

social issues & initiatives

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Fresh Girls Daily

In the woods on the border of the Czech Republic the Slovak social worker Ludmilla Irmischer -battles against women traffickers, ignorant “customers”, insulted authorities and everyday naked violence. Sometimes she gives women who have been forced to become prostitutes a new life.

Her parents threw her out. It’s time, they told her, for you to earn your own money. In an advertisement in Lithuania Petra read: “Cheap taxi to Europe”. A dream job as a dancer was mentioned. But before reaching the Czech-German border the taxi turned off the main road. Then there came those neon signs that suddenly shine so brightly in the headlights of the car, like the grimacing faces on a ghost-train ride: “Kamazutra”, “Marquis” and “Karibik”. The taxi bumped its way across potholes and forest paths to a small border village whose name cannot be mentioned here. It stopped in front of a building in which the windows were blacked-out with dark foil. Red lights blinked in an electrical garden hose that was curved to form a heart. In front of the building were cars with German licence plates. At the front there was also a sign that Petra could not read: “Fresh girls daily!”. The driver told her to get out. A “mama”, Petra remembers, told her to stay here, “to pay back the first instalment of the travel costs”. That’s quickly done, she said. Here are men with money, men from over there. Stand at the bar, you can dance with the Germans. And if you want, you can go to the bedroom with them. It won’t take long, she said, you’ll manage it.

Petra did not want to. But she no longer had her passport and her debts were growing, as she had to pay for her accommodation too. And then “mama” told her about women that were put in ice-cold baths and held under water so long that they thought they would drown. Some of them were buried alive, said “mama”.

The threats and intimidation work, and after a few days Petra complies. After the first time she is left with five euro. She had to hand over the rest. Petra says: “If you throw a frog into hot water, he jumps out. But if you warm the water slowly, he dies.” She escaped by entrusting her fate to a “regular customer”, as she recounts. She ran out barefoot into the woods when “mama” was not looking. The “customer” was waiting at a junction. And now she lives with him in a small Bavarian village and keeps house for him. He talks about love. She says: “Where should I go”. Two of her front teeth are missing. There are flames tattooed on her arms. She wears pigtails that are meant to make her look younger. That is the way he wants it, she says.

Seduction, blackmail, coercion, mistreatment, blows and “rescue” by “customers”: this is the everyday life described by the forced prostitutes sitting here in the small social group “Karo” in Plauen, a town in Saxony. The stories seem to come from another archaic world. But they are happening in the centre of Europe. Plauen is about 80 kilometres from the Czech border where trafficking in women flourishes. Here buses travel past showing the sign “Ficken Tour” (literally: fucking tour”). According to authorities estimates, up to 100,000 sex tourists a year drop by here for a quickie.

Here in the kitchen the courageous Karo social workers Cathrin Schauer and Ludmilla Irmischer attempt to give these women back some of their human dignity. It is an unusual scene: the women who only a few weeks ago had to wait for men at the edge of the road now sit here in safety, they eat fried sausages, laugh and smoke very heavily as if they wanted to cover the sun painted on the walls with a veil of smoke. "It's unbelievable what is done to these women. They often stand ten hours a day on the street, in the blazing sun and in the icy cold", Irmischer says, " Many of the customers are very violent. They dump the women naked in the woods or tear out their hair."

Irmischer, a native Slovak with a boyish grin, does not mince matters. She stuffs condoms, lubricant and syringes into a toolbox. She is about to head off in the direction of the Czech Republic and to look at night for those women who wait for their customers in bars, small hotels or on the street. Entire village communities are being destroyed here by all the sex clubs that officially are called "Penzione", as brothels are officially forbidden. The issue is not morality but brutal trafficking in women, exploitation, abuse and the misery of those who don't get to Europe. Roma families send their daughters here on the game. Traffickers in women dump young women from villages in Lithuania. "We had Russian women here who had not even been told the facts of life", explains Irmischer. Karo has already "brought out" up to 200 prostitutes. Irmischer: "Sometimes they jump into the car and plea with us to just take them away."

