14 articles were published on the issue.⁴ The publication begins with a general introduction regarding the history of prostitution in the 20th century on the European continent. In the introduction there were presented legal norms applied in European political systems, police practices and criminological aspects of the aforementioned phenomenon. Other articles describe the regional history of prostitution, and the conclusion offers book reviews focused on the history of sexualities. An article by the Czech historian Anna Hájková entitled *Why we need a history of prostitution in the Holocaust?* presented substantial information regarding Czech and Slovak history.⁵

⁴ European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire, Volume 29, Issue 2 (2022), .

⁵ HÁJKOVÁ, Anna. Why we need a history of prostitution in the Holocaust In *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 2022, 194-222.

Some of the latest approaches in the field of researching the history of prostitution have also been presented by participants from various academic disciplines and countries in 2018 at the international workshop in Prague entitled *Perspectives on the history of 'prostitution' in East-Central Europe*. The workshop provided a space for sharing inspiring knowledge as well as challenges for the future related to the study of this topic. The participants of the interdisciplinary workshop discussed the possibility of integrating the history of Central and Eastern Europe into the current world research on the history of prostitution. Important knowledge for the Czech and Slovak history of prostitution was presented by three experts: Anna Hájková, Judit Takács and Christiane Brenner. A. Hájková presented the results of research focused on the Holocaust and the provision of sexual services. Hungarian sociologist J. Takács analysed male homosexual prostitution in the Hungarian environment at the beginning of the 20th century in a paper entitled *Male Prostitution and Homosexual Panic in Early 20th Century Hungary*. The third significant research entitled *Expert Discourse on Prostitution in Socialist Czechoslovakia* was presented by

the German historian Ch. Brenner. Her contribution reflected the professional discourse on prostitution in socialist Czechoslovakia.

Magaly Rodríguez García and her colleagues in worldwide interdisciplinary research (2017) pointed out the importance of applying new trends to the study of the history of prostitution. The authors of the extensive studies published in the collection *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution* used a wide range of approaches and described the history of prostitution from a wide variety of aspects.⁶ The collection is divided into three parts, while each one of them uses different perspectives and methods. The first part of the collection provides a general view of the history of prostitution from 1600 to the present in cities worldwide via the perspective of an urban study. Mainly big cities are represented here, having been associated with prostitution for several centuries. These are, for example, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Istanbul, Tel Aviv, Buenos Aires, Chicago,

⁶ GARCÍA R. Magaly (ed.). *Selling Sex in the City: A Global History of Prostitution, 1600s-2000s*. Boston: Brill, 2017, 912 s.

Havana, Shanghai and Singapore. In the second part, the authors raised questions concerning the working and social conditions of prostitutes not only in the past, but also in the present world. There, historians examined the relation between migration and the history of prostitution and described the chosen topic within the framework of colonial relations and gender category. These authors report that interrelationships between topics such as migration, working conditions, gender and colonization contribute to a better understanding of the complexity of the topic and the structural factors affecting prostitution.

In their analysis of prostitution, the authors aim to compare prostitution not only with respect to time, but also location – looking worldwide for a new concept in the study of prostitution. This definitely provides a substantial support to my dissertation thesis as it is focused on the description and comparison of prostitution. In this book, almost every contribution related to prostitution includes a section containing recommendations of other foreign literature that could extend my view and research on this phenomenon. In the essays, authors do not use the modern

name *sex worker*, as it is a neologism and therefore has some limitations. The term *sex worker* is a relatively new concept for prostitution, commonly used in social work or gender studies. The historians often use traditional concept *prostitute*, which is more straightforward than other terms. These words *prostitute* or *prostitution* are the historical terms and sound more historically authentic. Many historians have argued about using the concept *prostitute* or *sex worker*, because “*language is important and language reflecting the humanity of a person or people describes a process requiring continual revision*”.⁷ One of the biggest issues faced by sex workers today, as well as throughout history, is the social stigma. The word *prostitution* comes from Latin *prōstituere*, meaning to expose oneself publicly or put up sb. for sale. To introduce this book fundamental as the editors seek definition of prostitution in time and place and explain basic words like sex worker, prostitutes, human trafficking and the differences between them. The authors have contributed by their simple definition of prostitution. *It is a provision*

⁷ Ibid..., 8 p.

*of physical sex for payment and this is done with no prospects for marriage.*⁸ The most useful part is the analysis of labour market regarding prostitution in the past. Some of the substantial parts are push-and-pull factors like urbanization, industrialization, pauperization, migration, wars etc. Some of the researchers provide in-depth analysis of the changes in working conditions throughout time and place. For example, they focused on payment systems, soliciting etc. Maja Mechant created the social profiles of prostitutes. In this part, she analysed religion, racial and ethnic background, education level, family situation and age structure of prostitutes.

