

Netherlands were involved in criminal activities. By 1994 he was not so sure of the figure. He said, 'We want to outnumber the bad operators. We have already refused a company which was known to deal in arms, minors and drugs.' He agreed that traffic is a serious problem which damages the respectable image the association needs to support its claim to be legalized. 'Only the genuine sex-club owners join us, if only to safeguard their investments.'

## 5 Thailand to Europe: a one-way ticket

---

In the district of Korat in Thailand there is a small village where most of the young women have left for Germany. The teacher's sister recruited them to be prostitutes in Berlin. To pay for their travel several incurred enormous debts. The teacher's sister had to stop trafficking because she was under suspicion, but another sibling carried on the family business. Twenty women went to Berlin, encouraged by their families to take jobs abroad. Some parents went so far as to persuade them to divorce their Thai husbands in order to marry a German; one woman had paid 5,000 marks for this. The women who returned home had found there was no way they could make a living. One of them had contracted AIDS.<sup>1</sup>

These women emigrated according to the one-step pattern, that is directly from the rural areas to their foreign destination. Women who do this usually have no experience of being on the game and have very high expectations of life abroad.<sup>2</sup> Women who move from the country to the big cities and then go abroad through agencies or as tourists are following what is called the two-step pattern.

Not until 1985 did the Thai government take measures to repress trafficking. The authorities stated that women who applied for a passport who were under 36, had little money and were travelling alone, had to be thoroughly screened. However, this only criminalized women who wanted to travel independently. To avoid being caught travelling alone, they had to use dubious middlemen.

More effective action has been taken by non-governmental organizations such as the Women's Information Centre and EMPOWER (Education Means Protection of Women Engaged in Recreation). EMPOWER wants to improve working conditions for Thai prostitutes, which are generally bad because the bosses have

a great deal of power over them. Most women have to pay commission to the bar owner just to be in his bar and they are fined if they are late. EMPOWER says, 'It is very difficult for a Thai woman to become the owner of a bar. The most they can hope for is to become a "mamasan", a supervisor of girls.' Exploitation of prostitutes became a worldwide issue when a brothel at Phuket caught fire in 1984. The women, some of whom were in chains, could not escape and were burned alive. The brothel-owner, Mr Koleng, was later sentenced to life imprisonment; his wife received a three-year sentence as an accomplice.

Another problem is police corruption: for every girl working in a bar, the owner has to pay a fee to the police. Thai women's groups are discussing the legalization of prostitution to give women some control and also to limit police corruption. Prostitution was banned in Thailand in 1960.

Thailand does not only export prostitutes: it is also becoming a target country for girls from Burma and China; 20,000 Burmese women and girls work in Thai brothels.<sup>3</sup> Even the Thai police are reputed to traffic in Burmese girls.<sup>4</sup> Because of their geographical and political isolation Burmese women are supposed to be free from AIDS.<sup>5</sup> There are two routes out of China to northern Thailand via Burma. One is a small road in southern Xichuanpanna passable only by motorcycles and tractors. This route takes three days. The other way is to cross the mountain forests on foot to northern Xichuanpanna, a 20-day walk. Most Burmese women are recruited by Thai middlemen, who hand them over to Burmese men, with whom they travel to the Thai border. At the border they are collected by another Thai group, which takes them to Bangkok and to the south, where they entertain Malaysian tourists. In Thailand the meeting point for smuggled women is Mae Sai, the northernmost district, which is separated from Burma by a small river. The lorry drivers pay off the Burmese officials at the checkpoint. As a result of the civil war in Burma, which has been fought now for 45 years, many civilians have fled to refugee camps near the Thai border. The women and girls in these camps are easy prey for traffickers.

