

New Film Probes Sex Trafficking Underworld

They May Be on Candid Camera But No One Wants Them to Smile

In 2000, Toronto filmmaker Ric Beinstock was scouting out crew accommodations in a remote Chinese village when she stumbled upon a new, upscale-looking hotel.

"It was very incongruous for that area of China," Beinstock recalls. Even though it seemed like a mirage in the desert, she booked several rooms for her upcoming television shoot, never realizing that the hotel was really a brothel. Shortly after the crew checked in, their phones began to ring repeatedly.

"Massage? Massage?" someone on the other end asked in a meek voice.

Beinstock was producing a Penn and Teller special that would be airing on the Learning Channel, so no one she knew was there for the "massage".

Later, in the basement of the hotel they discovered a discothèque, "very kind of camp and tacky", she said during a recent telephone interview from her office in Canada. A large contingent of Chinese women and two blonde Russian girls stood at the ready for any interested guests.

As Beinstock and her crew were the only other Caucasians for miles around, the Russians attracted their curiosity. So she invited them up to her room.

Neither of the prostitutes spoke English. Co-producer Felix Golubev, however, spoke fluent Russian, and what the women told them made Beinstock's head spin. Both had been beaten, raped, trafficked across the border from their nearby Russian village and forced



Ric Esther Beinstock

to provide sex in that hotel.

When the filmmaker offered to call the police, the women said that the police were among their regular patrons. There was nothing to be done.

"I couldn't get their stories out of my head," says Beinstock. After leaving the women behind and completing the Penn and Teller shoot, she delved back into the world of global sex trafficking. She and co-producers Golubev and Simcha Jacobovici decided to make a documentary on the subject by going undercover and filming the criminal enterprise as it was playing out at that moment along the Mediterranean.

Their company, Associated Producers, first had to get the financial backing. They approached the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, as well as a British television channel and PBS in the United States. All agreed to air the program.

With that backing and a grant from a nonprofit film fund, the team packed their cameras and headed for Odessa, Ukraine.

Sex Slaves is the poignant story

of several women whose lives are turned upside down after being sold into sex slavery by people they trust. No Hollywood production studio could have come close to replicating the raw dialogue and commentary of this real-life cast, let alone the mind-blowing premise of women being bought and sold as an everyday affair.

In the film, Beinstock deftly intertwines undercover surveillance of pimping transactions with one-on-one interviews of women recounting their ordeals.

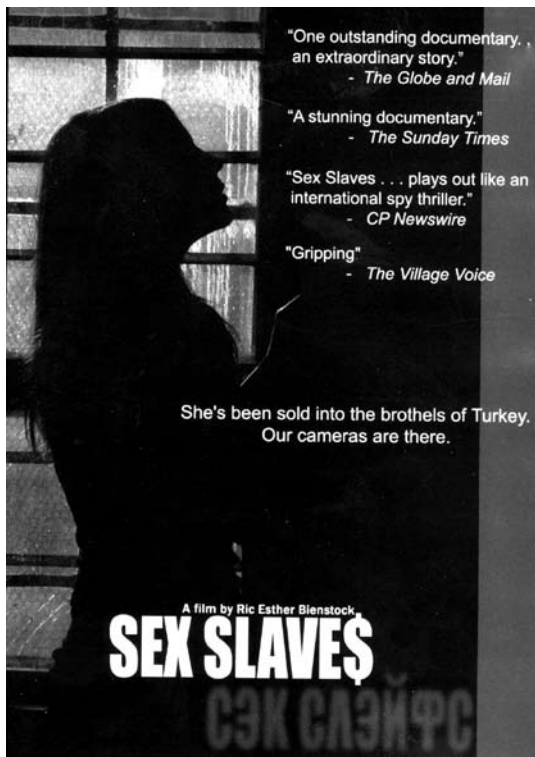
In one segment, a Ukrainian man named Viorel learns that his friend Vlad has sold his wife to one of Istanbul's most notorious crime figures, a pimp named Apo. The crew accompanies Viorel on a trip to Turkey to try and buy back his spouse.

Remarkably, just two floors beneath the office where Viorel is filing his crime report (in the Port of Odessa), the filmmakers track Pasha, a pudgy working-class woman who's transporting five women to Istanbul to sell to another pimp.

Pasha has a long history of placing fake ads for girls seeking overseas jobs, then handing them over to pimps for \$500 apiece. Following on a tip from the Ukrainian secret service, Beinstock's cameras are there when Pasha hands over her human cache to brothel owners in a parking lot in the Russian District of Istanbul.

In another segment, Tania, whose job abroad as a nanny turns out to be a horrific nightmare of enslavement, is just arriving home for the first time since she was

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DVD cover of the new documentary, kidnapped several months earlier. The sheer joy on the face of her 10-year-old daughter speaks volumes on the impact of a crime that may soon eclipse gun-running and drug dealing in terms of profits.

Although Bienstock travels thousands of miles to log the sex trafficking phenomenon abroad, it turns out there are trafficking schemes afoot in her own native Toronto. We meet a victim who was brought into the country on an "exotic dancer visa" issued by the Canadian government.

In London, Bienstock interviews a girl who has been sold six times and shuttled around Europe like a badminton cock.

"They smuggled me into England in the back of a lorry" this victim explains. "I was put in a box in the back. The box was filled with veal. I could barely breathe."

After the eight-hour ride, her stiff frame was lowered into the spa of the massage parlor where she started working the next day.

"First week I came to London,

I was very busy. I had 50, 60 customers. Everyone wanted to try the new girl."

Deborah Finding, a British social service provider with flaming red hair, tries to account for why so many women are getting sucked into trafficking schemes these days.

"Even if there's some needling doubt at the back of their minds that this might not be the perfect job opportunity, that there's something a little dodgy about it, they're going to desperately want to believe that everything's going to be OK," she explains. "So they're going to be far more likely to just take that risk and to go, because what could be worse than the

life they're having at the minute. And of course, there is something worse."

In the Ukraine, the filmmaker also sits down with family members to hear their reaction to having a loved one kidnapped. Viorel's mother-in-law, for instance, has been enlisted to watch the couple's son.

"Here I am with a 5-year-old, and I'm 60," the woman complains. "I told him she went to work. What else can I tell him – that his mother was sold? Imagine..."

Fortunately, there's a happy ending to Viorel's plight. His wife Tatiya returns home. A resilient soul, her sage commentary about what's happened to her and the many other young women who have been trafficked lifts *Sex Slaves*

far beyond the pale of a two-hankie, violin concerto.

After finishing the shoot, Bienstock says she took all her undercover material to the Ukrainian and Turkish authorities. Yet neither country was interested in pursuing charges. At last check, Pasha was still placing fake ads and selling women. Apo, the notorious pimp, was still running his brothels. Vlad, the friend who sold Viorel's wife for \$1,000, did get arrested, but received five years probation.

In January Bienstock spoke at the Omni Hotel in an appearance sponsored by the San Francisco-based International Museum of Women as part of their "Extraordinary Voices, Extraordinary Change" series.

Her previous credits include *Impact of Terror*, about a suicide bombing in Israel, *The Money Shot*, which examines the pornography industry, and *Ms. Conceptions*, about single mothers by choice. *Sex Slaves* has received the British Broadcast Award for best documentary in 2006, and also a Gracie Award from the New York based Women in Film and Television Association.

Bienstock recently finished work on a new documentary to air on the History Channel this March. It dabbles in biblical intrigue and is *DaVinci Codesque*, she says, but wouldn't reveal any other details.

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The City Edition of San Francisco

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