

Celestina's pimp was known to the police, but she became frightened and withdrew her statement. He was imprisoned only to be released soon afterwards. Hermana left the Netherlands without making a statement.

9 The Belgian Billionaire gang

There were only a few customers in the night club next door to the Billionaire Club in Rotterdam the evening I went to visit it in March 1992. The majority of the girls were non-European. 'They all work here voluntarily,' the manager, who was also a dancers' agent, explained proudly. 'At my agency the women can be trained as professional dancers. I also see to their health insurance, and I never force them to do a striptease if they don't want to.' Pointing at a sturdy, shy girl sitting at the bar, he said, 'It is no good trying to make her perform a striptease. By the way, it is wellnigh impossible to employ a whole contingent of foreign strippers and prostitutes legally. Next door, at the Billionaire's, there are at least 20 foreign girls.' One of the customers interrupted us to say that a new group of Philippine women had recently arrived at the Billionaire.

In 1987 the Billionaire gang owned half of the 38 sex clubs in Rotterdam. They also ran an entertainers' agency, which they had taken over from a French couple, who had gone out of business after it became known that they had recruited 20 Thai women as 'folk dancers' and then forced them into prostitution. The Thai women had entered the Netherlands through Belgium, France and Luxemburg.

The gang had vested interests in clubs and night clubs in the Netherlands and other European countries including Denmark, Switzerland and Italy. In its heyday the gang also received the revenues from clubs in Ankara (Turkey) and the Christian part of the Lebanon,¹ and was reputed to have a branch in the United Kingdom,² possibly for taxation reasons. Many Dutch sex-club owners have registered their businesses as British limited companies and have an office somewhere in the United Kingdom. Taxation on such limited companies is lower than for a b.v., the Dutch equivalent.

Abroad the Billionaire gang, who were Belgian in origin, focused on various side activities. They organized drugs transportation to

the United Kingdom and worked with dollar forgers. One girl was caught at the airport because she used forged dollars for her 'showmoney'. According to Dirk Trioen, a former gang member who wrote about his experiences in a book, one Belgian member called Van Engeland who fell out of favour with the gang had shipments of arms sent to Zaire on the side.³

The police financial bureau, popularly called the 'Strip them naked team', investigated the gang during 1991 and 1992. They confiscated the gang's books and discovered, among other things, that these Belgians had never paid any taxes and had practised false accounting. They owed over £1 million to the tax office, but rumour has it that they bought this off for only £35,000. The police found letters from customers whom they had cheated: when a customer was drunk, the waiter would get him to sign a credit-card slip twice. The managers ordered the women to steal from their customers under threat of losing their jobs.⁴ The Billionaire gang are not alone in this: if all tolerated brothels in the Netherlands were checked out for these sorts of fraud, probably 50 per cent of them would have to be closed down. The Belgians also cheated the tax office by using so-called leased company cars privately on a large scale and by their takings from gambling machines. They made at least £12,000 a day but paid tax of only £1,000 a month. The Dutch tax authorities had no records for them. Their profits were deposited in accounts registered to nominal figures, but most of their money came from the prostitution racket.⁵

Rather as McDonald's runs a fast-food chain, the Belgian criminals owned a fast-sex chain. They charged large commissions for prostitutes, who were more often than not grossly underpaid, and distributed women throughout Europe. From 1987 onwards STV documented over 80 cases of women trafficked by them, so the number they dealt with must have been in the hundreds. STV's Belgian sister organization came across many women who had been smuggled to Europe with false visa stickers, stolen from the Philippine embassy. This was a speciality of gang member Freddy de Coen, who is also a former member of the right-wing political group Flemish Block.⁶ From 1987 onwards the gang used the Cyprus route. At the time the police claimed not to know who was running the gang.⁷

