

## 11 The red mafia

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'The police in the city of Leeuwarden have rounded up 16 illegal women and men, mostly of eastern European origin,' Dutch radio reported in its early morning news on 11 February 1994. The arrests were the start of an investigation into a case which was typical of the criminal activities of eastern European gangs. Some of the women apprehended had been recruited in Russia by an organization which promised them a glamorous life as dancers. A few of them produced expired visas; one worked at a travel agency, which sold the visas the gang trafficking the women had obtained from the embassy. It is common practice for travel agencies in eastern European countries to sell visas. Two of the women had offers of work from a company, which proved to be forgeries. The other women had all been promised careers as high-class call girls.<sup>1</sup> All the women were trapped by debt; they had been tricked by different traffickers, but had all been taken to the same town, Leeuwarden, where the brothel-owner kept track of their debts, while conning them out of a lot more money. They were subjected to the classic controls of traffickers, such as handing over their passports and money. There was a camera in every room, so escape was impossible. The gang had intimidated them by threatening to sell them: they were even introduced to their prospective buyers, which terrified them all. 'I worked voluntarily because if I hadn't things would have been even worse,' one of the women said when she was told that there is a law against traffic in women. She said she didn't mind being exploited, she came from Russia where women are used to it. She clearly didn't want to take the matter any further.

The appearance on the scene of criminals and traffickers from eastern and central Europe, the so-called red mafia, caused great changes in the trade in women. After the fall of the Berlin Wall the numbers of women trafficked from eastern Europe increased dramatically. Now almost 80 per cent of STV's clients are from

central and eastern European countries, whereas before 1989 they were only 1 or 2 per cent. Polish and Czech women usually travel overland, which is cheaper than flying. They come by car or minibus, and sometimes on package tours on which they are told by the traffickers to get off the bus in Germany. The women then meet their traffickers at taxi ranks, petrol stations or parking lots.

Russian women usually travel by air, sometimes on a Polish passport. As yet Poles don't need visas to enter the Netherlands, whereas Russians do. The women are usually told just as they are boarding the plane that they have to carry a Polish passport. This intimidates them since they were not always aware of it beforehand. The traffickers use the women's anxiety to enforce their own terms: they send the women to countries other than those they thought they were going to and instruct them what to tell the authorities. For example, one woman said that none of the characteristics of trafficking applied to her. Another said at once before she was questioned, 'No, I have come of my own accord, I have kept my own passport and my money.' Apparently she had arrived at a brothel in a godforsaken village after a long taxi ride. She signalled to the group's spokeswoman to show that she hadn't given anything away. After a long time she said finally that she hadn't been taken in an ordinary taxi and that someone had promised to marry her if she kept her mouth shut.

The women are reluctant to talk because eastern European gangs are extremely violent and use every kind of threat to intimidate them. Since the red mafia arrived on the scene, killings to maintain the balance of power between traffickers have increased. They are said to have made a woman dig her own grave,<sup>2</sup> and they have kidnapped prostitutes simply to settle a dispute,<sup>3</sup> and not only prostitutes. For example, one woman at the police station seemed very upset but persisted in stating that she had not been wronged. She just wanted to be deported as soon as possible. It later emerged that her child had been taken hostage in Russia and she had decided to go back to negotiate with the traffickers. Another Russian woman saw on television the picture of a girl who had arrived in the same group as her. The girl was dead and her photograph was being shown as part of an appeal by the police for information. Eastern European criminals don't restrict themselves to trafficking, but usually sell arms and drugs on the side, which makes them even more dangerous.

Some eastern European brokers have promised women political asylum, to which they are not usually entitled. Another relatively

new trick is to give women false job offers from existing companies. In November 1994 one group was convicted of practising this trick. One of its members was a Dutchman, Jan W., a former naval officer who is now a brothel-owner. He boasted that he had excellent contacts in Russia. He and his associates were also said to deal in uranium, which he denied. He was a prominent member of the VER, the Dutch Association of Relaxhouses, from which he is now probably barred. In an interview in the VER magazine he denied all the charges pending against him. 'My only mistake was that I had a few illegal Russian women working for me,' he said, and compared to the Russian-Dutch couple he worked with he seemed a minor crook. The husband is a Dutch ex-teacher who ran a computer company. His Russian wife ran an 'artists' agency' in Kiev with her mother, which took care of recruitment. The couple falsified the company's business correspondence to get Russian women into the Netherlands. The letterheads of innocent business associates were cut off original letters and pasted on to false job offers, which were then faxed to the Dutch embassy to obtain visas for the women. The six women they had recruited were unaware of all this: they thought they were going to work in the entertainment industry.

