

**Charles van Onselen. *The Fox and the Flies: The Secret Life of a Grotesque Master Criminal*. New York: Walker & Company, 2007. pp. 646.**

Joseph Silver was a career criminal but no *master* criminal. He abused women and engaged in rape, white slavery, petty theft, and protection rackets, among other crimes. His sojourns in prison and his constant need to move reveal that he was not in complete control of his fate. Quickly wearing out his welcome wherever he was, he travelled the Atlantic world in search of new opportunities. It is this last characteristic which makes a biography of Joseph Silver particularly interesting.

Silver was born Joseph Lis in 1868 in the Russian Pale of Settlement in what is currently Poland. Like thousands of Jewish men and women, he fled to London in the 1880s to escape the pogroms that erupted in the Russian empire following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II. Those familiar with Judith Walkowitz's work will see in Joseph Silver the embodiment of late-Victorian narratives of sexual danger.<sup>1</sup> The timing of this publication complements the release of Isabel Vincent's *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas*.<sup>2</sup> While Vincent explores the "white slave trade" from the perspective of its victims, in *The Fox and the Flies: The Secret Life a Grotesque Master Criminal*, Charles van Onselen records the life of one of its entrepreneurs.

Van Onselen doggedly traces Silver's steps around the globe as he is forced to move to avoid long-term incarceration. When opportune or necessary, Silver served as an agent of the police, or moved on to new environs where sudden growth and inept or corrupt policing made fertile ground for his illegal enterprises; he "consciously sought out frontiers of turbulence in the expanding Atlantic world." (8) Van Onselen's narrative of Silver's interactions in various locations provides a unique and sordid view of the seedier sides

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of London, New York, Buenos Aires, and Johannesburg. In New York, Silver found perfect partners in the endemically corrupt police force. He was not only an informant, but he actively worked with two detectives in his robberies. The police were not involved in Silver's prostitution activities or his protection rackets, however; they had their own lucrative forms of the latter already in action. Silver maintained diverse illegal means of supporting himself, but always relied chiefly on selling and abusing women's bodies.

Van Onselen is a South African historian, and it is therefore not surprising that the most engaging and edifying parts of the biography are those set in southern Africa. His account supplements traditional political and military narratives. Silver made his way to southern Africa with other poor Eastern European Jews, dubbed "Peruvians." Before, during, and after the South African War, the poor Jewish immigrants and their wealthier coreligionists faced changing regimes and rules. In Johannesburg, Silver set up his "American Club," which ran rackets and preyed upon Jewish women. He and his colleagues courted innocent girls, then raped and beat them and forced them into prostitution. The American Club even procured women to satisfy special requests: "on one occasion [the Club] filled an order from a downtown brothel for a fifteen-year-old Lithuanian virgin within a matter of weeks." (7) Silver became a target of J.C. Smuts's campaign against organized crime and moral offences.

This book is a hybrid of painstaking research and speculation about Silver's health, psychology, and emotions. While the detail sometimes overwhelms the reader, some scholars might find van Onselen's claims about Silver's physical and mental state not entirely persuasive. What will garner the most attention, though, is van Onselen's claim to have uncovered the true identity of "Jack the Ripper."

Van Onselen cannot find direct evidence of where Joseph Silver spent 1888. He claims that part of this difficulty is the result of a deliberate effort by Silver to conceal his time in London's East End from the authorities because he had a terrible secret: he was the serial

murderer known as “Jack the Ripper.” Based on conjecture and supposition, this is the least convincing part of the narrative. Van Onselen consults those skilled in modern forensic disciplines, including handwriting experts and psychiatrists. He speculates about the roots of Silver’s “sex mania” and comments that “if ever there was a classic case of Jewish self-hatred and psychopathic ‘splitting’ then it was Joseph Lis-Silver.” (455) The trouble with the Jekyll and Hyde theme is that though there is evidence of a Mr. Hyde, there does not appear to be much evidence of a corresponding Dr. Jekyll. In identifying Silver as the “Ripper” and using the terms “Jewess” and “Jewesses,” van Onselen echoes the anti-Semitism of Silver’s contemporaries that explained their focus on Jewish men as the most likely suspects. One of the suppositions used to bolster van Onselen’s argument that Silver was the “Ripper” rests on the belief that Silver was extraordinarily affected by a particular passage in the Bible—chapter 23 in the book of Ezekiel. However, given the lack of evidence that religion played any role in Silver’s life, this is difficult to accept.

Apart from the diversions into speculation, this meticulously researched book is a testament to the author’s tenacity. *The Fox and the Flies* is the biography of a sadistic and misogynistic man who ruined lives and left pain in his wake. By following Silver’s progress across four continents, van Onselen provides sketches of diverse contemporary issues, such as monetary policy in the United States and moral reform in late Victorian London. The great strength of the volume is that it connects the histories of different continents and follows the global currents that carried vast migrations of destitute Eastern European Jews who fled Old World bigotry and pogroms only to encounter anti-Semitism in their new homes.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Judith R. Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- <sup>2</sup> Isabel Vincent, *Bodies and Souls: The Tragic Plight of Three Jewish Women Forced into Prostitution in the Americas* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2005).