Current research topics in the history of prostitution:

- history of prostitution in the regional area
- holocaust and prostitution
- prostitution and totalitarian regimes
- approaches of the state towards the phenomenon of prostitution in terms of historical development

⁸ Ibid..., 8 p.

- homosexual prostitution
- sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution
- prostitution and art history

Structure of dissertation

The first chapter *Theoretical-methodological background of the work* is divided into five subsections. At the beginning of the chapter, I present the theoretical concepts of the work based on gender history, social and cultural history. In the first sub-chapter, I describe the methods we used in writing the thesis. In the second part, I present archival sources stored mainly in Slovak archives and relating to the selected issue. I work with official documents, contemporary press dealing with prostitution and venereal diseases, as well as works of art. In subsections three and four, I look at the history of prostitution from antiquity to the present in the context of historiography and the current research field. In the last sub-chapter, I follow the professional discourse on prostitution through the analysis of contemporary academic works from health-related, social,

psychological, sociological and pedagogical fields. In this part, I want to point out which normative frameworks the discourse on prostitution was based on, which ideas it builds upon, and what strategies were used in professional argumentation.

The second chapter is important for understanding the legislative context of the issue of prostitution in the interwar period. Through the mapping of political discourse and a critical examination of official documents, I point out how the political-legal system in Czechoslovakia has developed. In the context of this research, I aim to identify the extent of Law No. 241 and its influence on a few brothels in selected towns in Slovakia, and to identify many consequences of this Act regarding the field of health and social care.

In the third chapter, I present the phenomenon of prostitution in the context of mechanisms of social exclusion in the years 1918-1938 on the territory of Czechoslovakia. I analyze the categories that determined the social exclusion of people in prostitution. I answer questions such as: who were the prostitutes in the interwar

period, what was their family background, what was their age structure, and what were their living and working conditions. I enrich this chapter with an analysis of the three dimensions of social exclusion. This part is focused on economic, spatial, and social exclusion.

Furthermore, I follow the social view of prostitution based on the analysis of contemporary periodicals of a national and regional character. In the fourth part, I aim to present the media image of prostitution in the interwar period – as thebecause newspapers included various tabloids – but also preventive and educational information regarding this phenomenon. The main goal of this chapter is primarily the conceptualization and identification of discursive practices used to construct the media image of prostitution, persons in prostitution, events and activities associated with the sex trade.

I present the artistic reflection on prostitution in the fifth chapter, focusing on literary and pictorial sources. The aim of this chapter is to find out how the interwar art scene reflected and depicted the issue of prostitution that was a current and discussed social topic at the time.

In the final and sixth chapter, I briefly present homosexual prostitution in Czechoslovakia.

I primarily focus our attention on the territory of Slovakia, but always in the broader context of Czechoslovakia, which should not and could not be neglected especially because it existed as a single state entity. In the work, we use the word prostitute quite often, due to the historical authenticity of the sources. The modern term *sex worker* (which we prefer) does not fit into the selected historical framework.

Methods and sources

I use several methods and approaches. The input was gathered from multiple sources at various time points pertaining to the interwar period. The dissertation thesis will use a qualitative analysis to gain insights into prostitution in Czechoslovakia. One advantage of this qualitative analysis is the fact that it operates within structures. Prostitutes usually represent a marginalized structure in society. Previous studies have based their selective criteria on location, migration and gender. Other authors have used approaches

based on gender history, social history and historical anthropology.

The design of the research is based on the analysis and interpretation of medical, political, and social discourses. The historical and archival records are analysed by internal and external criticism. The thesis is supported also by secondary sources. For the purpose of analysis, several categories of these primary and secondary sources will be established.

Primary and secondary sources for researching the subjects are as follows:

- periodical literature and newspapers from the interwar period focused on health, social care and sexually transmitted diseases, and also medical, political, theological and social discourses about regulation and abolitionism of prostitution.
- archival records focused on policies and organizations, aiming to either control or support prostitutes in the interwar period.
- prostitution law and political documents from the Parliament.

- theological literature focused on the issue of prostitution.
- foreign and Czechoslovakian prostitution feminist literature.

For the purpose of this research I visited the national archive in Bratislava and at the local archives in Košice.

