

STREET OF PLEASURE – HUNGARIAN SEX FOR EUROS¹ BY VERA MUNK (BUDAPEST, BOOKLINE BOOKS, 2017)

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This book by Vera Munk was written to reveal details about one of the red light districts in Germany. It examines a zone in Bremerhaven, Lessingstrasse, where women who work as prostitutes are legally allowed to work. The journalist examined the district for half a year, conducting interviews with nearly forty prostitutes, as well as – among others – pimps, clients, legal actors, social workers and police officers. Although one of the main aims of the book is to describe the situation of Hungarian prostitutes in Bremerhaven from an objective perspective in a descriptive way, the author often links the approaches of different feminist theories to the phenomenon.

Based on the information given in the book, there are 170 women working as prostitutes on Lessingstrasse in Bremerhaven, and Hungarian women are overrepresented. On the websites which advertise women who sell sex, and on the basis of the number of Hungarian prostitutes in Germany, ‘Hungarian women’ has become a distinct, searchable category. The German law on the decriminalization of prostitution offers no concrete guidelines for regulation at the local level (for example, in some areas of Germany it is obligatory for women who work as prostitutes to pay tax, while in others it is not). The book maps one woman’s road to prostitution and introduces her life in Bremerhaven at Lessingstrasse: we learn about her relationships in the red light district, her life in prostitution and at home, her clients, how she looks at her life, how she sees her job, and what her future goals are.

The book guides us through the phenomena which are well known from the literature about women from Eastern and Central Europe who are trafficked to Western Europe for prostitution: the deep poverty which ends up in women

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being forced in to prostitution, the high prices of rooms and brothels in the host country, how pimps control women in prostitution, and the phenomenon of the ‘capo’ system, which refers to when male pimps stay in their country of origin and control women in prostitution through other women the literature call capos. The capo serves as an extension of the pimp’s hand, and in return plays a significant role in the lives of women who ‘belong’ to the pimp.

Although Berta, the main character in the book, is fictional, her life, circumstances and actions have all been copied from the author’s interviewees. Berta is from a little town in the area of Nyírség, which is one of the main sending regions of Hungary with regard to women who are trafficked to Western Europe in to the sex industry. Her road to prostitution starts with a ‘loverboy’ in Nyíregyháza (the literature calls the husbands or boyfriends of women who sell sex, as well as those who live from the women’s income, loverboys).

The book introduces how Krisztián slowly starts to isolate Berta from her mother, and the slow processes of manipulation that first leads to Berta starting to work as a dancer in a bar in Austria, and then as a prostitute in different countries, finally ending up in Germany. The book gives insight into how Berta looks at the process and her relationship with Krisztián, how prostitutes view their pimps. The author concludes that *‘There is no similar relationship between a sex worker and their pimp’*.

The book points out the fact that pimping rarely happens in a well-defined way, as women who are working in prostitution are usually bonded to their pimps, and it is very typical for trafficking activity to be masked by a ‘loving’ relationship. Trafficking frequently happens through techniques of manipulation: through romantic promises, marriages which never materialize, or husbands who take their wives abroad and exploit them. Women are also frequently recruited by friends. This makes it easy for males to avoid being defined as pimps, even though it is they who manipulate women into prostitution. The process also makes it harder for women to escape because of their emotional bonding.

Through the life of Berta and other women who work as prostitutes in Bremerhaven, the book also describes the everyday exploitation of women in the sex industry – their continuous anxiety concerning the need to collect the daily rental fee for rooms and windows in which they work, for which the rent is incredibly high, and the anxiety of earning the money they are forced to give to their pimp. Throughout the book, the author continuously raises questions about what can be called force, and what should be understood as choice. For example, Berta, after breaking up with Krisztián, chooses another pimp – based on her fear of working alone – and asks him if she can work with him. She – theoretically – has a less compromised relationship with Iván in the sense that Iván has a family in Hungary, but Berta also has a sexual relationship with him,

and when she is in Hungary spends time with Iván and his family. The author expresses incomprehension about why women share their income with someone else, usually male.