One of their victims was promised a job as a waitress in a lonely hearts club. She had been told explicitly that she wouldn't have to work as a prostitute, but when she arrived this was not the case. She protested on several occasions, but to no avail. She even had to work when she was menstruating. The other girl, H., who filed charges, was also promised a career in entertainment. 'A man approached me on the streets of Kiev and asked me if I wanted to join a ballet show. I gave him my telephone number. For a long time I heard no more. Suddenly I learned that impresarios from the Netherlands and Denmark had arrived and would hire me as an erotic dancer. I was promised that my family would never find out. The worst thing I would have to do was strip, but they said they could probably find me some other employment.'<sup>4</sup> Her mother advanced her the money for the ticket. Again she had to wait a long time and spent the money she had borrowed on other things. When the time finally arrived for her to go, she had to borrow more money.

A contact of the gang's took her via Budapest to the Netherlands. H. said, 'In my broken English I told the managing director of the computing company that I didn't want to go into prostitution, but from his expression I realized that he was taking no notice of me.' So prostitution it was for a couple of months.

H. was pressured to pay her debts at an interest rate of 20 per cent and some sturdy men were meant to be on their way to enforce this. Before they arrived, H. was deported by the police. She went home, but didn't dare to tell her husband that she had had to have sex with the customers. Shortly afterwards she received a fax from the Netherlands instructing her to return. She was too frightened to refuse and so back she went. In the Netherlands she managed to start a relationship with a client from the brothel, who paid her release money, and went to live with him at an address unknown to the gang. One of the gang wrote a worried letter to the police in her husband's name to find out her address. In the meantime her husband in Kiev was being harassed by gang members and decided to leave. He joined her at the client's house and pretended to be her brother.

Although the women trafficked by the gang had received a number of threatening phone calls, they did not retract their statements. The couple, who were accused of threatening them with their contacts in the Russian mafia, denied the charges strenuously. 'I just wanted to protect the women from the mafia,' one of them said. The female suspect, who was 26 and a wisp of a girl, said she felt like a victim herself, and then came up with the classic excuse that she only wanted to help the women. However, it emerged from police telephone taps that the traffickers had called their assistants to enlist witnesses for the defence. They were each sentenced to a year's imprisonment. At the trial Jan W., the brothel-owner, confessed to having confiscated the women's earnings. He also admitted possessing weapons and drugs illegally. He was found guilty of being an accomplice to trafficking and was sentenced for that and two other offences he had also confessed to.

In another big case with a similar background women had been invited to the Netherlands by a group who did above-board business as well as 'irregular' trade. Of all things, the women were supposed to sell tulips in Amsterdam, a scam organized by two Russian police officers. The women were given official invitations stamped by the Dutch authorities. Two of the women went to live with clients, but the gang tracked them down and made the men pay.<sup>5</sup>

### Recruitment via asylum

Two Romanian women were swimming a river from Poland to Germany. Their luggage was on land in a car. They had been

recruited by a Romanian woman, Veronica P., who was meant to hand them over to a Turkish organization in Germany. The swimming women knew something was wrong, but where could they go? They were in the middle of nowhere and didn't know how the Polish or German authorities would react to their illegal crossing.

One of the two women, Asta,<sup>6</sup> had known Veronica P. for a long time. Asta is an educated woman who has a gift for learning languages. After a few months in the Netherlands she was able to tell her story in Dutch. 'I lived in the same village as Veronica P., who seemed a normal housewife with children. I was invited to her house. After several visits, she suggested I could work in a German household. As life in Romania was bleak for me – I had problems with my job – the idea was appealing.' Asta finally decided to try it. Together with two other women from her village, who were also friends of Veronica P.'s, she went to Poland. Her party was divided between two cars, one driven by Veronica's husband. Until their swim there had been nothing illegal about the journey.

Before beginning their swim, they had been told to apply for political asylum in Germany, but they were refused political refugee status. 'No problem. There is another solution,' Veronica said.

They went to Turkish friends of Veronica's who had a bar. In Germany many night clubs and bars are owned by Turkish people.<sup>7</sup> Veronica arranged temporary employment for the women with them. In the bar the women's resistance was broken by food deprivation. If they wanted to eat they had to sleep with the clients.

A few days later the German police raided the bar and took Veronica, who was the only woman present at that time of the night. She was deported and the Romanian women were left on their own. However, this only lasted for a day because contacts of Veronica's had directed a fresh group of Turkish men to the bar. One of them owned a restaurant where the women were to work. Again they were taken by car. On their way Asta noticed that the signs by the roadside had changed. "'We must be in another country, probably in the Netherlands,'" I thought.' This trip ended at a pizza restaurant in a small Dutch village. She thought, 'At last, a normal restaurant.' But she was mistaken. The place had just changed ownership and nobody there had ever baked a pizza. Instead, it was a brothel in disguise which served Turkish

customers only. The managers didn't advertise in the papers, but by word of mouth in Turkish coffee houses.