There are also Vietnamese women working in Thai brothels. Some of them were hijacked by Thai pirates when they were fleeing their countries in boats.<sup>6</sup> Even Colombian women have been forced into prostitution in Thailand. Colombian traffickers have joined up with Thai traffickers for this purpose.<sup>7</sup>

The evidence that an increasing number of Thai women were being trafficked to western Europe became clear from the 1970s onwards. In their struggles to provide for themselves and their families they had sought help from acquaintances, who had put them in touch with traffickers. They were promised jobs or marriage once they had paid large sums in commission and for what turned out to be either non-existent or forged documents. They were then flown to the easiest European points of entry – Denmark or the Czech Republic – and smuggled across the borders into, for example, Germany or the Netherlands. Because they did not have work permits and because they 'owed' large sums to the traffickers, they were powerless, although sometimes they managed to get away.

### 'Surely this is not a restaurant?'

In January 1991 in the northern Dutch town of Den Helder three Thai girls made a remarkable escape. One, named Tip, jumped out of a window on to the top of a police car in which her friends Tina and Da were already safe. They also had jumped from the window of the sex club where they had been locked up.

Soon afterwards the women made statements. Tip and Da decided to return to Thailand as soon as their evidence had been heard by the examining magistrate. Tina stayed on in the Netherlands until the trial. I spoke to Da and Tip before they left for Bangkok and Tina gave me further details later. Their stories, which ended so spectacularly, started with the promise of well-paid jobs in Europe.

For Tip and Da it began with the Thai woman W., who recruited three of the six women who were taken to Den Helder. Tip met W. through a caretaker in a school where her aunt was a teacher. 'The caretaker asked me whether I would like a job in the Netherlands. Of course I said yes and later he gave me W.'s name. I went to see her and she promised me I could work for an excellent salary as a waitress in a restaurant. At the time I didn't know her well, but I was impressed by her luxurious apartment. That's why I believed her instantly. I knew she had lived in the Netherlands, but she never told me she had worked as a prostitute. She only mentioned that I needed a passport and tickets. Before everything was arranged I had to visit W. several times. In the meantime I had to find the money to pay her commission for providing me with the travel documents. She also claimed she had to order

suitable working clothes for me. They turned out to be a bundle of cheap second-hand rags.'

Tip did not realize that she would be working as a prostitute. She only knew that she had to drink with clients. 'I thought that was normal. When I worked in a restaurant in Thailand, I also had drinks with customers, but I never had to sleep with them.'

Da, Tip's partner in misfortune, was also recruited by W. But W. had unceremoniously told her beforehand that she would be a prostitute. Da was already waitressing in a bar where she sometimes slept with clients. 'That was different. I spoke the language and I was my own boss,' she said. 'A few times W. dropped in at the bar where I worked. On one occasion she told me she had made a fortune in the Netherlands. At first I didn't believe her. I thought she was bragging. To win me over she invited me to her house. I changed my mind when I saw how she lived.'

Da was taken in by W.'s wealth. 'W. told me I would get a certain percentage of what clients paid the club. I was going to make ten dollars just for drinking a bottle of champagne.' This is the regular fee for hostess work, but Da was to earn nothing. W. didn't tell her that she would only start to earn after she had paid off her debts.

Before leaving Thailand, Da thought she only owed W. the commission. When W. kept on asking for more money, Da became suspicious. 'First W. asked me for 5,000 baht, which I had to borrow from a neighbour. That was not enough. I had to pay up more and more, but W. never gave me notice that I could set out for Europe. However, I could not back out because I would lose the money I had already paid. Eventually I went.'

There are many procuresses like W. in Thailand. Indeed her own story is a sad one. On her first trip to Europe she found herself in the hands of traffickers. Instead of pressing charges, she decided to co-operate with them; unfortunately this didn't help her. On her return to the Netherlands they locked her up until she had paid her debts.

Tina, the third girl who told me her story, was not recruited by W., but by a girl called Jacky. 'In a bar she introduced me to Jan, the owner of the sex club where I could work in the near future. Jacky said to him, pointing at me, "Nice girl, you want?"' Tina had to pay Jacky a large sum for this small service.

Some weeks later Tina was put on a plane to Prague with Da, Tip and three other girls. Da and Tip had a photograph of Jan, whom Tina had met already in the bar. He was waiting for them at the airport and they were glad someone had turned up to collect them.

