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Sex slavery thriving in Holy Land

by **Megan Goldin**
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Rolls of money changed hands between the Bedouin and the Russian-speaking men who bought the women. Christina doesn't know how much they paid, but the market price for a woman like her in Israel is around \$8,000.

Sex slavery thriving in Holy Land
By Megan Goldin NEVE TIRZA PRISON, ISRAEL

Christina, an 18-year-old university student from Moldova, has been bought and sold so many times she has lost count.

Christina, who declined to give her real name, studied classics and anthropology and played basketball as a hobby before she was lured from a rural town in one of Europe's poorest countries to sex slavery in Israel.

She is not alone.

Hundreds of thousands of 'Christinas' have been bought like merchandise, beaten, raped and chained in Western brothels in a 21st century form of slavery.

Christina received top marks in her anthropology studies but couldn't scrape together enough money to pay for photocopies, let alone buy textbooks.

Her dire economic situation made her fair game for women hired by criminal gangs to lure young, naive girls from Moldova and other financially-strapped Eastern European countries into prostitution with promises of large sums of money.

"I never thought I would actually have to do it," Christina said in bewilderment. "I thought once I arrived I would find a way to escape and find other work, as a waitress or something."

Christina was flown to Egypt where along with 20 other Moldovan and Russian women aged between about 18 and 24, she was escorted across the Sinai desert into southern Israel by a Bedouin smuggler.

They walked over dunes, eventually crawling under a barbed-wire border fence in the middle of the night.

Rolls of money changed hands between the Bedouin and the Russian-speaking men who bought the women. Christina doesn't know how much they paid, but the market price for a woman like her in Israel is around \$8,000.

Frightened, an illegal alien, unfamiliar with Hebrew or Israeli geography, Christina had no real hope of escaping.

Instead she was taken to a brothel in northern Israel where she was forced to have sex with around 15 men every day, raped, beaten and threatened with death if she ran away.

Eventually she did and is now a witness in a court case against the pimp who bought and mistreated her under a new Israeli law that makes human trafficking punishable by up to 16 years in prison.

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"It's very easy. You just put them on a plane, walk them through the desert and you have slaves," said lawyer Nomi Levenkron, who represents women like Christina who are locked in a special wing of the Neve Tirza prison near Tel Aviv while they wait to testify or to be deported for entering Israel illegally.

Sex slavery, or white slavery as it was called in the 19th century, is almost as old as prostitution itself. But it has had a sudden resurgence since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 devastated many eastern European economies.

Women who earn around \$20 a month in Moldova are promised \$1,000 a month abroad to work as prostitutes. It is a tempting offer for young women with bleak futures in their home countries or burdened with supporting a large family.

Sometimes the women don't know they are being sent to work as prostitutes and are told they will be waitresses or secretaries. Others are simply kidnapped.

Almost always they are trafficked by the local Mafia, frequently on a forged passport and threatened that if they don't behave, their family back home will suffer the consequences.

"They come from a place with no money, a very poor family in a poor village, looking for a better future," said Levenkron, a legal adviser to the Hotline for Migrant Workers, the only organization in Israel that helps former sex-slaves.

"These women are so naive, they don't realize people are lying to them," she said.

Israel is a popular destination for the human trade. It is not difficult to smuggle and hide Russian-speaking women in a country where almost a million people originate from the former Soviet Union.

"It's very easy for them to disappear between all the Russian-speaking women in Israel," Levenkron said. "It's very easy for traffickers to bring women here and when you have the supply, you have the demand."

A recent U.S. State Department report on human trafficking put Israel on a list of countries where the phenomenon is rampant. It has until 2003 to implement "minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking" or face stiff economic sanctions.

According to Zahava Gal-On, who heads an Israeli parliamentary committee on trafficking that means deterring traffickers with hefty prison sentences instead of a few months in jail, the usual punishment handed down by Israeli courts.

It also means putting women like Christina in safe houses instead of jail, thereby encouraging them to stay and testify.

In the past the victim has been locked up, sometimes for as long as six months, while the pimp is let off with a small fine or a brief stay in jail although under the law, it is the brothel owner, not the woman, who has committed a crime.

Like most former sex-slaves, Christina is penniless. Those lucky enough to be paid a paltry sum, usually a few dollars, by their pimps save the money to buy themselves freedom from their brothel-prisons. Often they are sold before they can do so.

"They are slaves and slaves of the worst kind," Levenkron said. "They are disposable people because it's so easy to buy a person."

Human trafficking is becoming a modern day scourge, said Tal Raviv, an advocate for the International Organization for Migration who works in Kosovo where trafficking is widespread.

"This has become a huge phenomena in the last decade," said Raviv during a visit to Israel. "The estimates are between half a million to 700,000 women trafficked every year just to the West, but the global figures are for millions."

Law enforcement officials say human trafficking is almost as rampant as drug and

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weapons smuggling. Many of the women being trafficked are forced to work in brothels.

In Africa and Asia, men are often sent to sweatshops and children forced to work in cocoa plantations in West Africa. Some of those trafficked are slated to be unwilling donors for black market organ transplants, Raviv said.

"Trafficking people is much easier than trafficking drugs and weapons," she said.

"It's easier because if you find drugs or the arms, there is no question something illegal has happened. But if you find a person with a passport, how do you know this person is not traveling out of their own free will?"

Raviv says the only difference between the 21st century version of slavery and that of the plantations in the Americas some 200 years ago is that today slavery is illegal.

"When you buy and sell a person, then it means a person is merchandise and that is slavery," Raviv said. "The person has no freedom, no control over his or her fate."

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