

‘Nefarious: Merchant of Souls’ Exposes Sex Trafficking Industry

As we waited in a packed theater recently to see a new documentary about sex trafficking, I wondered how Christian filmmaker Benjamin Nolot would present this graphic subject to us.

Nolot heads an international ministry called Exodus Cry, based in Grandview, Mo., and is part of the leadership team of the International House of Prayer, led by Mike Bickle. The purpose of Exodus Cry is to abolish sex enslavement worldwide through prayer, awareness efforts, nonviolent rescue, and the rehabilitation and social reintegration of victims.

I knew, therefore, that he would be seeking to reach the widest audience possible with his exposé, *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*. To do so with this subject matter, he’d have to balance reality with discretion. I’d soon see that he did—and accomplished that feat without comprising his purpose: to reveal the dreadful reality of this widespread criminal enterprise.

In 2007 Nolot embarked on fact-finding missions to investigate the underground sex “industry.” Ultimately, he traveled with his film crew to 19 countries. The film we were about to watch chronicled their journeys.

Most of us attending the screening that night at Full Sail University in Orlando, Fla., were Christians. We went at the invitation of Florida Abolitionist, the sponsor and an NGO that campaigns against modern forms of slavery. Local pastor Tomas J. Lares told the audience he founded the organization after learning that Florida is a major pipeline of human trafficking. The state, it turns out, is the second-largest

“hub” of human trafficking in the country, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

Lares provided some disturbing statistics about sex slavery: 2 million children worldwide are victims; 80 percent of all victims are women and children; the average age of victims entering the commercial sex trade in the U.S. is 13. Nolot’s film, however added the human side to those stats, telling the stories of real-life victims.

For the next two hours, we were taken to pulse points of the global sex industry: eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, western Europe, the western U.S. Through on-location footage and interviews with rescued girls, human-rights experts and others, Nefarious illuminated the darkness that shrouds this illicit trade.

In particular, I found two expressions of the so-called industry to be profoundly troubling for the misery and oppression they inflict. These are the human-trafficking infrastructure in Europe and the parental-complicity culture of Southeast Asia.

Europe: ‘The Breaking Grounds’

Nefarious opens with a disturbing reenactment of a daylight abduction. A young woman is taken by force from a city street somewhere in Europe. The location isn’t named, but it perhaps is in Moldova, a small, former satellite nation of the Soviet Union on the edge of the Black Sea.

Moldova today is among the poorest countries in Europe and a land ripe for illegal enterprises: a place of “widespread crime and underground economic activity,” the CIA World Factbook notes. Slave traders call it “The Engine” of the European sex-trafficking industry. According to the film, more than 10 percent of its population has been trafficked into the illicit sex trade.

The young woman is taken to an apartment building owned by

organized crime where she is confined with other girls who have also met her fate. Traffickers call these residences “the breaking grounds,” and it’s clear from the film that they are factories of human misery. Here young women are brutally transformed into compliant products for the sex industry.

Although abductions such as *Nefarious* portrayed do occur, most female victims of sex trafficking in Europe are lured by job offers that promise a better life from working in hotels, restaurants or in child care in prosperous cities of the continent. Phony employment agencies set up by traffickers run the scams. The best jobs supposedly go to girls who will relocate. Instead, they are kidnapped upon reaching their destinations and sent to the breaking grounds.

Vlad (not his real name) worked as human trafficker for 11 years in Europe. He spoke on camera and dissected the hell of the breaking grounds for *Nolot*.

Terror, drugs, threats of violence and actual violence all are used to subjugate victims’ wills and create total compliance. The brutal men who mete this out consider the ideal compliant state to be one in which they can bark single-word commands at girls (“Go.” “Stay.” “Down.” “Up.” “Sit.”) and receive immediate obedience.

Very few girls escape from the breaking grounds, Vlad said, due to constant surveillance, physical abuse and knowing the consequences of an attempted flight. Vlad was asked what would happen to a girl who tried to escape more than once.

“Well, when they are caught, they would be beaten,” he said. “If they tried it again His voice trailed off as if to imply the obvious.

Didn’t this bother him? he was asked.

“The first two or three times I had to discipline a girl, I thought about it,” he replied. “After that, I didn’t. You get

used to it.”

Why didn't this bother him? he was asked.