They set off for the Netherlands in two cars. Tina said, 'Jan drove and somebody else read the map. For some hours nothing happened. We just talked and slept till the car stopped in the middle of nowhere. "Get out," Jan said. "You have to walk the next bit."'

The six women, shivering in their flimsy summer clothes and on high heels, had to walk for a few hours to cross the German border on foot. They had to be smuggled in because they didn't have visas for Germany or the Netherlands. As they walked it dawned on them that they were now illegal immigrants, but they felt it was too late to turn back. On the other side of the border they continued their journey by car. Tina and Da found out that the two recruiters, Jacky and W., worked for the same sex clubs.

Once in the Netherlands the girls discovered that Jan, who in Thailand had been described as the big boss, was in reality small fry. He worked for someone else. Tina said, 'Jan was a bit of a buffoon. Sometimes he was even nice. I didn't want to argue with him all the time.' Jan was not very clever and didn't make much from trafficking in women, in fact it caused his bankruptcy. According to Tina, he was taken advantage of by his boss, Jacques, who was well known to the Dutch police. Jacques had threatened Tina. 'That monster told me, I could kill you and nobody will find out. Nobody knows you are here.' He owned several sex clubs, some of them in Thailand. Jan had recently bought one of Jacques' clubs and wanted to staff it with the recently imported Thai women. He was foolish enough to sign the contract of purchase just after the police had raided the club, which gave the police solid evidence against him.

When they reached Den Helder the women were made to sign a paper stating they were indebted to Jan and Jacques for their fare and for the detour via the Czech Republic. They also had to pay for their accommodation in the sex club. Jan's Thai wife (who had been put to work as a prostitute) acted as translator, but didn't translate literally. She made out that she was reading them a normal employment contract, but the women later discovered that what they had signed was a confession of debt. The contract stipulated they would not receive any money until they had paid off their debts. After that their salary would be half what an independent prostitute earns. It also obliged them to provide any service a punter might ask for. They were even forbidden to make friends. They signed reluctantly in order to start paying off their debts. To prevent them from running away, they were made to hand over their passports immediately. Finally

they were told they had to hide in a secret room reached by a connecting door in the event of a raid.

'Surely this is not a restaurant?' Tip remarked when she walked into the recently painted sex club for the first time. Unlike Tina and Da, she had not known that she was expected to work as a prostitute. She was met with derisive laughter. Jan had hammered it into her that she had to pay her debts; and made it clear that the only way to do this was by having sex with the clients. Tip told me, 'The first day I tried to limit myself to drinking champagne with customers. But the men didn't want to leave it at that and took me upstairs. Then I always told them they were my first client. "Me no work in business," I said. Sometimes they took pity on me – after all, I look younger than my age, so nobody caught me lying. One of the punters realized he had a daughter of my assumed age at home, who was sleeping in her own bed. He dashed out of the room. The bosses didn't mind as long as the clients paid up.'

As Tip spoke hardly any English, Tina negotiated with the clients for her. In broken English, she would say, 'Pay 100 guilders half a hour, 200 guilders one o'clock,' Tip added laughing.

Tip had more difficulty working with the clients than her friends, who had experience on the game and who had at least learned to protect themselves against AIDS. However, here they were not always allowed to use condoms, especially not with clients who were acquaintances of the managers.

One of the six women had a very special client, a Scottish sailor who came to the club and bought her for £1,000. Soon afterwards he took pity on her and sent her back to Thailand, from where she wrote to the girls she had left behind.

As well as not receiving a penny, the women were locked up throughout their stay in Den Helder. Once or twice they were allowed outside, accompanied by Jan. When the last client had gone, Jan would lock the club up and leave the women on their own. None of the telephones worked. The women were also afraid of fire because there was no emergency exit.

Tina decided to put an end to this. She had not told Jan that she had the telephone number of a Thai girl in Rotterdam. She smashed one of the windows, climbed out and went to look for a phone booth. She managed to phone her friend, who immediately called the Rotterdam police, who in turn contacted their colleagues in Den Helder. Events moved quickly. Though the other girls were frightened, they plucked up their courage and jumped out of the window which Tina had broken. Tip was the last to escape.