Violence against women who sell sex also happens in Bremerhaven's Lessingstrasse. Berta had a traumatic experience with a client who tried to choke her. The author also mentions a case from 2016 when two women who worked as prostitutes were murdered in the street. It is also well known that significant violence is associated with prostitution: death rates for prostitutes are forty times higher than average citizens³. Research that examined the situation of prostitutes in nine countries with the involvement of 854 people who worked in prostitution, and another piece of research involving five countries and 475 interviews with prostitutes found symptoms of PTSD⁴ in nearly 70 percent of women⁵. One theme that continuously runs through the book is that women do not want to work in prostitution, and that it is hard to leave the sex industry. The author states that: '*most of the women would stop being involved in prostitution but they do not have any idea how*'.

The book is based on important work and research: it is important to talk about prostitution and to fight against the romanticization of the phenomenon of prostitution, to reveal and raise awareness of the structures which surround the sex industry, and to try to increase awareness in society of this issue. Nevertheless, the author makes many improvident conclusions in the book, omitting mention of the structures and inequalities which surround the phenomenon of prostitution. It interprets different phenomenon and events – relationships between pimps and women in prostitution, the perspectives of clients, the question of choice and opportunities to escape – as if males and females had the same decision-making latitude, and as if class inequalities were not determining social factors in most cases in society structures, although it has been proven that class is a critical variable in relation to who becomes a victim of trafficking⁶. It is clear from the

3 Ekman, K. E. (2013). *Being and BeingBought: Prostitution, surrogacy and the splitself*. Spinifex Press.

4 PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is an anxiety problem that develops in some people after extremely traumatic events, such as experiences with combat, crime, an accident or natural disaster. People with PTSD may relive the event via intrusive memories, flashbacks and nightmares; avoid anything that reminds them of the trauma; and have anxious feelings they did not have before the event that are so intense that their lives are disrupted.

5 Farley, M., Baral, I., Kiremire, M., & Sezgin, U. (1998). Prostitution in five countries: Violence and post-traumatic stress disorder. *Feminism & Psychology*, 8(4), 405-426., Farley, M. (2003). *Prostitution, trafficking and traumatic stress* (Vol. 2, No. 3-4). Psychology Press.

6 Kligman, G., & Limoncelli, S. (2005). Trafficking women after socialism: From, to, and through Eastern Europe. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society*, 12(1), 118-140.

book just how deeply poverty determines women's lives and work as prostitutes, but when it comes to the interpretation of the present, to women's lives in prostitution, to their relationships with their pimps, clients, their decisions and opportunities, inequalities remain outside the interpretation. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of prostitution cannot be examined outside the social context. The phenomenon of prostitution is closely tied to social inequality, poverty, unemployment, social exclusion and marginalization.

Another questionable issue regarding the book concerns the objectivity of the author and the interpretation of the different approaches to prostitution. The author introduces the two main approaches to prostitution ('sex work' and the abolitionist view) as if they were two ends of a continuum, and as if objectivity could be defined as taking a position between the two. For example, Munk states that is her objectivity that leads her to believe that it is not easy to differentiate between voluntary and non-voluntary prostitution, although one of the main critiques of abolitionists concerns the inseparability of the two positions. Proponents of this perspective state that the phenomenon of prostitution is socially unacceptable, and as voluntary and involuntary prostitution are inseparable in most cases, it is impossible to base policies around 'voluntary' prostitution. Feminist theories take a critical view of societal structures and seek to analyze social phenomena through examining socially defined power relations. Seeking objectivity too often involves analyzing phenomena without questioning existing social structures; a position which is constantly taken by the author of this book.

I would recommend the book to anyone who seeks to learn more about the phenomenon of prostitution, although I would recommend reading it with a critical eye. The reader should constantly think about how structural inequalities (both gender and class) determine the concept of free choice, our relationships – especially the romantic relationships and how these structural inequalities are able to influence free choices of women in prostitution who have come from a background of deep poverty.