

The New York Times

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, please [click here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#) »

January 11, 1998

CONTRABAND WOMEN -- A special report.; Traffickers' New Cargo: Naive Slavic Women

By MICHAEL SPECTER

RAMLE, Israel—Irina always assumed that her beauty would somehow rescue her from the poverty and hopelessness of village life. A few months ago, after answering a vague ad in a small Ukrainian newspaper, she slipped off a tour boat when it put in at Haifa, hoping to make a bundle dancing naked on the tops of tables.

She was 21, self-assured and glad to be out of Ukraine. Israel offered a new world, and for a week or two everything seemed possible. Then, one morning, she was driven to a brothel, where her boss burned her passport before her eyes.

"I own you," she recalled his saying. "You are my property and you will work until you earn your way out. Don't try to leave. You have no papers and you don't speak Hebrew. You will be arrested and deported. Then we will get you and bring you back."

It happens every single day. Not just in Israel, which has deported nearly 1,500 Russian and Ukrainian women like Irina in the past three years. But throughout the world, where selling naive and desperate young women into sexual bondage has become one of the fastest-growing criminal enterprises in the robust global economy.

The international bazaar for women is hardly new, of course. Asians have been its basic commodity for decades. But economic hopelessness in the Slavic world has opened what experts call the most lucrative market of all to criminal gangs that have flourished since the fall of Communism: white women with little to sustain them but their dreams. Pimps, law enforcement officials and relief groups all agree that Ukrainian and Russian women are now the most valuable in the trade.

Because their immigration is often illegal -- and because some percentage of the women choose to work as prostitutes -- statistics are difficult to assess. But the United Nations estimates that four million people throughout the world are trafficked each year -- forced through lies and coercion to work against their will in many types of servitude. The International Organization for Migration has said that as many as 500,000 women are annually trafficked into Western Europe alone.

Many end up like Irina. Stunned and outraged by the sudden order to prostitute herself, she simply refused. She was beaten and raped before she succumbed. Finally she got a break. The brothel was raided and she was brought here to Neve Tirtsa in Ramle, the only women's prison in Israel. Now, like hundreds of Ukrainian and Russian women with no documents or obvious forgeries, she is waiting to be sent home.

"I don't think the man who ruined my life will even be fined," she said softly, slow tears filling her enormous green eyes. "You can call me a fool for coming here. That's my crime. I am stupid. A stupid girl from a little village. But can people really buy and sell women and get away with it? Sometimes I sit here and ask myself if that really happened to me, if it can really happen at all."

Then, waving her arm toward the muddy prison yard, where Russian is spoken more commonly than Hebrew, she whispered one last thought: "I'm not the only one, you know. They have ruined us all."

Traffic Patterns

Russia and Ukraine Supply the Flesh

Centered in Moscow and the Ukrainian capital, Kiev, the networks trafficking women run east to Japan and Thailand, where thousands of young Slavic women now work against their will as prostitutes, and west to the Adriatic Coast and beyond. The routes are controlled by Russian crime gangs based in Moscow. Even when they do not specifically move the women overseas, they provide security, logistical support, liaison with brothel owners in many countries and, usually, false documents.

Women often start their hellish journey by choice. Seeking a better life, they are lured by local advertisements for good jobs in foreign countries at wages they could never imagine at home.

In Ukraine alone, the number of women who leave is staggering. As many as 400,000 women under 30 have gone in the past decade, according to their country's Interior Ministry. The Thai Embassy in Moscow, which processes visa applications from Russia and Ukraine, says it receives nearly 1,000 visa applications a day, most of these from women.

Israel is a fairly typical destination. Prostitution is not illegal here, although brothels are, and with 250,000 foreign male workers -- most of whom are single or here without their wives -- the demand is great. Police officials estimate that there are 25,000 paid sexual transactions every day. Brothels are ubiquitous.

None of the women seem to realize the risks they run until it is too late. Once they cross the border their passports will be confiscated, their freedoms curtailed and what little money they have taken from them at once.

"You want to tell these kids that if something seems too good to be true it usually is," said

Lyudmilla Biryuk, a Ukrainian psychologist who has counseled women who have escaped or been released from bondage. "But you can't imagine what fear and real ignorance can do to a person."

The women are smuggled by car, bus, boat and plane. Handed off in the dead of night, many are told they will pick oranges, work as dancers or as waitresses. Others have decided to try their luck at prostitution, usually for what they assume will be a few lucrative months. They have no idea of the violence that awaits them.

The efficient, economically brutal routine -- whether here in Israel, or in one of a dozen other countries -- rarely varies. Women are held in apartments, bars and makeshift brothels; there they service, by their own count, as many as 15 clients a day. Often they sleep in shifts, four to a bed. The best that most hope for is to be deported after the police finally catch up with their captors.

