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# Prostitutes in Israel Are Finding New Lives in Training for the Fashion World

By ISABEL KERSHNER

TEL AVIV — For 20 years Aviva, 48, flamboyant and transgendered, worked the streets of the business district of this Mediterranean city, as well as the seedy square mile around the central bus station and the Tel Baruch beach, once a notorious hub of Israeli prostitution that has become a spruced up stretch of sandy coast.

Alona, 40, immigrated to Israel with her parents from Ukraine in the early 1990s. Her circumstances quickly degenerated from working in a casino to a life derailed by debts, drugs and prostitution. When she was not in prison, the squalid streets around the bus station became her home.

“In the streets there was no toilet, no toilet paper,” Alona said. “I forgot a lot of things, like how to look after myself, to love myself. I learned to survive.”

Now, in an endeavor as far removed from their former lives as the gleaming banks and trendy boutiques of Tel Aviv are from the city’s sleazy subculture, the two, who asked to be identified only by their first names, recently completed a free course in styling and the retail clothing business. Along with other former prostitutes who have received similar training in dress design and sewing, they are now aiming to find a place in the world of fashion. There is always demand for sales staff in Tel Aviv’s bustling stores, and one talented graduate even went on to a professional design school on a scholarship.

“The course gave me a lot of self-confidence and knowledge,” Aviva said. “Maybe one day I’ll be able to start something of my own. When they gave me the certificate — the first in my life — I was proud of myself. I’d done something positive.”

The idea for the program grew up from the underside of Tel Aviv.

The program’s initiator, Lilach Tzur Ben-Moshe, was working as a fashion writer and editor at a leading Hebrew news Web site and volunteering at the city’s rape crisis center when, four years ago, she moved to the dilapidated Shapira Quarter near the bus station. Her squalid new neighborhood exposed her to the full misery of the sex trade, and she determined to help women to leave it.

Alona, whose thin arms bear the scars of years of drug abuse, offered advice to Mr. Reiss about how stores can fall short — customers buying shoes might have nowhere proper to sit, or mirrors might not go all the way to the floor. Shoplifters, she added, often cover security tags with nylon or aluminum foil to prevent them beeping at the exit. “A saleswoman,” she said, “always needs to keep an eye.”

Many prostitutes here begin as teenagers and have little education and no other work experience.

“Working in stores will help them integrate into the real world,” Mr. Reiss said.

The courses also teach them how to get through a job interview and to cope when prospective employers ask whether they have ever stolen or used drugs.

“The answer,” Ms. Stern Levi said, “is, ‘Yes, I have a past. But I am looking forward now.’ Turning the Tables is turning people with the stigma of being ex-sex workers into women with expertise.”

Aviva came to Israel with her family from India in 1979, and, still male, completed compulsory military service. Afterward, Aviva made the transition to female but felt rejected by society and could not find a regular job. Prostitution was her answer. Change came, she said, when she found love. Now in a steady relationship, she found her way, with the help of Elem volunteers, to the hostel and the course — a whole new world of people.

“At first I wasn’t sure if I would understand them,” she said. Having completed the course, she was waiting to hear from a fashion designer about a job as a seamstress.

Alona first heard of the hostel after visiting an emergency apartment it ran near the bus station where prostitutes could come in from the street to shower and rest. This was her third attempt at a reset. The first time she moved into Saleet she stayed for one day; the second was a short stint directly from prison. Now it had been six months and she said she wanted to become a stylist in a clothing store and had been reading a lot about the building of fashion empires like that of Coco Chanel.

“It’s a new life,” she said.

If her City Winery set is any indication, Golbi has veered into a more commercial Top 40 pop/rock sound. That, too, is subject to change.

"I'm 19. When I'm 30 ...," she said, shrugging.

This sort of artistic flux is certainly understandable in one as young as Golbi. After all, if she were an American of the same age she'd be in college, changing her major for the umpteenth time.

Instead, Golbi is now serving in the Israeli military. In fact, she was on loan for the night; the Israeli army had given her special permission to travel to New York and perform at the gala.

Golbi ended her set with an English song, the endlessly covered "Hallelujah." The Leonard Cohen song works in nearly any context -- an animated feature film ("Shrek"), the "American Idol" stage or a room full of Jews who had just opened their checkbooks to help underserved and underprivileged Israeli youth.