

FROM RUSSIA AS 'SLAVES'



Lev Trakhtenberg, under house arrest, denies the women he has brought over from Russia (below) to dance in local clubs are here against their will.

RON ANTONELLI/DAILY NEWS

They came through Kennedy Airport with visas claiming they had traveled 5,000 miles to work as musicians in internationally renowned Russian show groups.

Instead, the women of Voronezh, an agribusiness city of 1 million people in central Russia, worked as strippers in northern New Jersey clubs like Delilah's Den and Frank's Chicken House.

Natasha, Vanessa, Liza, Lolita and about 30 others danced six days a week, shuttled from Brooklyn apartments by a hulking ex-boxer.

Today, several are government witnesses in a federal case that opens a window on the burgeoning international trade in young, attractive Russian women.

"The fearful plight of these women, who were forced to dance nude and perform other abhorrent acts, cannot be measured in a 12-count indictment," New Jersey Attorney General Peter Harvey said of the case. "Their plight can only be measured in human tragedy."

One expert has testified that as many as 8,000 women are smuggled into the region each year to work in strip clubs, massage parlors or as domestic servants.

The trade generates thousands of dollars a week for dancers who are forced to kick in between \$200 and \$600 a day to the people who brought them here — money that over the years has attracted violence.

In April 2000, Veronica Chaschina, a 28-year-old Russian stripper, was gunned down in her Brighton Beach apartment by an acquaintance who believed she was hiding more than \$100,000.

"These women are not doing this of their own choice," Jersey City Police Lt.

Within a week, he found work outside the Democratic National Convention at Madison Square Garden, hawking flyers for a Manhattan strip club.

Federal prosecutors say that in the late 1990s, Trakhtenberg and his ex-wife, Viktoriya I'lina, hatched the plan to bring women from their native Voronezh to work in strip clubs in New Jersey.

They placed ads in Voronezh newspapers, seeking women who wanted to work "striptease" in America. They hired

I'lina's old flame Sergey Malchikov, a former professional boxer, to drive the women to their jobs from sparsely furnished apartments in Brooklyn, authorities say.

Prosecutors say the couple lied on the women's visas, claiming they

would work in popular Russian show groups or study at the University of Illinois. Further, the prosecutors say, the women were not informed of the "lascivious" nature of the dancing.

The women's passports were confiscated to restrict their movement, and those who tried to leave or refused to pay back their \$5,000 smuggling fee were threatened, prosecutors say.


Trakhtenberg tells a different story. He said he and his family were forced to take part in the smuggling by unnamed criminal elements. He alleged his name was forged on the women's visa documents and that they lied in the hopes of winning residency.

"I never smuggled anybody," Trakhtenberg said as he sipped Russian cognac in

DAILY NEWS

SPECIAL REPORT

By THOMAS ZAMBITO
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER



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"These women are not doing this of their own choice," Jersey City Police Lt. Walter Zalisko told a group gathered last month at the Ukrainian Institute of America on East 79th St. for the screening of a film that dramatized the problem. "They're slaves."

He said the Russian mob is behind many of the operations.

Zalisko, who is fluent in Russian, has assisted with prosecutions in New York and New Jersey and estimates he has spoken with as many as 800 victims, some as young as 15, working in strip clubs or as prostitutes.

Since 2001, the Justice Department has charged 149 traffickers — three times the number from the previous three years. Over the same period, 287 prosecutions were opened.

"It's like a cancer that has gone undetected and has metastasized," said Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), a sponsor of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Enacted in 2000, the law increased penalties for traffickers and made cooperating victims eligible for visas.

At the center of the case involving the women of Voronezh is Lev Trakhtenberg, a 39-year-old Russian émigré who produces theatrical shows for Brighton Beach's Russian community.

Trakhtenberg arrived in the United States in 1992 with a master's degree in Russian literature and few prospects.

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Trakhtenberg tells a different story.

He said he and his family were forced to take part in the smuggling by unnamed criminal elements. He alleged his name was forged on the women's visa documents and that they lied in the hopes of winning residency.

"I never smuggled anybody," Trakhtenberg said as he sipped Russian cognac in his Brooklyn apartment, where he is under house arrest awaiting trial in October in Newark Federal Court.

"Everybody who came here came here voluntarily. Can you imagine they're calling this modern-day slavery if many of [the dancers] came here twice and continue to do the 'lascivious' dancing? This is absurd."

But prosecutors said in court papers that I'lina, attorney Larry Bronson and a private investigator tried to intimidate witnesses in the case at Delilah's Den in South Amboy, N.J., last November.

"We're gonna win, and I know they promised you a green card," I'lina told one of the dancers, according to a prosecutor's account. "They're going to use you like condoms and throw you away."

Prosecutor Leslie Faye Schwartz said one of the alleged victims told her that an attorney and another man from the group came close to the stage, waving \$20 bills as she danced.

"Come on and talk to me like a customer," one of the men said. "I'll take a dance."

Bronson questions the credibility of the dancers.

"Anybody who can stand on a stage and take their clothes off and then give some greasy truck driver a lap dance is not someone who is a shrinking violet," Bronson said.

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Re: Attached Newspaper Article – “From Russia As Slaves”

Dear Mr. Harvey:

With all due respect, you don't know a damn about the Russian mafia's underground pipeline for bringing Russian prostitutes and strippers to America. These ladies come of their own free will to make big money. The average monthly salary in Russia is \$150. They can make many times that in one night at a lap-dancing club and even more as prostitutes. Prostitution was always the former Soviet Union's key capitalistic enterprise with the pimps being both men and women. Now it's Russia's key earner of hard currency because the fall of the Iron Curtain unleashed tens of thousands of prostitutes and assorted criminals into the world.

The Russian sex industry works quite simply: model agencies through out Russia, some run by men, some by females, are swamped with pretty young girls wanting to sell their assets in hard currency markets. The agencies, often via bribes, obtain the girls travel visas so they can work overseas in lap-dancing clubs and brothels. Some agencies send the ladies to work at clubs in Mexico City, such as The Men's Club, and then smuggle them into the U.S. The girls know before they leave what they are going to work at, how else could they hope to make so much money. They sell their bodies willingly because that's how they become millionaires by Russian standards.

The standard agency fee is around 20% for making the travel and visa arrangements and paying the airfare. The strip club or brothel takes around another 15%. That leaves the prostitutes and strippers 60 to 65% beside the private prostitution deals they cut with their customers and whatever they can cheat from the money they owe their agencies. It's rather difficult for a model agency in Russia to keep track of how many times a girl gives a lap dance or performs sexual acts. These Russian model agencies also function as matchmakers, suckering American men into bringing these prostitutes to America, and pornography producers for the American market.

I suggest you talk to the Deputy District Attorney for Los Angeles County, Marcia Daniel, who recently prosecuted the largest prostitution ring in Los Angeles' history, run by a 42 year old Ukrainian woman and her 22 year old daughter. Ms. Daniel will tell you how the underground railway funneling Russian prostitutes into America works. But you are probably not interested, since you are obviously pandering to the female vote. Oh, and by the way, when a Russian has her passport stolen or "confiscated," all she needs to do is contact the nearest Russian Consulate to obtain a replacement.

You may feel like a white knight, but the folks in Russia and those here that understand the twisted nature of that country are laughing at your gullibility. You should take a lesson from former President Harry Truman, "Those Russians, they lie." And Russian women are the best at it in large part because they can cry at will.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Roy Den Hollander