Few ever testify. Those who do risk death. Last year in Istanbul, Turkey, according to Ukrainian police investigators, two women were thrown to their deaths from a balcony while six of their Russian friends watched.

In Serbia, also last year, said a young Ukrainian woman who escaped in October, a woman who refused to work as a prostitute was beheaded in public.

In Milan a week before Christmas, the police broke up a ring that was holding auctions in which women abducted from the countries of the former Soviet Union were put on blocks, partially naked, and sold at an average price of just under \$1,000.

"This is happening wherever you look now," said Michael Platzer, the Vienna-based head of operations for the United Nations' Center for International Crime Prevention. "The mafia is not stupid. There is less law enforcement since the Soviet Union fell apart and more freedom of movement. The earnings are incredible. The overhead is low -- you don't have to buy cars and guns. Drugs you sell once and they are gone. Women can earn money for a long time."

"Also," he added, "the laws help the gangsters. Prostitution is semilegal in many places and that makes enforcement tricky. In most cases punishment is very light."

In some countries, Israel among them, there is not even a specific law against the sale of human beings.

Mr. Platzer said that although certainly "tens of thousands" of women were sold into prostitution each year, he was uncomfortable with statistics since nobody involved has any reason to tell the truth.

"But if you want to use numbers," he said, "think about this. Two hundred million people are victims of contemporary forms of slavery. Most aren't prostitutes, of course, but children in sweatshops, domestic workers, migrants. During four centuries, 12 million people were believed to be involved in the slave trade between Africa and the New World. The 200 million -- and many of

course are women who are trafficked for sex -- is a current figure. It's happening now. Today."

Distress Calls

Far-Flung Victims Provide Few Clues

The distress call came from Donetsk, the bleak center of coal production in southern Ukraine. A woman was screaming on the telephone line. Her sister and a friend were prisoners in a bar somewhere near Rome. They spoke no Italian and had no way out, but had managed, briefly, to get hold of a man's cell phone.

"Do you have any idea where they are, exactly?" asked Olga Shved, who runs La Strada in Kiev, Ukraine's new center dedicated to fighting the trafficking of women in Eastern Europe and the countries of the former Soviet Union.

The woman's answer was no. Ms. Shved began searching for files and telephone numbers of the local consul, the police, anybody who could help.

"Do they know how far from Rome they are?" she asked, her voice tightening with each word. "What about the name of the street or the bar? Anything will help," she said, jotting notes furiously as she spoke. "We can get the police on this, but we need something. If they call back, tell them to give us a clue. The street number. The number of a bus that runs past. One thing is all we need."

Ms. Shved hung up and called officials at Ukraine's Interior Ministry and the Foreign Ministry. Her conversations were short, direct and obviously a routine part of her job.

That is because Ukraine -- and to a lesser degree its Slavic neighbors Russia and Belarus -- has replaced Thailand and the Philippines as the epicenter of the global business in trafficking women. The Ukrainian problem has been worsened by a ravaged economy, an atrophied system of law enforcement, and criminal gangs that grow more brazen each year. Young European women are in demand, and Ukraine, a country of 51 million people, has a seemingly endless supply. It is not that hard to see why.

Neither Russia nor Ukraine reports accurate unemployment statistics. But even partial numbers present a clear story of chaos and economic dislocation. Federal employment statistics in Ukraine indicate that more than two-thirds of the unemployed are women. The Government also keeps another statistic: employed but not working. Those are people who technically have jobs, and can use company amenities like day-care centers and hospitals. But they do not work or get paid. Three-quarters are women. And of those who have lost their jobs since the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, more than 80 percent are women.

The average salary in Ukraine today is slightly less than \$30 a month, but it is half that in the small towns that criminal gangs favor for recruiting women to work abroad. On average, there

are 30 applicants for every job in most Ukrainian cities. There is no real hope; but there is freedom.

In that climate, looking for work in foreign countries has increasingly become a matter of survival.

"It's no secret that the highest prices now go for the white women," said Marco Buffo, executive director of On the Road, an antitrafficking organization in northern Italy. "They are the novelty item now. It used to be Nigerians and Asians at the top of the market. Now it's the Ukrainians."

Economics is not the only factor causing women to flee their homelands. There is also social reality. For the first time, young women in Ukraine and Russia have the right, the ability and the willpower to walk away from their parents and their hometowns. Village life is disintegrating throughout much of the former Soviet world, and youngsters are grabbing any chance they can find to save themselves.