The Rotterdam policeman who took part in the release of the girls, Bert Bennink, said, 'I didn't want to be a knight in shining armour, but I thought it inhumane just to write a report and leave it at that. Fortunately I had good contacts with colleagues in the north.' After the police car had left, Jan arrived to find his brothel empty. To his surprise he learned the police, who had entered the building, had also taken his wife, mistaking her for a victim. She was put with the victims, who understandably became very taciturn in her presence. Jan went to the police to give himself up.

To date no one has been convicted because obtaining evidence was difficult. Tina gave seemingly conflicting evidence to the examining magistrate. He had asked her to answer his questions as far as possible with a simple yes or no, which she did; so when he asked whether the door of the sex club was locked from the inside, she said yes. Next the magistrate wanted to know if she had a key. Tina again said, 'Yes.' She assumed that she was not allowed to say that Jan locked the door from the outside with a second key.

The examining magistrate then asked, 'Could you leave the room?', to which Tina replied, 'No.' The examining magistrate could only conclude he had contradictory statements on his hands.

Most of the women involved in this case are now back in Thailand. Just before leaving Tip was plagued by feelings of guilt. 'I am still trying to convince myself it was not my fault. At first I thought it all happened to me as a punishment for wanting to be rich.' Like many Thai girls she believed in the Buddhist concept of karma: that future events are the result of one's actions in the past.

The route through Prague is relatively new. Bert Bennink, the Rotterdam policeman, said, 'Nowadays Thai people need a visa for most European countries, but not for the Czech Republic. And *vroom*, the women are driven by car to the Netherlands, before you can say Jack Robinson.' Nowadays many women from South America also travel via Prague. Other Thai girls arriving by plane come via Copenhagen because they don't need a visa for Denmark.

### Other cases from Thailand

The story of Tip, Da and Tina is one of small-scale trafficking in women: sex-club owners scouring Bangkok or other Third World cities for women they can con. Jan's method was typical of trafficking in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Like Jan, many sex-club

owners became romantically involved with the women they hired to work in Europe. Much small-scale trafficking is a direct result of tourism.

Many Thai women who married after 'falling in love' with a tourist are now working as prostitutes. The husbands claim their salaries or social security money are not enough to support their wives and their families in Thailand. One husband told me, 'She considers herself forced, not by people, but by circumstance. Her family thinks luxury grows on trees. I hope my daughters will never find out where she is working. I am always nervous when she is at work. I am particularly worried about the neighbours, who eventually might put two and two together.'

Two large-scale court cases involving Thai women came before the Dutch courts in 1988. One concerned three Dutchmen who had trafficked three Thai women. This case was controversial because a policeman claimed the women could not have been trafficked since he had seen them laughing. Later on he admitted that trafficked women don't necessarily have to cry all the time. In reality they are not allowed to cry because they might put off the customers. In a second case three brothers had recruited five women through a Thai middleman. The brothers started a fight with the broker because the women he had procured for them were too old. They had wanted girls of 15.

In 1990 a case came to court in the Dutch-German border region. Only one victim testified against the gang. Clutching the Buddha pendant on her neck, she said, 'I am going to make talk.' She was terrified because one of the traffickers had smashed up the house of the client who released her. Because there were no other witnesses the traffickers left the court free men, while the victim and her companion had to depart under police protection. Four years later one of the gang was still operating. Some foreign women he employed complained of exploitation but didn't press charges. He was seen recently on television boasting that he had about 60 girls working for him in several countries.

Another Thai woman played a major role in a bigger case in 1990. Seven Thai women were recruited and promised jobs as domestic helpers. Several traffickers were involved, some of whom were sex-club owners. The police were alerted when one of the traffickers unwittingly came to the police station to register his girlfriend as a prostitute. She turned out to be a former victim who had chosen to work with the traffickers, as W. had.