Law and Prostitution

Aside from its victims, suffering and other war damages regarding health and property, World War I also brought suitable preconditions for a change in political, economic, social and cultural conditions. The end of the war, and the internal problems in Austria-Hungary, which led to its demise, also brought new geopolitical conditions throughout Europe. The disintegration of the monarchy of Austria-Hungary and the emergence of a democratic Czechoslovakia set new conditions for the people of Slovakia, Subcarpathian Rus, and the Czech. There have been major changes in the issue of prostitution and public brothels. In addition, the public brothels closed and prostitutes were not under any medical or police control. Registration of these women in the police department was

not considered necessary. The public health of the population was broken as a result of the war, while people died from fighting their injuries. Many struggled with tuberculosis, venereal diseases, or other traumas. The issue of prostitution in the war and post-war period was complicated and finding a practical solution was a Sisyphus task. History shows that prostitution needed state control during this period to prevent the massive spread of STDs and the resulting weakening of the military. Syphilis, gonorrhea and canker sores were not marginal diseases at the time, resulting in the occurrence of new political leaders, military commanders, and doctors.

Until 1922, there was a valid system of regulation in Czechoslovakia that had tolerated and controlled the sex trade for up to a hundred years. Prostitution was conducted in towns and cities, individually regulated by local policies. It was tolerated as a necessary evil by most societies. Prostitution was therefore controlled by the cities; workers were required to keep health cards and attend regular medical examinations. Up until 11 July

1922⁹ prostitution was checked by public authorities and belonged mainly within the scope of police and medical control. Among the main reasons that pushed women into prostitution were poverty, low education, insufficient employment opportunities and, in some cases, mental disabilities. According to contemporary biological theories promoted in the nineteenth and twentieth century, prostitutes should have had an innate predisposition to this phenomenon. The ideological basis of the system was clear pragmatism, closely linked to hygiene, public health, and venereal diseases. Doctors examined prostitutes for STDs twice a week, and police carried out regular check-ups in brothels and on the streets. Officially, women could provide sexual services from the age of sixteen.

The situation in the new state of Czechoslovakia was influenced by the political and medical discourse in the country as well as by philosophical ideas. The abolishment of prostitution was a popular opinion in society, being

⁹ Ministry of Public Health and Physical Education. Zákon o potírání pohlavních nemocí, vládní nařízení, jímž se zákon provádí a výnosy ministerstva veřejného zdravotnictví a tělesné výchovy (Prague: MVZTV, 1920), 98.

presented by the president T. G. Masaryk in the nineteenth and twentieth century. He promoted the abolitionist movement. His efforts about abolitionism of prostitution culminated in 1922 when Law No. 241 “O potírání pohlavních nemocí” (Combatting sexually transmitted diseases) was approved. The consequences of this policy were fatal, not only for the brothels but also for the women working in them. Prostitution was now controlled by the authorities; workers were required to keep health cards and attend regular medical examinations. After the abolitionist law had been accepted, the count of brothels decreased. Prostitution was moved to the streets in this period, no longer under control. The state administration was supposed to create shelters for these night-time workers where they would be properly educated. This project was unsuccessful for economic reasons. The abolitionist law had a lot of defects. The decline of brothels caused prostitutes to move to bars, taverns, and cabarets. For example, hotels’ usage of prostitution increased. The effectiveness of the abolition law was therefore low. The ban on brothels proved ineffective because the prostitutes either started using alternative

locations for sex, or the owners of brothels changed their licence to a hotel, salon etc.

The global development of abolitionism got broken by the next war. World War II brought another rise in prostitution. Lack of nutrients and food has caused infertility in women. Many female prostitutes were raped or died in a working camp. The contemporary regime promoted eugenics, aiming to create a pure race. Prostitutes were not part of public discourse, but they played a role in private brothels of German soldiers and commanders. The law was the same as in the previous period; there was no difference.

After the end of World War II and the defeat of Germany, the Czechoslovak Republic was restored, yet its character different from that before the Munich dictatorship. The post-war society focused on the ongoing changes which significantly affected and transformed the political, economic, social and cultural spheres of the inhabitants' daily life. The arrival of a new political and ideological regime in 1948 permeated every area of life. In Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989, the phenomenon of prostitution formally did not exist. In official

discourses, the authorities regarded sex work as a breaking of social norms and rules. Conversely, the term *parasitism* began to be used frequently. If there was a specific case of prostitutes or prostitution occurring in society, then instead of the prostitute nor prostitution being addressed it was the *parasite* and *parasitism*. Prostitution was therefore considered to be one of the forms of parasitism, but it was not prosecuted per se. Although the law mentioned the concept of prostitution in § 204 (prostitution), it did not define or explain it. The factual nature of the crime of parasitism was formulated in the Czechoslovak law in Act no. 64/1950 from 1956, which amended and supplemented Act no. 86/1950. In the second part of the twentieth century, the discourse on prostitution was shaped mainly by doctors (psychiatrists) and criminalists. Prostitutes secretly provided sexual services in hotels or apartments.

