

History Major Allison Cronk Becomes an Authority on Early 20th-Century Prostitutes

"I always get some weird looks when I talk about my project," senior Allison Cronk said about the research she did for the Henry Rutgers Scholars and History Honors programs, with assistance from the Aresty Research Center for Undergraduates. A possible reason for this is that Cronk conversationally describes Maria Blum, a German immigrant to Ellis Island who died a century ago, as "my prostitute." Or it could be the title of her work, "White Slavery: Exploitation or Myth? A New Narrative of European Immigrant Prostitutes in Early Twentieth Century New York City," that turns heads.



During the Progressive Era from 1890 to 1920, social reformers believed that white prostitutes could not have chosen their profession; they must have been forced into the business by "white slave" traders. Cronk, a history major from Roselle, New Jersey, began to question that premise when she took an American studies course on the culture of the 1920s. As a summer intern in the Ellis Island Oral History Project, she devised a way to test it.

Cronk discovered that many white European women were deported under the 1907 Immigration Act, an anti-white slavery law. She applied for and received funding from the Aresty Research Center for Undergraduates and the Henry Rutgers Scholars Program to travel to the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, D.C., and examine the deportation hearing records of 27 prostitutes deported between 1907 and 1910.

The hearing records confirmed her hypothesis: The vast majority of European prostitutes were not victims of organized white slavery. Like most immigrants during the same period, they came to the United States of their own free will, as part of a massive migration of poor and middle-class Europeans, to earn a living. Using Maria Blum's story as a narrative anchor, Cronk paints a picture of these women as strong, capable, proactive, and in control of their economic destiny. "These women really did want to be here," Cronk said. "They are being labeled as victims, but they actually wanted to be part of the transnational labor movement."

Cronk met weekly this semester with history Professor Virginia Yans, her faculty adviser on the project. "She has really pushed me so hard to write a really good paper – Ph.D.-level research," said Cronk, who

will begin this summer working toward her master's degree at the Graduate School of Education. "She seems to think I can really do it."

The following is an abstract of Cronk's paper:

White Slavery: Exploitation or Myth?

A New Narrative of European Immigrant Prostitutes in Early Twentieth Century New York City

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a combination of forces in the United States, that included reformers of the Progressive Era, restrictive policies introduced by the Immigration and Naturalization Service, and traditional American ideals about sex and sexuality, led to a national movement against the White Slave Trade. White slavery was based on the idea that an international trade ring existed that trafficked white women, particularly women from Europe to the United States, against their will, for the purpose of prostitution, or as it was considered then, the "social evil." Until now, both contemporary and modern sources have examined the structure of white slavery reform efforts but none have examined the story of immigrant prostitutes in this context. Through the examination of original deportation records of immigrant prostitutes at the NARA branch in Washington DC, a new narrative has unfolded, one which portrays immigrant prostitutes deported under white slavery reform and laws not as victims but as willing and proactive participants involved in their immigration to the United States. Clearly not a generalization, this work seeks to tell the story of a small group of women whose experiences strongly differ from the version shared by contemporary sources and modern historians.

Photography from the deportation file of Maria Blum, National Archives and Records Administration.