'We were made to understand that we had to entertain clients in a special way. To make it clear to the customers that they could sleep with us, one associate of the Turkish guys made a show of taking a woman upstairs. In the bedroom he did nothing, but just drank a glass of mineral water. He was not allowed to sleep with us; his job was to show clients that they could go upstairs with us.'

It was made clear to the women that if they didn't co-operate they would be taken somewhere worse and by worse the gang meant the whole litany of horrors involved in trafficking. The women were forced to give in.

The women were further threatened by the violence they had to witness. One day Asta came downstairs to see a man covered in blood. Knowing no better, she thought he was dead. She was forced to wipe up the blood. Only after she escaped did she learn that he had survived and had been abandoned, seriously wounded, in Germany. He was stabbed by a regular customer at the pizzeria, a Turkish man nicknamed the 'chicken doctor' because he could kill people as easily as he could slit a chicken's throat. (It emerged later that this fight had nothing to do with the women.) Veronica P. surfaced once more in the Netherlands to help out in the restaurant and it became clear that one of the Turkish men was her lover.

Asta kept resisting and was locked up as a result, while the other girls were allowed to go shopping. This was part of the divide and conquer policy of the traffickers. Not that they could buy much because they were never given any money, just cigarettes and food, as one of the suspects later admitted at the trial.

One day Asta saw a chance to escape and ran out to ring the neighbour's doorbell. From her window she had seen that a sympathetic-looking woman lived there. 'Please, polizei,' she said. The police raided the pizzeria on the same day. One of Asta's fellow victims was suspected of complicity because she hadn't been forced into prostitution, but Asta pointed out to the police that her situation was very difficult. A virgin when she arrived, she was then raped and reserved for the restaurant owner.

Obtaining the full story from the women proved difficult: some of the other girls had been promised Dutch husbands if they kept their mouths shut. No one could convince them that a paper marriage would not entitle them to stay in the Netherlands legally. However, when a suspect kept on threatening them, they

finally realized that the trafficker wasn't trustworthy. The owner of the pizzeria had even taken the women to his lawyer to withdraw their statements formally: a highly irregular procedure, since a criminal defence lawyer is not supposed to meddle with his or her client's victims. At the trial the lawyer defended himself by saying that not he, but a trainee, had dealt with the Romanian.

At the end of the trial only the proprietor of the restaurant, Mustafa K., was sent to prison. At the trial he said he had been forced to exploit the pizzeria by a Turkish organization, which he did not dare to name. This could be true: some Turkish organizations like the PKK (the Kurdish Workers' Party) are known to extort money from Turkish citizens. Mustafa K. said he had been ordered to sell his poultry business to buy the pizzeria. Veronica P. was found guilty in her absence.

Turkish traffickers are involved in many of the cases involving Romanian women. Romania opened up not only to the west but to the east as well, to Turkey. On the other hand, the system works both ways. The Romanian mafia also plunder Turkish people as they wait in long queues on the Romanian-Turkish border. And Romanian and Turkish people work together in trafficking.

### **Are they taking over?**

A madam of a brothel suspected that the Polish girl brought to her a few days earlier had not come of her own accord. The girl seemed terrified, so the madam called STV. I went to talk to her and, sitting on rubber sheets, the girl implored me to convince the madam that she was working of her own free will. She could not afford to lose her job because she had to earn £2,000 in the next two days – a sum no hooker could possibly hope to earn. If she couldn't pay up in time, her family would be killed. The madam refused to co-operate with the red mafia and took the girl somewhere else. She wanted to help, but wouldn't employ women under conditions like that. Nor did she like the idea of eastern European pimps waiting on her doorstep.<sup>8</sup> There have been other examples of sex-club owners asking for help the moment a girl is delivered. Another madam said, 'I don't want any trouble with the police. That's why I don't want Russian or Polish pimps to force girls to work in my joint, especially not when they are still under age. I send them away, but I know that other houses don't

hesitate in hiring them.' A third brothel operator said, 'Every day I find a few eastern European women waiting on my doorstep.'

Health workers and other field workers have noticed a tense atmosphere in otherwise friendly clubs, 'especially when these eastern European creeps in tailormade suits enter the premises'. Prostitutes and their advocates report growing control by eastern European pimps in almost every red light district. A social worker in Rotterdam said, 'You can see them standing in front of the prostitution houses. We don't know how long we can keep up our street-corner work.'