The trafficking through Cyprus went on until 1991, when four Filipina women at last gave evidence against the gang. The women had been promised training as dancers in Cyprus, which they were

given. Their careers as dancers were short-lived, however; they soon found themselves on the game in Rotterdam. The police raided the clubs belonging to the gang, but found no girls. News of the raid had leaked out and the women had been safely hidden in clubs in other cities. Later it emerged that a policeman who was not involved with the case had tipped off the gang.⁸

The case came to court in September 1991. Some information came to light but the four Filipina women who had given evidence to the police were no longer in the country and so could not be called as witnesses. The judge consequently dismissed the case and the three Belgians continued their business as usual. Two years later it was discovered that this legal catastrophe could have been averted: the women did not have to appear because their evidence had been heard at length by the examining magistrate. The public prosecutor had made a mistake, but because he was suffering from a fatal illness nobody wanted to offend him.⁹

The four Filipina women who had taken their complaints to court were the last to be trafficked by the Billionaire gang in conjunction with Ernesto B. and the investigation marked the end of the gang's Cyprus phase. The connection with the agents in Cyprus had brought them too much unwelcome publicity.

The public prosecutor was not the only person to be criticized: the Rotterdam police were too. Until 1992 they had allowed foreign women to work for three months on artists' visas. While this policy was in force, many sex-club owners suddenly started up in business as artists' agents, just as the Billionaire Club's neighbour had. Bert Bennink and Peter de Winter, two officers in the Rotterdam foreigners' police, commented, 'Through these visas we freed the women from their illegal status for three months, which allowed us to make personal contact with them. They had to report to the police station, preferably without their bosses. We could not always prevent the boss from being present, but usually we asked him to wait outside for a while. On these occasions we would register their passports and ask about any problems on the job.'

'To our regret we sometimes learned from the vice squad or social workers that traffic in women had taken place under our very eyes. We might prevent these kinds of problems by putting a halt to our contacts with the bosses altogether. But then you run the risk that dozens of women will enter the country and have some man guaranteeing their living expenses and health care, which means we lose sight of them because we have to appeal to people

who signed the warrant some months earlier. Now at least we know who has a contract with whom.'

The Rotterdam police were asked more than once why they didn't close down the gang's brothels; the law forbidding the exploitation of brothels was still in force and might have been useful. Their answer was that it wasn't possible to shut the clubs: those owned by the gang met the legal requirements, the residents were not restricted, the clubs were fireproof and reached the necessary standards of hygiene.

'We suspected that organized crime was taking place in these clubs, but the gang members had not been convicted of it so we couldn't ask the mayor to close them. It was a shame, because if we had been able to we would have demonstrated to the public that sex clubs can't be used to launder money. We weren't able to prove that trafficking in women was a systematic part of the brothels' management.' The police were extremely tolerant towards the clubs: when the gang opened a new one, the policeman in charge of checking clubs sent a bunch of congratulatory flowers.¹⁰

The fact that the gang had complied meticulously with the law was a major point in the defence at the trial and was a new element in the game of cat and mouse which the gang were playing with the police. One of the three men who ran the gang told a BBC documentary team, 'The police check the women. By the way, our contacts with the police are quite smooth. The women who work here have to decide for themselves whether they sleep with the customers or not. On their arrival all women are asked what they want to do. Sometimes they are homesick and tell their sad stories because clients like to hear them.'¹¹ He falsely claimed that the women left the clubs with a medical certificate stating their virginity was still intact. He also admitted to having a gun, 'just for my private collection'.

While gang members paid lip service to the regulations, they were maltreating and threatening women. One woman ended up in hospital. The gang used John David's method of torture, named after an English gangster: the violence started with the victim's fingers being broken and escalated from there, to end possibly in rape. The violence extended beyond the women victims. According to a former gang member, the threesome in Rotterdam had had one of their Belgian puppet figures, Marc Verbanck, killed by Yugoslavians.¹² Their manager in Spain was killed 'in an accident' just before he was due to take the witness stand against them.¹³

Indonesia

After the trial had been dismissed gang members decided to do their own recruiting and chose Indonesia as their new territory. One member, Jean-Paul, who hadn't been subpoenaed at the trial, was married to Ira, an Indonesian woman. Personal contacts were crucial in Indonesia because the Muslim religion forbids women to associate with strange men. Since Ira knew Indonesia well, she recruited there for the gang. She conscripted her nieces, who could easily approach their friends.