"After the wall fell down, the Ukrainian people tried to live in the new circumstances," said Ms. Shved. "It was very hard, and it gets no easier. Girls now have few opportunities yet great freedom. They see 'Pretty Woman,' or a thousand movies and ads with the same point, that somebody who is rich can save them. The glory and ease of wealth is almost the basic point of the Western advertising that we see. Here the towns are dying. What jobs there are go to men. So they leave."

First, however, they answer ads from employment agencies promising to find them work in a foreign country. Here again, Russian crime gangs play a central role. They often recruit people through seemingly innocuous "mail order bride" meetings. Even when they do not, few such organizations can operate without paying off one gang or another. Sometimes want ads are almost honest, suggesting that the women can earn up to \$1,000 a month as "escorts" abroad. Often they are vague or blatantly untrue.

Recruiting Methods

Ads Make Offers Too Good to Be True

One typical ad used by traffickers in Kiev last year read: "Girls: Must be single and very pretty. Young and tall. We invite you for work as models, secretaries, dancers, choreographers, gymnasts. Housing is supplied. Foreign posts available. Must apply in person."

One young woman who did, and made it back alive, described a harrowing journey. "I met with these guys and they asked if I would work at a strip bar," she said. "Why not, I thought. They said we would have to leave at once. We went by car to the Slovak Republic where they grabbed my passport. I think they got me new papers there, but threatened me if I spoke out. We made it to Vienna, then to Turkey. I was kept in a bar and I was told I owed \$5,000 for my travel. I worked for three days, and on the fourth I was arrested."

Lately, the ads have started to disappear from the main cities -- where the realities of such offers are known now. These days the appeals are made in the provinces, where their success is undiminished.

Most of the thousands of Ukrainian women who go abroad each year are illegal immigrants who do not work in the sex business. Often they apply for a legal visa -- to dance, or work in a bar -- and then stay after it expires.

Many go to Turkey and Germany, where Russian crime groups are particularly powerful. Israeli leaders say that Russian women -- they tend to refer to all women from the former Soviet Union as Russian -- disappear off tour boats every day. Officials in Italy estimate that at least 30,000 Ukrainian women are employed illegally there now.

Most are domestic workers, but a growing number are prostitutes, some of them having been promised work as domestics only to find out their jobs were a lie. Part of the problem became clear in a two-year study recently concluded by the Washington-based nonprofit group Global Survival Network: police officials in many countries just don't care.

The network, after undercover interviews with gangsters, pimps and corrupt officials, found that local police forces -- often those best able to prevent trafficking -- are least interested in helping.

Gillian Caldwell of Global Survival Network has been deeply involved in the study. "In Tokyo," she said, "a sympathetic senator arranged a meeting for us with senior police officials to discuss the growing prevalence of trafficking from Russia into Japan. The police insisted it wasn't a problem, and they didn't even want the concrete information we could have provided. That didn't surprise local relief agencies, who cited instances in which police had actually sold trafficked women back to the criminal networks which had enslaved them."

Official Reactions

Best-Placed to Help, But Least Inclined

Complacency among police agencies is not uncommon.

"Women's groups want to blow this all out of proportion," said Gennadi V. Lepenko, chief of Kiev's branch of Interpol, the international police agency. "Perhaps this was a problem a few years ago. But it's under control now."

That is not the view at Ukraine's Parliament -- which is trying to pass new laws to protect young women -- or at the Interior Ministry.

"We have a very serious problem here and we are simply not equipped to solve it by ourselves," said Mikhail Lebed, chief of criminal investigations for the Ukrainian Interior Ministry. "It is a human tragedy, but also, frankly, a national crisis. Gangsters make more from these women in a week than we have in our law enforcement budget for the whole year. To be honest, unless we get

some help we are not going to stop it."

But solutions will not be simple. Criminal gangs risk little by ferrying women out of the country; indeed, many of the women go voluntarily. Laws are vague, cooperation between countries rare and punishment of traffickers almost nonexistent. Without work or much hope of a future at home, an eager teen-ager will find it hard to believe that the promise of a job in Italy, Turkey or Israel is almost certain to be worthless.

"I answered an ad to be a waitress," said Tamara, 19, a Ukrainian prostitute in a massage parlor near Tel Aviv's old Central Bus Station, a Russian-language ghetto for the cheapest brothels. "I'm not sure I would go back now if I could. What would I do there, stand on a bread line or work in a factory for no wages?"

Tamara, like all other such women interviewed for this article, asked that her full name not be published. She has classic Slavic features, with long blond hair and deep green eyes. She turned several potential customers away so she could speak at length with a reporter. She was willing to talk as long as her boss was out. She said she was not watched closely while she remained within the garish confines of the "health club."

