

U.S. Jails Russian for Human Trafficking

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COLUMBUS, Ohio — A U.S. judge sentenced a Russian immigrant to one-year in prison for her role in a human trafficking conspiracy that recruited hundreds of women from Russia, Estonia, Belarus and Ukraine to work illegally at hotels in the United States.

U.S. prosecutors said Maria Terechina, 47, was a criminal who helped trick the women into taking hotel jobs in Ohio they couldn't escape because she took their passports and controlled where they lived and how they got around.

Terechina's lawyer said she was a hardworking grandmother who made mistakes and cooperated when tax authorities began an investigation two years ago.

U.S. District Judge James Graham acknowledged that cooperation when he sentenced Terechina to 12 months in prison. She had faced up to five years in prison.

"I am no angel, but I am no devil," Terechina said during a court hearing.

Terechina pleaded guilty in April to conspiring to defraud the government and conduct human trafficking.

Terechina, a U.S. citizen who emigrated from Russia, was recruited by other Russians to move to Columbus, Ohio, and supervise cleaning businesses that employed immigrants who did not have permission to work in the United States, according to federal court filings.

The conspiracy that began in 1999 and continued for eight years involved Terechina holding the passports and other documents of the female immigrants as an implied threat that they had to keep working, the filings said.

Terechina and her conspirators would tell the recruited women they owed debts of \$600 to \$1,000 that had to be subtracted from their wages. They would also tell the workers they owed money for transportation and housing expenses such as electric bills, according to court documents.

Prosecutors also said she helped defraud tax authorities of \$185,000 by filing false tax returns on behalf of the workers.

Terechina's attorney, Bradley Barbin, described her as a hard worker who has taken responsibility for her mistakes, according to a court filing.

"The work has not always been lawful and she regrets her mistakes," he said. "She has made great progress in paying rightful debts."

He said after Friday's sentencing that many of the women who worked for Terechina saw her as a "benevolent" manager who looked out for them, taking them on trips and to church.

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