

The plight of the 150,000 Batyas

New novel 'The Third Daughter' is a cry for the Jewish women sold into sex slavery

• DAVID ISAACSON

I am a Jew, and while the ancestors of the right honorable gentleman were brutal savages in an unknown island, mine were priests in the temple of Solomon," proclaimed Britain's future prime minister Benjamin Disraeli in response to a jibe at his ethnicity by the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell during a House of Commons debate in 1835. We like to think Jews are not predisposed to the inhumanity that be-devils the histories of other peoples. Then along comes an episode so shocking we can only hang our heads in shame.

Talia Carner's latest novel, *The Third Daughter*, follows the misfortunes of 14-year-old Batya, whose family escape a pogrom in Russia in 1889. Destitute, homeless and starving, the family chance upon an urbane stranger, Moskowitz, who offers to marry Batya and take her to the safe, affluent and free New World. Despite his misgivings, Batya's father agrees to the deal, thereby precipitating Batya's descent into a new circle of hell. She is raped by Moskowitz, beaten by his henchman and imprisoned in the hold of a ship. On reaching Argentina, she is sold into sex slavery.

Historically, there were more than 150,000 Batyas, all recruited by Zvi Migdal, an international association of Jewish pimps who preyed on Jewish girls rendered exceptionally vulnerable by the constant fear of and flight from violent antisemitism. Operating with impunity from the early 1870s until 1939, the network extended to Poland and Germany, to India, China and South Africa and to New York's Lower East Side, making at its height \$50 million profit a year.

"Pimping in Argentina was so culturally associated with Jews that the name for a pimp in Spanish, *caftan*, was borrowed from the word for the long black coat worn by Orthodox Jewish men," Carner writes in a historical background appendix.

"Similarly, *polaca*, the word for a prostitute, was adopted from the Yiddish name for Polish women. An 1899 registry of prostitutes in Buenos Aires reveals that 30% of them were Jewish. In 1920, 25% of the state's money was generated by brothels." In the 1930s the dictator Getulio Vargas sent Argentina's Jewish pimps and prostitutes back to their now Nazi-occupied countries of origin.

Batya's attempt to escape is dashed by the local Jewish community, whose members don't distinguish between Zvi Migdal's victims and their persecutors. If this seems like a further indictment of our people, Carner

regards their apparent callousness with a novelist's breadth of understanding.

"Our social and cultural sensibilities are very different from those of that period," she says, on the phone from Florida. "In those days everything was black and white. Jewish survival in an ocean of pogroms, assimilation and annihilation was anchored in keeping the ideals of Judaism, with its high moral values and claim to the role of 'a light to the nations.' The women's and girls' 'impurity' was too great a contrast to the Jewish ideal."

HER EYES were opened to the plight of women throughout the world at the International Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995, where she was leading workshops and speaking in panel discussions. In addition to stories of sex trafficking, "I was shocked to my core by accounts of clitoridectomy of tens of millions of Muslim and African women, the Indian 'burning of the brides' over family dowry disputes and Chinese gendercide, singling out baby girls for death. And about the way our US justice system betrayed molested children by giving custody to their molesters."

This latter issue is the subject of her first novel, *Puppet Child*. From pedophilia to sex-trafficking to the cruel strictures of ultra-Orthodoxy in her 2011 novel *Jerusalem Maiden*, there seems to be a pattern. Which isn't to say that Carner's tales of despair are misery memoirs.