"I didn't plan to do this," she said, looking sourly at the rich red walls and leopard prints around her. "They took my passport, so I don't have much choice. But they do give me money. And believe me, it's better than anything I could ever get at home."

Yitzhak Tyler, the chief of undercover activities for the Haifa police, is a big, open-faced man who doesn't mince words.

"We got a hell of a problem on our hands," he said. The port city of 200,000 has become the easiest entryway for women brought to Israel to work as prostitutes -- though by no means the only one. Sometimes they walk off tour boats, but increasingly they come with forged documents that enable them to live and work in Israel. These have often been bought or stolen from elderly Jewish women in Russia or Ukraine.

"This is a sophisticated, global operation," Mr. Tyler said. "It's evil, and it's successful because the money is so good. These men pay \$500 to \$1,000 for a Ukrainian or Russian woman. Do you understand what I am telling you? They will buy these women and make a fortune out of them."

To illustrate his point, Mr. Tyler grabbed a black calculator and started calling out the sums as he punched them in.

"Take a small place," he said, "with 10 girls. Each has 15 to 20 clients a day. Multiply that by say 200 shekels. So say 30,000 shekels a day comes in to each place. Each girl works 25 days a month. Minimum."

Mr. Tyler was busy doing math as he spoke. "So we are talking about 750,000 shekels a month, or

about \$215,000. A man often owns five of these places. That's a million dollars. No taxes, no real overhead. It's a factory with slave labor. And we've got them all over Israel."

The Tropicana, in Tel Aviv's bustling business district, is one of the busiest bordellos. The women who work there, like nearly all prostitutes in Israel today, are Russian. Their boss, however, is not.

"Israelis love Russian girls," said Jacob Golan, who owns this and two other clubs, and spoke willingly about the business he finds so "successful." "They are blonde and good-looking and different from us," he said, chuckling as he drew his hand over his black hair. "And they are desperate. They are ready to do anything for money."

Always filled with half-naked Russian women, the club is open around the clock. There is a schedule on the wall next to the receptionist -- with each woman's hours listed in a different color, and the days and shifts rotating, as at a restaurant or a bar. Next to the schedule a sign reads, "We don't accept checks." Next to that there is a poster for a missing Israeli woman.

There are 12 cubicles at the Tropicana where 20 women work in shifts, 8 during the daytime, 12 at night. Business is always booming, and not just with foreign workers. Israeli soldiers, with rifles on their shoulders, frequent the place, as do business executives and tourists.

Mr. Golan was asked if most women who work at the club do so voluntarily. He laughed heartily.

"I don't get into that," he said, staring vacantly across his club at four Russian women sitting on a low couch. "They are brought here and told to work. I don't force them. I pay them. What goes on between them and the men they are with, how could that be my problem?"

Deterrent Strategies

A System That Fails Those Who Testify

Every once in a while, usually with great fanfare and plenty of advance notice, Mr. Golan gets raided. He pays a fine, and the women without good false documents are taken to prison.

If they are deported, the charges against them are dropped. But if a woman wants to file a complaint, then she must remain in prison until a trial is held. "In the past four years," Betty Lahan, prison director of Neve Tirtsa here, said, "I don't know of a single case where a woman chose to testify."

Such punitive treatment of victims is the rule rather than the exception. In Italy, where the police say killings of women forced into prostitution average one a month, Parliament tried to create a sort of witness protection program. But it only allowed women to stay in the country for one year and did nothing to hide their identities.

"The deck is just so completely stacked against the women in all this," said Daniella Pompei, an immigration specialist with the community of Sant'Egidio, the Catholic relief agency in Rome.

"The police is the last place these women want to go." She said that only 20 women had ever used the protection program.

It is not clear who will stop the mob. On a trip to Ukraine late last year, Hillary Rodham Clinton spoke out about the new white slave trade that has developed so rapidly there. The United States and the European Union have plans to work together to educate young women about the dangers of working abroad. Other initiatives, like stays of deportation for prisoners, victims' shelters and counseling, have also been discussed.

"I don't care about any of that," said Lena, a young Latvian, one of the inmates waiting to be deported here. "I just want to know one thing. How will I ever walk down the street like a human being again?"

Photos: Maya, a Russian prostitute at the Tropicana club in Tel Aviv. The sign on the door reads, "No Smoking." (Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times)(pg. 1); Poverty has trapped Ukrainian and Russian women in the sex trade. Nathalie, left, and Maya prepare for work at a Tel Aviv brothel. Israel says it has deported 1,500 Russian and Ukrainian women in the past three years. For most, deportation offers the only escape. (Photographs by Rina Castelnovo for The New York Times)(pg. 6)