Fatima was a friend of Ira's niece. 'In Indonesia I went with my friend Mimah to a meeting about working abroad. There I met Ira and Jean-Paul. I thought Jean-Paul was very sympathetic, and even in Rotterdam I still liked him. I have always thought that he was different from the others. Ira treated us with respect too. They said I could make a lot of money working behind a bar, about £15 a day. I hadn't been in a bar before, I was a beautician in Indonesia. However, they said my lack of experience wasn't a problem and no training was required. According to Ira, women of every nationality worked in the bar and any language problems could be solved with dictionaries. I only found out later that Jean-Paul was the proprietor. I was very nervous because I didn't know what to expect. According to Ira between 15 and 20 women were needed. Eventually Ira and Jean-Paul selected eight of us. Afterwards I realized that they didn't want the fat women, but at the time I didn't notice.

'I didn't accept immediately because Europe is a long way from home. But the argument that I could give my children a better future convinced me because I was divorced. Before I left, I visited Jean-Paul a few times to arrange the details. Ira and he procured the documents. They photographed me, but not naked.' Impresarios sometimes have the women photographed naked to prevent them from maintaining afterwards they didn't know striptease was involved.

'The eight of us went to Holland on the same plane. Jean-Paul didn't travel with us. At the airport we talked to a Dutch couple, who gave us their address, and who were on the same plane. A chauffeur met us at Amsterdam airport. Since he was old and grey, we called him "daddy". On the way to Rotterdam he took away our passports. At our destination we had the shock of our lives: striptease photographs were on display in the showcases outside.

It wasn't exactly the traditional dancing for which one girl in our group had been hired.' Ill at ease, the women went inside to meet their prospective bosses.

Fatima said, 'It was very dark in the bar. I could only see dancing women. "Oh gosh," we thought, "striptease." I tried to write down the name of the bar, but one of the bosses saw me and quickly turned off the lights. We didn't dare to ask what kind of bar it was. There were some very strong and muscular men there.' Fatima giggled as she imitated their way of walking like Frankenstein's monster.

To her, one particular gang member seemed the most formidable: 'A big bold man, with a large golden chain around his neck. I can still feel his eyes on me. Nothing escaped him.' Fatima thought he was the head of the gang. Although he wasn't in fact, he was important as the head of day-to-day business.

On the first night Fatima had to watch the other strippers, 'for her own instruction'. Afterwards a man took the women to an apartment above the night club. 'A large house with many rooms, full of women. The management of the Billionaire locked the place with three keys. We could only peer at the outside world through a window. They didn't feed us and the other women living there had hardly anything either, but kindly gave us one bowl of noodle soup and an egg to share between the four of us. Most of them came from Latin American countries and the Philippines. We couldn't understand them, but we gathered that they had not been paid one penny so far.'

On their third day in the Netherlands the Indonesian women had to wait more than an hour in the artists' agency's office. Meanwhile Ira telephoned from Jakarta. According to Fatima, she had problems obtaining passports. After the call, Jean-Paul said he had to go to Jakarta with another gang member to take care of urgent business. 'And you lot are leaving soon for Belgium,' he told the four Indonesian women, to their surprise.

In Belgium they were taken to a bar in Ghent. Again they were housed in an apartment above the bar. Fatima said, 'We had to work for different people there. We were only supposed to drink with the guests and usually they didn't stay with me for long because they couldn't understand me. The bartender told them that I was shy because I was new. He told me that a drink might relax me, provided I didn't get drunk. For the first time in my life I had an alcoholic drink. I am a Muslim, you see, and Muslims don't drink alcohol.'