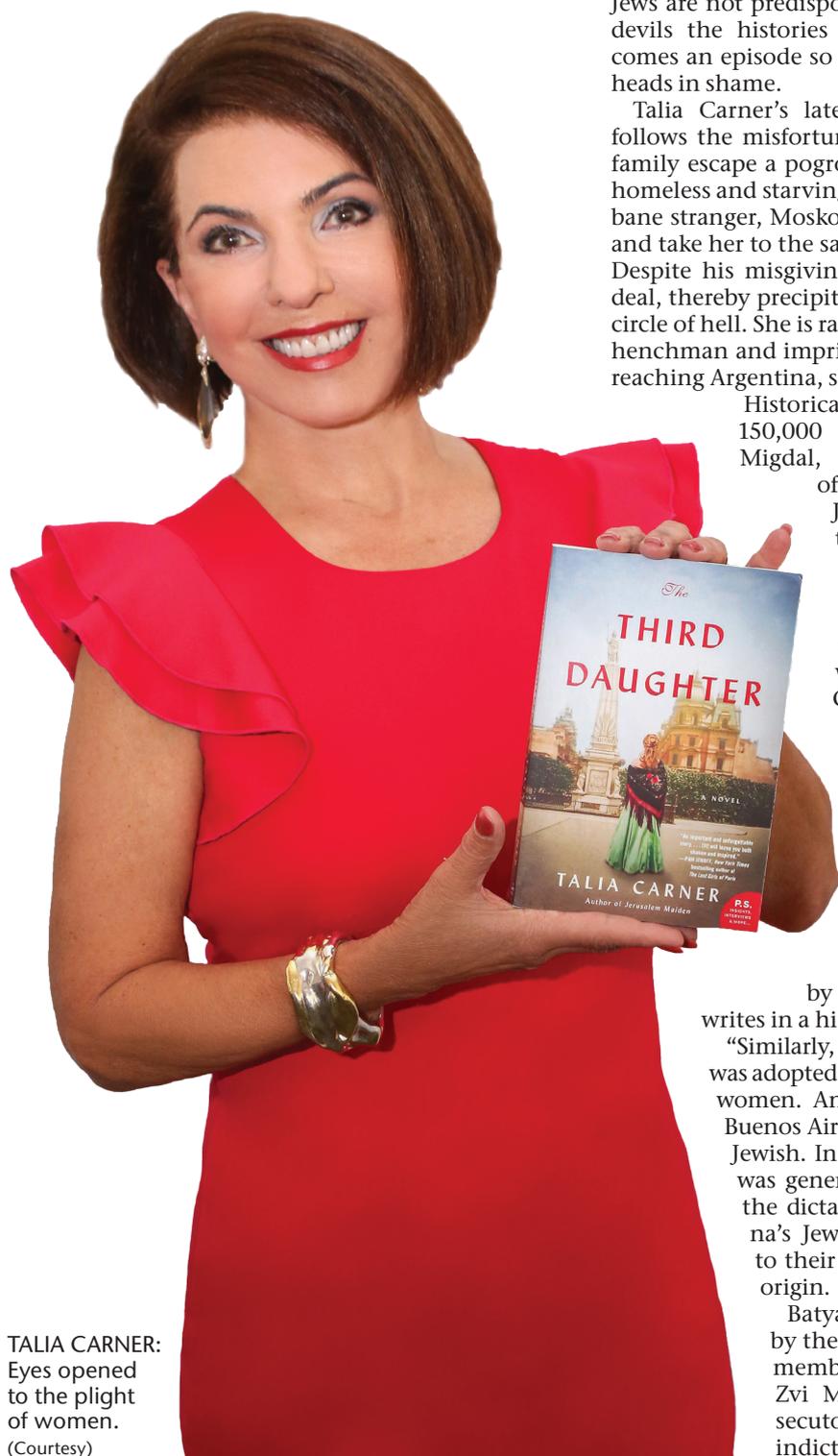
Though she certainly has the courage and ability to write scenes "so heart-wrenching that I find myself sobbing while my fingers furiously tap the keyboard," her context is historical and social rather than personal. As Phyllis Chesler writes in her review of *Jerusalem Maiden*, "The reader feels that she has entered living, lost history." Carner says she is "inspired and guided by whichever social issue pops into my life and takes roots in my mind and heart. The sense of justice, or a strong aversion to injustice, even if cases had nothing to do with me, has always been a part of who I was."

The story of who she is goes back to the 18th century. A seventh-generation sabra and "daughter of the largest Ashkenazi family in the world," she traces her antecedents to "Reb Zalman Solomon (Zoref), who was born in 1794 in Lithuania. He immigrated to the Holy Land, where he built the Hurva synagogue in Jerusalem. His son, Yoel Solomon, was one of the Jerusalem leaders who pioneered the first neighborhoods outside the Old City walls."

Carner's own place in history was assured by the timing of her birth. She is a "Daughter of the Nation," a status conferred on those born in Israel in 1948 on May 14, or just that May, or that year, depending on who you ask.

In the days when paid-for hatch, match and dispatch announcements appeared on newspapers' front pages, the nation was notified of Carner's birth in *Ha'aretz* under the headline, "The State of Israel was Declared." She grew up in Tel Aviv 'on Rothschild Boulevard, on the corner of Ma'ze Street, in the center of what is now known as "Lev Tel Aviv." Those were the days, she says, of "dancing to Elvis and Paul Anka on Friday nights."

A childhood award provided a foretaste of her later success. "Only in hindsight did I recall how, when I



TALIA CARNER: Eyes opened to the plight of women. (Courtesy)

was 10 years old, the school principal pulled me out of class one morning and told me to walk over to Bialik House. It was quite a distance for a fourth grader to walk from Ahad Ha'am Street to Bialik Street. Once there I found myself in a ceremony where, to my amazement, I was awarded the Bialik Prize."