Results

The phenomenon of prostitution in Czechoslovakia after 1918 was transformed under the influence of the reforming ideas of politicians, doctors and society. Their goal was to create a healthy society cleansed of venereal

diseases and immoral behaviour rooted in alcoholism and adverse living conditions. The primary task after 1918 was to provide education in the field of sexual education aiming to prevent sexually transmitted diseases and delinquent behaviour of women. This change was supposed to occur with the adoption of the new abolition law 241/1922 on the suppression of venereal diseases. The process of implementing the law into the daily life of prostitutes and the majority of society was complicated, uncoordinated and different across Czechoslovak municipalities. The main problems during its introduction consisted of economic, personnel and communication discrepancies between the government and city bodies (doctors, officials, police officials) which were not sufficiently informed about its functioning and application.

During this mapping of the political discourse and the analysis of the abolition law, we found that the phenomenon of prostitution was a burning social issue that divided society into two categories: supporters of regulation and supporters of abolitionism. Each group had

its own arguments as to why is their preferred approach better and more beneficial to society. As a result, the century old regulation system was abolished by the law 241/1922 and replaced by the abolitionist approach, first spreading its ideas in the second half of the 19th century. The new law had a significant impact primarily on licensed prostitutes who used to be under police, medical and municipal supervision until 1922. With the abolition of brothels, the phenomenon of prostitution moved to bars, cafes, parks, etc.

In the field of health, prostitution was under the strict supervision of city doctors who, until 1922, carried out both regular examinations and moralizing swoops. After the adoption of a new law, the treatment of venereal diseases was mandatory for everyone. Nevertheless, some prostitutes resisted, ran away from hospitals or otherwise deliberately avoided these measures. As a result, venereal diseases did not decrease in the first years under the influence of the new law, contrary to the politicians' and other experts' predictions. Further significant changes occurred after 1939 under the influence of a generational

change, a change in the education system and a strict clerical-fascist government that spread its ideas in society.

Some associations tried to solve the social problem of prostitution in Slovakia, especially *Záchrana*, *Živena* and the Society against Venereal Diseases. These associations organized lectures, exhibitions and discussions as part of both their educational process and leisure activities. Members of the associations tried to help the fallen women through social care for other women in shelters and correctional facilities, while trying to address the prostitute as a victim of an unequal society where men are allowed everything, women are prohibited from everything and prostitutes are marginalized.

Aside from doctors, other experts in the fields of health, criminology, sociology, psychology and eugenics have dealt with the issue of prostitution. They have addressed the problem within five identified normative areas. Prostitution was considered as a result of a medical discourse focusing on venereal diseases and their prevention. Criminologists addressed this topic by examining women's biological predispositions to the craft,

referring to their innate characteristics. Biological predispositions were monitored by eugenics, which perceived prostitution in the context of improving the health of society and developing its viability in a post-war critical state. Psychologists, sociologists and educators assumed the opposite view of the sex trade and perceived prostitution in the context of a societal evil ailment, potentially changeable through enlightenment and the transformation of the family and familial life.

I presented the media image of prostitution based on the analysis of the national and regional contemporary press. The press apparently used a specific language that discriminated and sometimes dehumanized the prostitute as a person. The issue of prostitution was prominently considered regarding the political, health and criminal aspects. Preventive reports of an educational nature were also published, aiming to protect young girls from agents or pimps. Any positive news from the life of prostitutes was absent. Prostitution has always been associated with unfavourable and negative events or activities.

As to the artistic perspective, this topic was addressed by writers, artists and film directors. Their artistic reflection was influenced by modernism, expressionism and post-war pessimism. Their attention was typically centred around the figure of a prostitute associated with social and moral misery. The Slovak society was specific for its so-called Košice modernity characterized by free form urbanity and colourfulness. Literary authors reflected on prostitution through prose and poetry. Compared to other countries, their reflection was less numerous and almost always centered on unfavourable living conditions and experiences. In Slovakian interwar literature, erotic literature about prostitution was either absent or it would require a deeper search.

The dissertation showed that the prostitutes' misery was caused by their unsuitable living and family conditions. The graphs clearly suggest that religion and marital status did not play an important role. Prostitution was performed by married, single, divorced and widowed women. Prostitutes could be partners of other men, mothers of children as well as criminals. Sexual orientation played a

slightly unimportant role in the sex trade. Sexual services were provided by women and men, however in case of men the extent was lesser, mainly in big cities like Prague, Brno, or spa towns. This form of prostitution occurred uncontrollably and secretly as the legal system prohibited and punished homosexual intercourse.

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