“Why should I quit thinking about what happens to the girls?” he replied rhetorically. “[It was] because it was good money—real good money.”

Ultimately, the girls face an existence in prostitution. Worse, some are sent to the slave auctions where they are sold as property to high bidders from around the world. One rescued European girl whose face was concealed when she spoke on camera described the modern-day, secret slave blocks of eastern Europe that are held in secured buildings and run like fashion shows.

“We had to walk down the runway and take off our clothes and stand before the audience,” she said. “The men who were interested in buying would come forward and examine us, like we were cattle.”

Nefarious contrasted the secret and brutal sex trade of eastern Europe with the openly practiced and well-established trade in the Netherlands, in western Europe. Brothels in the Netherlands are legal, government-regulated business. Amsterdam is well-established as an international destination for sex tourism.

Yet the Netherlands is also listed as a top destination for victims of sex trafficking, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. In the last few years, sex businesses in the city have been closed down due to suspected criminal activity.

Nolot and his team spoke with an Amsterdam prostitution retailer named Slim and asked if his business was financed by organized crime. Hesitating for a moment, Slim replied, “No. No.”

Vlad disagreed. "These businesses are all mafia-run," the ex-trafficker claimed, using the term mafia to mean "organized crime" in general. "It's big money."

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, human trafficking is the fastest growing criminal industry in the world and second largest, surpassed only by the illicit drug trade. Vlad told Nolot why sex trafficking in particular is growing so fast.

"Unlike with drugs, which can be sold only one time," he said, "a person can be sold over and over again."

But how is it all made possible on an international scale? he was asked.

"Without the mafias, there would be no human trafficking. It's all about money," he told Nolot. "But government corruption makes it possible."

The illicit money is so abundant, he explained, that even authorities look the other way for a price. Payoffs occur every day, he claimed, from the top to the bottom in governments: from national to local officials, from immigration officers to customs workers, from police agencies to cops on the street.

Money is the key that opens the door of official complicity, he said.

Southeast Asia: 'Parental Complicity'

In Southeast Asia, primarily in Cambodia and Thailand, Nolot and his team discovered another type of complicity helping to drive the industry.

In this corner of the world, the cultural views about women, as well as widespread poverty, have combined to create a feeder system for child prostitution fueled by "parental complicity." The difference between this corner of the world

and eastern Europe is that parents living in the impoverished regions knowingly, willingly, send their young daughters into the urban prostitution centers to make money for the family. In some areas of Southeast Asia, girls are prostituted before age 10 and are used in the pornography sub-industry.

Once again, organized crime controls the larger industry. While this fact is not very evident in the cultural life of the rural villages, the film showed it at work in the modern tourist scenes of the big cities.

In the travel destinations of Southeast Asia, karaoke clubs are the main connection point for sex tourism. Nolot captured the club scenes on film: Groups of girls who looked to be in their early teens to 20s mingled with patrons on sidewalks or in street-side café-bars in front of the clubs. Many of the girls had paired off with white, middle-aged Western men—some of whom had no doubt traveled thousands of miles to be in a place where they could safely buy the underaged for sex.

Inside the clubs, Nolot's camera captured the scenes: modern-décor rooms with shiny accents, bright colors, large flat-screen TVs, background music, subdued lighting and sexual energy. One club where he filmed had 80 of these rooms. In each of them, girls mingled, or floated in and out seeking connections. According to a police source Nolot interviewed, the owner had eight other clubs just like it and more than 2,000 girls in his network. It was just one such club among many in the international tourist areas.

Witnessing the sex industry at work, through scenes such as these, meant that making *Nefarious* was not an easy task for Nolot: "Seeing the trafficking problem from this angle was extremely difficult. There is not a day that goes by that I am not mindful of the horrific tragedies we uncovered."

His motive for it, he said, is not to "sell" a movie but to help right a wrong. "This is all personal and deeply

meaningful to me. I approach this issue with a desire for justice, not credential or fame. I am deeply passionate about seeing others, like myself, moved from ignorance to action.”

Speaking as a viewer, my guess is that all of us in the theater that night shared one thought by the time the credits were rolling: We wanted nothing less than to see this nefarious trade stopped forever.

Nefarious: Merchant of Souls is the first of three films from Benjamin Nolot about human trafficking. Films two and three are currently in production. For more about the movies, go to Nefarious: Merchant of Souls. For more about Exodus Cry, click here.