'The next day we went to the place where we were eventually going to work, where we had to stage a striptease act. My friend Mimah, who spoke some English, translated the manager's instructions. We said that we could not possibly dance naked the next evening - "No problem," we would learn. Playing for time, we objected that we didn't have suitable clothes. But they were prepared for that. That was not all. We *might* have sex with customers. Imagine - we didn't *have* to, we were allowed to. The bar had "séparés" for the purpose, little private rooms for sexual intercourse with customers. These men meant business and time was running out. We plotted to call the couple we had met at the airport. In the morning we said that we had to do some shopping. The bartenders were still drunk from the night before and let us go. They didn't even notice that we were hardly dressed. We had already been given our passports back. I never understood why. Other women had to go without passports for months on end. The men had told the Filipina women that the police needed their passports all that time.'

The four women walked barefoot through the Belgian town, looking for the Dutch village Krimpen aan de Lek, where the Dutch couple lived. Of course no one in Ghent knew where it was. The women finally managed to phone the couple with the help of assistants at an Indonesian food shop, a toko. The Dutch couple came as soon as they could and took them to report to the police; in vain, as it later turned out. Fatima then lived with the couple for some time.

From the gang's point of view, Fatima and her friends were failures. The gang members didn't succeed in forcing them into prostitution. 'Thanks be to Allah, because we refused to do that immoral work,' Fatima said to me. Ira, who had worked in Indonesia for the gang, had not selected the most 'suitable' submissive Indonesian women. After Fatima and the other girls escaped, Ira was thrown out of the gang. Her associates got away with it. Since the gang had not been able to force the women into prostitution, Fatima's complaint to the police failed. The police could only bring a prosecution if the women had been forced to have sexual intercourse with the customers.

The police said about their stay in the Netherlands, 'Nothing really happened. All right, they were locked up, but that's not sufficient proof to convict of trafficking. Nor were they beaten up.' And they said about the women's short trip to Belgium: 'That happened in Belgium and not in the Netherlands. In Belgium

they didn't use force when the women refused to strip. And the women were not explicitly told to have sex with customers. They could only infer that from the context.'

Fatima was indignant: 'I loathe the idea of being in a *séparé* with a customer. Jean-Paul and the others should be locked away. It makes me sad to think of that week. I am penniless and I lost my job in Indonesia.' However, the gang were warned that the police were still monitoring their activities. Besides, the journalist Chris de Stoop was about to publish his book in Belgium on the gang's time in Cyprus; a further reason for them to be more careful. Nevertheless, they had plenty of time to prepare for their next venture.

Poland

'Sometimes the girls from the Billionaire Club come in here crying,' the manager of the next-door club said to me. 'I help them and take them to a hotel. And then what happens? The police can't find the time to investigate the complaints against the gang.'

A few weeks after our conversation, some Polish women turned up on the manager's doorstep, one of whom was Kasha aged 22. According to Kasha, six girls were brought by bus from Poland every week. Some 500 women from all over Poland had been transported to western European countries. The women had been recruited by a new member of the Billionaire gang, a man called Lech, who was a former schoolteacher. In Poland he managed an employment agency for the gang.

Kasha told me her story. 'I saw an advertisement in a regional Polish newspaper for waitresses and receptionists. No knowledge of English was required, which seemed an advantage. I hesitated a long time before answering, but eventually I wrote. The company sent me a lot of information, which I sent back with a note to say that I wasn't interested. But the agency kept sending me glossy brochures, with promises of employment in Belgium and the Netherlands. I thought, "The Netherlands are beautiful." I talked it over at length with my mother. I lived with my parents and got on well with them; we badly needed the salary they were offering. My mother wasn't working, which is unusual in Poland. She looked after my brother, who is an invalid. My father had a job. My mother thought I ought to go, but she was afraid that

something was wrong. But, after a few weeks I decided to go for it. The fact that I wasn't happy at the butcher's where I worked tipped the balance. Besides, I only had to go to the Netherlands for three months. "I can manage that," I thought.