The recruiters were helped in Thailand by a civil servant who provided women with the forged birth certificates they needed to marry. The victims were paid £2 a day and were married off to strangers to give them legal status. When they arrived they were raped to break their resistance and then made to work in the Amsterdam red light district. They dared not and could not run away. One girl became troublesome and the traffickers considered dumping her on a German autobahn. The gang later threatened the girls and one of the policemen handling the case.

In 1990 a third case failed. It concerned a sex-club owner who went to Thailand pretending to be a wholesale fashion importer and enticed women to work for him in the Netherlands. The police were alerted by neighbours, who complained of the public nuisance in the village. They were also tipped off by the Thai community. When the police raided the club, bystanders who didn't live in the neighbourhood tried to prevent what they thought was police harassment of the girls, believing that in a country like the Netherlands prostitution should be tolerated. It was all to no avail. The Thai girls had disappeared because the owner had been warned about the raid.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most recent cases involving Thai women occurred in April 1993. The police found five Thai women and a Russian in an empty apartment, where they had been abandoned without food. The traffickers had vanished because they had heard rumours that they were to be raided. The boys had met one of the women when they were on holiday in Thailand and returned later to invite her and her friends to the Netherlands. One of the women asked them to find her a job in Dutch prostitution, which they agreed to arrange. Her friends then followed suit and the women travelled to the Netherlands via Denmark. The recruiters had organized a bogus marriage for one of the women. Luckily for her, the husband-to-be liked her and said he would marry her for free. The marriage hadn't taken place by the time the police intervened. 'Just whistle and you have a Boeing full of Thai girls,' one of the boys said in his defence. 'It all happened in a friendly atmosphere. We only wanted to help the girls.'

The judge at their trial said, 'The girl did in fact want to work as a prostitute but she didn't bargain with being tied by a debt of 200,000 guilders.' The women didn't know that they would be illegal immigrants. Before leaving Thailand, the girl had agreed to pay for the necessary papers, but the amount she owed had soared overnight.

'Why was the sum of money so ridiculously high?' the judge asked the boys. 'Charge 1,000 or 2,000, what's the difference?' one replied casually. The boys had not even given the women their small share of the deal.

They had threatened the family of one of the women and had told the girls that they had guns. 'I'm the kind of guy who likes to flash a firearm,' one boy said coolly.

The women regarded the boy who acted as their chauffeur as their protector because he was less violent than his friends. Every day the girls had to hand him their earnings in an envelope from which he helped himself to his own share. He was convicted of being an accomplice. In court he admitted that he had wanted set up in business on his own. A Russian girl, whom he had nicknamed Gorbachev, already worked for him. He had not recruited her himself, but had taken her over. 'I took pity on the Russian girl. That's why I tried to help her.'

The chauffeur said he preferred trafficking in women to drugs because he thought it was easier. The other two boys were already drug traffickers and had started trading in women to remedy a temporary shortage of money – the trafficking of drugs is dangerous because the goods have to be bought and sold fast. Paying with cash is the only way to do this; with any other method the risk of being caught is too great.

The three boys hadn't realized that trafficking in women was so complicated. They had had to deal with a local pimp who had threatened to 'steal' one of the girls: it was the resulting car chase which had caught the police's attention. All three were convicted.

### **The declining Thai market**

The numbers of Thai women coming to Europe lessened after the arrival of women from eastern Europe and the traffic between Thailand and Japan increased. 'Nowadays Thai women need a visa for Germany. Their transportation to Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong is much cheaper. Most women go in groups to Japan by bus and pay much money for their visa and passports. They don't go independently. They always have to know someone who arranges the necessary papers,' two prostitutes from EMPOWER said, when visiting the Netherlands.

The threat of AIDS is one of the reasons why sex tourism from Europe to Thailand has dwindled. Through street theatre, the

women of EMPOWER persuade customers in the bars in Thai seaside resorts to use condoms. This is necessary because the number of AIDS victims has increased dramatically in Thailand. Pollution of the beaches has also played its part in decreasing the number of sex tourists to the country. Thailand is now trying to restore the seaside as a place for family outings.<sup>9</sup>