Since May 1994 the Dutch southern border region has had a special police force, which is solely concerned with the phenomenon of eastern European organized crime. Teamleader Jos Hermans and his assistants worked frantically in a room cluttered with computers: 'Indeed we have the impression eastern European criminals are taking over. Some big sex clubs have changed hands and are now owned by eastern Europeans. It all starts in a friendly way, with just two women being offered. Next these gangsters demand that the salaries of the women be paid to intermediaries, not directly to the women. Later on they brandish firearms and threaten to set the place alight. It doesn't just happen here. In a Frankfurt brothel six bodies were discovered, reputedly killed by the red mafia. In this part of the Netherlands we have to cope with Russian, Moroccan, German, Yugoslavian and even Dutch criminals. In this sparsely populated region there are twice as many sex clubs as in Amsterdam. We are making an inventory of 58 sex clubs. There are hardly any Dutch women working in these clubs. They work from escort agencies or their homes. The clubs each employ 30 women for a short space of time. Up to now we have found 325 illegal women, most of them from countries in central and eastern Europe. None of them work voluntarily. We have only come across them by chance. Among them are only a few women from Ghana and Thailand. We encounter many "Polish" women who are in fact Russians. Then a few hours later a whole new team is turning tricks. These women cost very little: they are just throw-away merchandise. The gangs don't even take the trouble to select suitable women. Those who refuse are beaten up and disappear, we don't know where. We have never investigated escort agencies, but we have heard they employ young girls and boys from the Czech Republic.'

The core of eastern European gangs usually consists of four or five criminals of various eastern European countries working

together. They are highly organized and have a strict division of labour: the recruiters don't take charge of the transportation to the brothels. On the whole eastern European women seem to be recruited by accident, by people they met by chance, for example in a café or on the street. The famous communist queues in front of shops have much to answer for: standing in lines offers great opportunities to contact people. The red mafia has also revitalized old tactics such as kidnapping and blackmailing women. Contrary to, for instance, Dominican cases of trafficking, family ties don't play a big part in the relation between recruiter and victim.

The Russian mafia is increasing its hold over surrounding countries. Trafficking in Russia has been taken over by redundant ex-army men, KGB officers and veterans of the Afghan War. Since the Berlin Wall came down it is estimated that more than 10,000 women have been working against their wishes in German prostitution. The red mafia is very active in Berlin. In Germany in 1993 200 organized eastern European gangs were at work.<sup>9</sup> Budapest is an important centre for the red mafia too. Small-scale traffickers take Romanian and Russian women there and then sell them to wholesalers.<sup>10</sup>

The break-up of the USSR increased traffic not just to western Europe but also to Turkey. Since the border with Georgia and Azerbaijan was opened up, people from the south of the former Soviet Union have invaded eastern Turkey, where women sell their goods as well as their flesh.<sup>11</sup> They have evoked the wrath of Turkish women, who accuse them of enticing their husbands. There was even a popular song about these 'Natashas'. Not enough women are volunteering for the job, so it is likely that many 'Natashas' are trafficked.<sup>12</sup>

The influence of the red mafia even extends to China, where it puts women to work in restaurants where they have to be nice to the customers and are paid for every kiss. Chinese men stand in line for their services.<sup>13</sup>

## 12 Mail-order marriage

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'Europeans have the tempting idea that Asian women are very submissive. They think we are poor and therefore have to work in prostitution. I know many women have to, but not me,' said Gabriela, an Asian woman who was a mail-order bride.

Many women try to marry their way into industrialized countries, but they may find themselves living with a complete stranger who, more often than not, will be very hard to please. The trade in Third World brides, ordered through catalogues or introduction agencies, is increasing. Many agencies are genuine, but a small number don't care about their clients and are parties to the international trafficking of women. The women are trafficked in that they are completely dependent on the wishes of their husbands, who have bought them as if they were a commodity.

Most arranged marriages cannot be defined as trafficking. Often men want to meet women or women want to meet men and they do so using the services of an agency. In many cultures arranged marriages are the norm. In others matchmaking is a respectable institution, which works well provided the arrangement is undertaken on equal terms by both sides. However, there are agencies which don't care about the men and women they are introducing and which are only interested in making money. Some are known to take the money without arranging any introductions or to use photographs of women who don't want to marry.<sup>1</sup> Through others the woman is bought, without having the right to state her own wishes. Some European men who are genuinely seeking a wife complain of being showered with leaflets from unscrupulous agencies.

Such agencies can be recognized by the way they advertise the women – as submissive, or beautiful, or having no minds of their own. Where Third World women are advertised in the sex-tourist industry as promiscuous, in the mail-order bride business they are described as monogamous. The brochure for *Asian Contact*, which