"The brochures contained a telephone number. I thought a call could do no harm. The company was too far away to visit easily. This man Lech answered. He said we were to leave within a couple of days, which was too soon for my liking. That wasn't a problem; he said I could join the group which was leaving a week later.

'I agreed and packed my belongings. My mother decided to see me off and we took the night train to the town where the agency was. We phoned the office from the station and they said they would come to collect us. We waited for over an hour in the cold.' Kasha burst out laughing. 'I had seen a very small ramshackle vehicle, but I didn't think it was their car. My mother and I took no notice of it. And of course they hadn't bargained on there being two of us.'

After another phone call, mother and daughter finally found the agency's office. 'We sat there without anyone paying attention to us. The staff were too busy picking up other girls. Eventually we went down town because we had some time on our hands. Before we left for the Netherlands, they took my mother to the station.'

Kasha travelled by bus with six other girls. 'Lech drove us. We had to share two blankets between us, and it was terribly cold. Two girls quit in Rotterdam. One of them decided to visit her family on the spur of the moment, and the other took the next bus back to Poland because she didn't like what was going on. I had second thoughts too, but I decided to go on because otherwise I would have gone to a lot of trouble for nothing. And after all we were supposed to be working in an ordinary office.'

That night Kasha stayed in a hotel. The next day she and her travel companions were taken to an apartment above the night club which she described as 'terribly dirty'. The following morning the girls had to go into the office one by one and introduce themselves. The men inside were talking and hardly took any notice of Kasha. Casually they made it clear that she had to undress. Kasha said, 'I wondered what that was supposed to mean. Was I to have a medical check-up? I thought maybe they wanted to see if I washed regularly.' The men never bothered to talk in a language which Kasha spoke, but they did give her a contract in strange English

which stated: 'This contract is valid for three months. The artist will receive a standard £10 a day. Additionally the artist will cash £15 a day for performances.' It also said that, among other bonuses, Kasha would receive 10 per cent of the profits on the champagne consumed by clients she had a drink with.

The artists' agency was contractually obliged to pay the girls' return fares to Poland; it was also supposed to arrange housing, work permits and pay any taxes. In return, the artist had to declare she was healthy and not pregnant, and have a medical check up. She could be fined £150 in the following instances: if she broke her contract and left within three months; if she left the club in working hours; and if she was absent from the job.

Kasha was astonished when she gathered from the contract that she was not going to be a receptionist but an 'artist'. Later she discovered that this meant striptease and prostitution. Kasha said, 'I only realized when we were ushered into the club. A Polish woman who had been working there for some time tried to encourage us. "It's not as bad as it seems," she said. However, we soon found out that she was the new girlfriend of one of the bosses. Lech had already befriended the girls who arrived before us, so they were no help.

'By the absurd terms of the contract we had to dance naked. The first day we only had to watch to learn the trade. We wanted to tell the boss that we had never agreed to striptease, but instead of taking our complaints seriously, he said that we would only get our money after we had had sex with customers. And if we didn't, we wouldn't receive our commission for the champagne.'

The Polish women were never beaten up by the gang; one look at the men was enough to make the girls obey them. Kasha remembered especially the frightening eyes of her boss. She didn't know of his reputation for violence. She had only heard that in Belgium he had women working for him behind the windows. The gang used being sent to Belgium as a threat: they said it meant earning no money at all.

Eventually the girls were paid a sum which an ordinary working girl in Holland would never accept. And, of course, they couldn't refuse clients, which is a 'fundamental' prostitute's right.

Kasha stood it for no more than two months. One night she and some colleagues passed the night club next door to the Billionaire. They started talking to the doorman and complained about their wages. He had heard these stories before and introduced them to the manager, who offered them jobs with better conditions.

They accepted and then were paid the usual fees for sleeping with punters. This time Kasha was allowed to refuse clients. After a few weeks Kasha's mother came to visit her in the Netherlands. She was told that Kasha only had to drink champagne with her customers, which was not true.

