



## Bodies and Souls

By Isabel Vincent  
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### Introduction

*Bodies and Souls* sheds light on one of the most shameful and secret chapters in history—the forced slavery and prostitution of thousands of young Jewish women from the 1860s to the beginning of World War II by a notorious gang of South American Jewish mobsters, the Zwi Migdal. Though these women were forced into this life, they were deemed unclean and shunned by the rest of the Jewish community, barred from partaking in the sacred Jewish burial ritual. Eventually, the women overcame this ban by banding together and forming The Society of Truth, a religious order that practiced love, honor to God, and faith in one another.

### Questions for Discussion

1. *Bodies and Souls* begins with a tour of a rundown cemetery in Inhaúma, Brazil. How does this set the tone for the rest of the book? What information do we learn from the author's visit to the cemetery? What is Daniel Rodrigues's relationship to the cemetery?
2. Who is Isaac Boorosky? When he visited the shtetls, what did the peasants think of him? Though penniless and desperate, Sophia Chamys's father initially resists Boorosky's offer to give his daughter employment as a maid. Why didn't he jump at the chance to improve his daughter's circumstances? Why does her father eventually give in to Boorosky's offer?
3. Describe Sophia Chamys's initial impressions of Isaac Boorosky. When did her opinion of him change? What caused it to change?
4. "In life, they endured humiliation, abuse, and marginalization. But death was different." How do we know that a Jewish burial was the most important facet of the pimps and prostitutes' Jewish faith? Why was a Jewish burial so important to them?
5. Compare Sophia Chamys, Rebecca Freedman, and Rachel Liberman's experiences in the brothels and what they ultimately did with their lives. How were they alike and how were they different?
6. The Zwi Migdal, Warsaw Jewish Mutual Aid Society, and other Jewish criminal associations were successful because they were "all based on order, discipline, and honesty." How do you think the members of these organizations reconciled the terrible trade from which they made their money and their religious beliefs? How were community leaders—Jewish or otherwise—able to justify their dealings with these criminal organizations?
7. Why was the "respectable" Jewish community hesitant to take action against the Jewish gangsters?
8. How did language and religion contribute to the power that the pimps had over the Jewish prostitutes?
9. When the girls learned the truth about what their life was going to be in America, why didn't they write home to their families to let them and the rest of their community know that these well-dressed men—with their promises of a comfortable life—were lying about the kind of life they offered the girls in America? If they had managed to write home, would it have been enough to have stopped the Zwi Migdal?
10. The pimps and prostitutes in Argentina and Brazil were considered the "Jews of the Jews." What does the author mean by this statement?
11. What were Julio Alsogaray, Rachel Liberman, and fascism's role in bringing about the downfall of the Zwi Migdal? Whose role was the most important?
12. Do the atrocities that the girls and women from the shtetls suffered make you want to take action against the global trafficking in women that still occurs today? What are some of the ways in which you can make a difference? Or do you think that your efforts would be as ineffective as Bertha Pappenheim's—that there is very little you can do to change the way the world works?

### About the Author

Isabel Vincent is the author of *Hitler's Silent Partners: Swiss Banks, Nazi Gold, and the Pursuit of Justice* and *See No Evil: The Strange Case of Christine Lamont and David Spencer*. She is the Latin America editor for Canada's *MacLean's* magazine. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Departures*, *The Independent*, *Marie Claire*, and many other international publications. She lives in Rio de Janeiro. *Bodies and Souls* is the recipient of the 2006 Canadian Jewish Book Award for History.