Irmischer travels slowly in her Škoda through the towns of Odrava and As. "Here, take a look, six houses, five brothels." It seems peaceful only at first glance. "In this area here we hand out 600 condoms a week." Girls wait in wooden shacks on the edge of the road, they're not even 18 years old, and stretch their hands into the car to get the condoms. One of the girls tells how she was chained to a tree and raped by a "pig of customer". She wrote the licence plate number of his car on her arm. Irmischer will report the incident to the police. But they will just file away the report. "For them the girls here are the dregs." What makes this scene so crazy is that while the social workers distribute tampons financed by donations, customers with German registration plates are driving past. And then the pimps come and the girls open their hip bags and give them the money. This is a "legal vacuum", says Irmischer. "I'm the only one fined here, because sometimes I leave my car in a no-parking zone to speak briefly with the women."

Irmischer has stopped the car in front of a supermarket at the edge of the centre of Cheb. The headlights are turned off, Irmischer is watching. Time and time again the same strange men roll by, some of them in white buses. Irmischer tells that children are often offered here. She knows a lot of "customers" that wander through the streets here for hours. At a number of inns where the regular customers meet she attempts to talk to the men. Often in vain: "Sometimes they wait the entire night, until the price is five euro. And some of them are just sick."

The social workers of Karo pursue a number of goals. First of all they want to protect the women against serious illnesses – most of the prostitutes are already infected with hepatitis, HIV and, increasingly, with syphilis. In addition Irmischer and her colleagues attempt to get an insight into the "scene". How brutal are the customers? Where do the women come from? It is hard to find that out. "Here the girls are constantly shifted from one village to another", says Irmischer. In addition there is the fact that the women are often "completely out of it" on a drug called Pernik, an amphetamine that they mix with washing powder before injecting themselves with it.

How representative is what helpers such as Ludmilla Irmischer experience day after day here on a Schengen border? Recently the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine presented a socio-medical study of compulsory prostitution. Police, judges, social workers and prostitutes were interviewed. It states in the study that all the women questioned, “said that they were forced to do certain sexual practices”. Most of them had to have sex with between ten and 25 men daily, sometimes as many as 50. The girls told about group rape, they said they had been injured with knives or cigarettes and, above all, that they had been locked up alone for longer periods. They complained about broken limbs, loss of consciousness, sexually transmitted diseases, about the damage left by abortions. The study records that during the traumatic time in the brothels chemical reactions take place in the brains of many of the women that damage their perception. They can later only vaguely or partly remember their period as forced prostitutes.

Slowly, politicians seem to be reacting to this situation. In Germany, and gradually in Austria too, the Ministers of Justice are considering targeting those customers of the prostitutes who ought to be able to recognise the situation in which the women find themselves. Men who cross the border for a sexual adventure should land in prison if they exploit the compulsory situation of the prostitutes. Politicians and the authorities know how difficult it will be to prove this but they want to develop the men’s awareness. They should be forced to ask themselves a few questions before they buy themselves sex. At the same time the rights of the women should be improved. They should get psychological help more quickly and be given longer residency permits – not least of all so that they can give evidence against their tormentors. Only in this way can the perpetrators be prosecuted. While the politicians discuss punishing the customers in order to help the women, associations such as Karo are struggling to survive. In the Czech branch of the association there is one old gynaecological chair made of iron. No doctor who is willing to treat the girls can be found. This is not by chance. Karo is boycotted here. The head of police in Cheb, Jaroslav Kerbic, complains that the social workers have “brought shame on the town”. It is bad enough that German male customers should come to the town, he says, they don’t additionally need German women to explain to the Czechs what is happening on the streets here. Germany has also cut the subsidies to Karo because the association deals with a Czech rather than a German problem. In addition there is the scandal started by Cathrin Schauer, the head of Karo and recipient of numerous awards. Commissioned by Unicef, this militant nurse documented child prostitution and pedophilia. Since then the association lives from limited EU subventions and private donations, for example from Alice Schwarzer, the German women’s rights activist.

But Ludmilla Irmischer is not willing to give up. Quite the opposite, in fact. At present she is accompanying Petra, the girl who wanted to go to Paris, to the first German language course that Karo has been able to set up with EU money. The girls can learn here anonymously. The idea is to make them self-sufficient, and to allow them learn a trade sometime in the future. Petra now writes German letters on the blackboard. She smiles so broadly that you can see the gap between her teeth. And an elderly, patient teacher stands at the front and says: “Girls, we’re going to manage this!” Ludmilla Irmischer nods. And then she goes off again in her silver Skoda. There is so much still to be done.

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Contact and information about Karo:

<http://karo-ev.de>

KARO donations bank account

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