The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Suspect in Human Trafficking

January 30, 2011

Gonikman

NEW YORK — A U.S. citizen who used a fake Russian passport while living in Ukraine has agreed to go to Michigan to face charges he was a member of a violent ring that lured Eastern European women to the United States and forced them to become strippers.

Veniamin Gonikman consented to the transfer from New York during a brief appearance in federal court in Brooklyn.

The jailed Gonikman, 55, has "agreed to go to Michigan as quickly as possible so he can defend himself against the charges there," Jan Rostal, a public defender who represented him at the hearing, said outside court.

It could be several days before U.S. marshals make the transfer, the lawyer said. Prosecutors in New York declined comment.

Court papers filed in Brooklyn on Friday allege Gonikman, who's a U.S. citizen, was using a fake Russian passport while living in Ukraine. Officials there arrested him on Wednesday on immigration violations and ordered his deportation.

The officials notified the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which had agents board a U.S.-bound commercial flight in Kiev carrying Gonikman, the papers say. The agents took him into custody once the plane landed Thursday night at Kennedy Airport.

The Associated Press reported on the case involving Gonikman last year in a lengthy investigation of the exploitation of a U.S. cultural exchange program that provides foreign college students temporary visas to live and work in the United States.

One of Gonikman's alleged victims, using the alias Katya, told AP that she was a 19-year-old sports medicine student and waitress in Kiev in 2004 when her boss, who she said was Gonikman, told her about the visa program. She asked the AP not to use her real name because she feared for her life.

Katya said she thought she was going to Virginia Beach, Virginia, to waitress. But when the plane landed in Washington, Gonikman's son met her and other women at the airport and put them on a bus to Detroit.

There, he took the women to an apartment, confiscated their passports and told them they owed thousands of dollars for the travel arrangements and that they had to pay it off by becoming exotic dancers.

"I said, 'That's not what I signed here for. That's not right.' He said, 'Well, you owe me the money. I don't care how I get it from you. If I have to sell you, I'll sell you.'"

The women were told that if they refused, their families in Ukraine would be killed, Katya said.

Over the next several months, the women's handlers beat and sexually assaulted them, threatened them with guns and forced them to work 12 hours a day, six days a week at Cheetah's strip club, according to court records.

Authorities say the victims were forced to turn over all their earnings — more than $1 million in all. Some of them finally escaped with the help of a club customer and notified authorities.

Gonikman — listed as one of Homeland Security's top 10 fugitives — faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted of human trafficking, money laundering, extortion and other charges.

Several other defendants, including Gonikman's son, have been convicted in the scheme, officials said. Some are serving sentences ranging from seven to 14 years.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/01/30/suspect-in-human-trafficking-a4623