After serving in the Six Day War and studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, she decamped to New York, where she enrolled in an MA program in Economics at SUNY and met her husband, Ron Carner. She became the publisher of *Savvy Woman* magazine and a consultant to Fortune 500 companies; he became a president of Maccabi in the USA.

CARNER CAN recall the exact moment that her journey from successful businesswoman to prize-winning novelist began.

"On November 3, 1993, at 2:48 p.m., I sat down to write a story, not knowing where it was leading me. In the months and years it took to shape this maiden effort of a novel and study the craft of fiction writing, I did not distract myself from the computer screen by fantasizing about the stardust of future literary success. Had I taken the time as a business person with a strong background in statistics to examine the odds, I would have aborted the project. Instead, I was driven by the fiery need to write. I discovered a whole world inside myself that used language which, combined with maturity and the luxury of compassion, took on the shape of novels."

Research for *The Third Daughter* took her back to Buenos Aires, where she had demonstrated outside the Ministry of Justice in 1996 against the Argentine government's foot-dragging over the bombing of the Jewish community's AMIA building two years previously. Along with the 85 lives and hundreds of injured, untold documents that would surely have exposed the dark world of Jewish traffickers were destroyed.

"I asked the librarian at the new AMIA building about the prostitutes and pimps – I didn't yet know the name Zvi Migdal. She went silent and forgot her English, so I knew. But I dropped it out of politeness."

In the novel, the evil Moscovitz brags about his organization's respectability in high society, citing its funding of the long-needed renovations of Teatro Colon, the city's leading opera house. This is all true, says Carner. "The spokesman at Teatro Colon wasn't forthcoming but the director of the city's Jewish archives confirmed it."

She was initially alerted, albeit implicitly, to the appalling export of Jewish virgins to South America by Sholem Aleichem. In a collection titled *Railroad Stories*, *The Man from Buenos Aires* depicts an urbane modern stranger visiting the sad landscape of impoverished *shtetlach* (small villages). On a train journey with the narrator, he boasts of his incredible wealth but won't reveal its source until the final paragraph, and not even then.

"I am already on the platform with my belongings, and my man from Buenos Aires stands in the car's vestibule, beaming with his smooth, self-satisfied countenance, a fragrant cigar between his teeth. As the train pulls away, my ears ring with his last words, 'Ha-ha! Well, I'm not peddling Hanukkah candles.'"

So reads Carner's own translation on her website. Yet



in Frances Butwin's 1949 translation, in a collection titled *Tevye's Daughters*, it's not Hanukkah candles but "prayer books" that the man isn't peddling. How to explain the discrepancy? Who is misrepresenting the bard of Yiddishkeit?

"In the original Yiddish, it was 'etrogim,'" says Carner. "Nobody [in the outside world] knows 'etrogim,' so different translators use different terms."

In *Jerusalem Maiden*, which won the Forward National Literature Award, the heroine Esther Kaminsky is torn between religious orthodoxy and an unwanted artistic bent. A precursor to Akiva Shtisel, you could say.

No, you couldn't.

"I loved *Shtisel*. It was a brilliant series. But its protagonist lived in a hassidic society and was allowed to paint, even 'graven images' of people, even revered rabbis. *Jerusalem Maiden* takes place in 1911 and depicts what was to become Neturei Karta [who only adopted the name in 1938]. No artistic expression was allowed. Women were not even educated, let alone permitted to meet men for coffee. In pre-Israel Mea She'arim, girls were being married off soon after puberty toward one destiny: to hasten the Messiah's arrival through fulfilling the first decree, "Be fruitful and multiply."

With its cell phones, music, home appliances, medical services, and vehicular transportation, *Shtisel* takes place not only 100 years later, but light years further ahead.'

The difference between Esther Kaminsky and the lovable schlemiel played by Michael Aloni exemplifies the hardcore historical realism that is Carner's calling card. ■

SCREENSHOTS FROM the 1925 Russian silent film 'Jewish Luck' by director Alexis Granowsky. The film, about one of Sholem Aleichem's characters, has a scene in which the mass shipping of 'brides' to America is dramatized. Otherwise, there are no archival photos from that time for visual documentation of the sex trafficking of Jewish girls from eastern Europe to the New World. But this scene shows that trafficking was a quick-cash scheme; the women were traveling willingly, believing the false promise of marriage. (Screenshot)