One Polish girl in Kasha's group had asked the agency before she left Poland whether she would have to work as a prostitute. 'Absolutely not, prostitution is forbidden in the Netherlands,' Lech had said. 'Dutchmen are different from Polish people, they are satisfied when you look at them with your beautiful eyes.' Another girl's contract stated that she would never have sexual contact with the club's customers.

Social workers in Rotterdam advised Kasha and her friends to report the Belgians to the police. The police gave them three months to consider lodging a complaint, although they wanted to make statements immediately. It then became clear that it was the police, not the women who needed time. They were reluctant to pursue the case: some of them believed the women were merely involved in a labour dispute in a semi-legal setting and that failure to keep the terms of contracts and poor pay were insufficient reasons to charge the gang. The police had a further problem: 'We can't prove that the Billionaire gang instructed a Polish contact person to offer the women jobs as waitresses or as receptionists. We can't definitely pinpoint the organization in the Netherlands. The Polish women were neither imprisoned nor beaten up. Their passports were not confiscated and after all they had a contract. It is true they were underpaid. But we can hardly prove they were manipulated into prostitution. We can't check it in Poland, relations with the Polish police are not that good.'

In June 1994 some members of the Polish police visited their colleagues in Rotterdam to trade information about trafficking. At their meeting Policewoman Wiesława Szytkowska of the Polish General Police Headquarters asked questions about this particular case: 'In Poland we arrested four traffickers of the Billionaire. The Polish state attorney had assumed that the managers of the club would also be brought to trial in the Netherlands. But that never happened.'¹⁴

One of the Dutch police replied, 'We would welcome a Polish police rogatory commission to the Netherlands. We have given the Polish police a lot of information. It is thanks to the Polish women who complained to us that the traffickers were arrested in Poland.'

Afterwards Wieslawa, who is in charge of all the cases of trafficking in Poland, said, 'They missed the opportunity of a lifetime. They could have talked seriously with me. Probably they didn't realize how high my rank is in the Polish police.' She was speechless when she heard of the Rotterdam police's reluctance to take statements from the Polish women who had worked in the Billionaire Club in 1992.

Disintegration of the Billionaire gang

In August 1993 there were still reports of women shouting for help from the Billionaire's windows. At the time the place was packed with Hungarian and Czech girls. The night club's new choreographer wanted to leave but didn't dare. According to some sources the girls were filled up with vitamin pills to keep them going. Business was slack: too many journalists had invaded the place, chasing the punters away.¹⁵ The tax office was also on to them, so they decided to set up in Spain. At the time the gang was cracking up. One of the first gang members to quit was an international footballer who had the expertise to set up on his own.¹⁶ Long before the fall of the Berlin Wall, he had been running an agency in Budapest which sent women to Austria and Italy. Even under the communists Budapest was the best place for eastern European traffickers, and Arab tourists had always visited the city. From Budapest women go to Luxemburg and Scandinavian countries.

Between 1975 and 1985 the gang's impresario was V., who used to engage famous pop groups to perform in Belgium.¹⁷ He also quit the gang. Another dissident gang member, Dirk Trioen, was threatened because he had taken pity on a few girls. He pretended they had run away and moved them elsewhere to work on more favourable terms. He was the manager of the bar where the Indonesian girls were housed. He had a knack of organizing cartels and smuggling and he knew how to handle corrupt Belgian policemen. He was also active in EC fraud.

One Filipina was rescued by the gang's former chauffeur, who had to break away from the Billionaire because he fell in love with her and asked her to marry him after he had divorced his first wife. Because he feared reprisals by the gang, he demanded help and financial support from the Dutch authorities. When he didn't get it soon enough, he threatened to disclose the whereabouts of the shelter where he and his fiancée were hiding out. He is now

divorced from his first wife and the Filipina has a residence permit in Belgium.

However, it was not until 1994 that two bosses of the Billionaire gang were finally arrested, at the end of what had been a shameful chapter for both Belgium and the Netherlands.