

Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize

Reflecting on my field study

By Ekaterina Moiseeva

Every day, I feel more blessed when reflecting back on a truly unique opportunity to conduct an anthropological study - over a hundred interviews with Russian sex-workers - enabled by a generous Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize. I feel honored by the trust that my interviewees granted. I feel humbled by the stories that they shared. I feel depressed thinking how insignificant one person's effort can be, and how much more there is to be done. I feel hopeful for future scholars and activists to follow my footsteps in raising awareness about social acceptance and non-stigmatization of sex-work in Russia.

The Stronach Baccalaureate Prize allowed me to travel to the grounds of Russia, Turkey, Italy, etc. to observe Russian sex-workers in their element, communicate with their clients and work facilitators, spend time with their families, and most importantly, to obtain knowledge that no book or class can offer.

Over the months of travel, I feel like I've done it all. I found myself in every situation unimaginable to my brain – from the ridiculousness of carrying two suitcases of See's Candies for my subjects (culturally, it is expected to greet with gifts) that ended up occupying my entire room, to hiding my passport and money in a hidden inside pocket under three coats for fear of Italian pocket-pickers. (The fun part was when I had to show my passport at the train station)! I met some exciting people down the road. For example, the mother of my subject – Larisa, who has become my art guide in Moscow.

In Turkey, I learned the art of bargaining. Some times I was yelled at for being another cheap Russian, but for the most part I was able to cut a price in half. Also in Turkey, I learned to live on a dollar per day for food. Local markets, easily found on every corner (similar to 7-Eleven), sold the freshest organic vegetables, local dairy and smoked meats. A big fan of tomatoes and cucumbers, I went days eating salads.

I made mistakes as well ... I've made one of the most crucial mistakes that a researcher can possibly make, and that my mentor warned me about - getting emotionally attached to your subjects. Some might see emotional attachment as a school of thought on the approach to human subjects, but getting close to my subjects made me, at times, question my intentions. I was depressed for many months by the realization that the disturbing studies and stories I had read pertaining to sex-work were accurate depictions.

Throughout the months in the field, I've struggled with the question "What am I doing here?" Initially, I arrived with the intent to bring awareness and alleviate the pain of women kept enslaved and abused in the private mansions on the outskirts of Antalya, trafficked from Tokyo to Hostess bars of Hokkaido, and lured to the streets of Rome. However, I was not prepared for how convincing their happy-ending, or as one of my subjects puts it "if it is not broken, do not fix it" stories and attitudes were.

Nastya, a Moscow native, began our interview by reassuring me that Москвички - 'Moscow girls' are never desperate to sell sex. They only do it for fun. There is an unspoken hierarchy among Russian-speaking women involved in sex-work. Starting from women from the former Soviet Republics (Uzbekistan, Belarus, etc.) at the very bottom; to Russian деревенские девочки (village girls); to городские девочки (city

girls); and finally Москвички (Moscow girls) at the very top of hierarchy were also immune to sex-work, according to Nastya.

Although “Doing it for fun” has been a common theme, and purported to be somewhat of a psychological tool, Nastya’s claim seemed to be valid. Like many women in Russia, Nastya obtained a degree in Marketing, and decided to pursue an entrepreneurial career. As a former dancer, she organized a dance troupe that first performed at various corporate events and nightclubs in Russia. While the business was expanding and gaining local recognition, Nastya’s colleague offered to organize work in Turkey.

For two weeks the troupe of five females worked at the nightclub of a luxurious five star hotel. Four performances per night, five times a week paid for the tickets to Antalya, a complimentary suite stay, food, drinks and recreation.

Almost two weeks into their dream adventure, a familiar club bouncer appeared in the troupe’s suite at about five in the morning. He ordered only the three women, including Nastya herself, to meet him at the lobby in ten minutes with all belongings packed. (Later, the women figured out they were set up by Nastya’s friend that organized the trip and the other colleague). Prior to leaving, the bouncer demanded passports, cell-phones, cameras and any pocket money.

As Nastya and the two other women under the fear of death were following the orders, Nastya risked calling Yusuf - a guy she met at the club she danced at with the cell phone she happened to bring “на всякий пожарный” (just in case). In the lobby, the three women were met by a group of unfamiliar men, the bouncer, and an older lady. They were searched, and Nastya’s phone was found, for which she was slapped and

ordered to beg forgiveness from everyone on her knees. As for the phone, it was shattered against the wall.

Several hours later the women were taken to a private mansion that was fenced off and still under construction. The women were placed in the room on the second floor and barely left it. They were told that their contract with the hotel and nightclub in Antalya ended early due to their poor performance and lack of customers. Their troupe was subcontracted by a new owner who was generous enough to let them earn money. However, the women could not see the contract details and understood they could not complain.

Left alone, the two other women turned hysterical. They were screaming and crying trying to figure out an ingenious plan of escape. In the face of her friends' hysteria, Nastya took control of the situation. She knew that the women had to get it together, stay together, act normally and agreeably. The plan to find out as much as possible about the location and people that kept them before taking any irrational steps was favored.

As planned, the women were on their best behavior - attending to men that visited them, keeping the house clean, befriending the construction workers and even sharing the food they cooked. Their submissive behavior seemed to warm up the bouncer designated to watch over them. The women they met at the lobby of the hotel who visited once a week to check on the troupe and pay a weekly salary started giving extra money for favorite treats. At this point, Nastya suggested to the bouncer that he allows the three women to join him to the local market, so that they could purchase

everything they needed and were shy to ask for from a man (feminine hygiene supplies, Russian foods, etc.).

On one such trip to the market, Nastya saw a familiar face in the crowds - the friend of hers that she called weeks ago on her way to the lobby. As much as she wanted to scream for help and yell his name, she decided to draw as little attention as possible.

After a month in the house, everything turned into a routine - daily visits from the clients, weekly pay and visit to the local market, momentary chats with the other women about life in Moscow and families, dance practice, and every other possible positive topic to keep the women sane and bad thoughts as far as they could be.

The next visit to the market was different, however. The same person that Nastya managed to call at the hotel was signaling her to get into the van. As Nastya described what was in a second, she found herself and her companions in the car escaping the life of sex prisoners.

Nastya and the women were brought to another resort in Antalya owned by Yusuf and his father. They spent the next month recovering and taking advantage of Yusuf's hospitality. (Until now, Nastya still does not understand Yusuf's good intentions, "с тех пор я просто верю в хороших людей," she says (since then, I simply believe that there are good people)).

Later, Yusuf shared some insights with Nastya. From the beginning he knew that the owners of the resort, where Nastya's troupe originally came to work, were involved in the shady business of re-trafficking dancers/waitress/hostesses from Russia and, to a lesser degree, from some other Eastern European countries. The older woman that met

Nastya's troop in the lobby before they were moved to the private house was a well-known human trafficker (who is now in jail). Yusuf and his dad were long-time business rivals of Nastya's captors. They visited 'enemies' territory' to learn about business practices. He and his dad called themselves Progressives, as they did not approve of business practices/cycles that took place at the resort and throughout Turkey in general, and of which Nastya and her troupe happened to be victims. According to Yusuf, Turkey has turned into a rivalry of clans - the country has been divided into the spheres of influence controlled by influential business authorities. Everyone wanted to get the biggest slice of the cake, but the old ways were not sustainable. (In my writing I compare the situation in Turkey to the one in Russia during early 90's).

Since this episode, Nastya has returned to work for Yusuf several times. She does not dance herself anymore, but sends her troupe during the high seasons. And as in every fairy tale ... you guessed it right ... Nastya and Yusuf have been dating for the past four years.

Although delighted by the 'happy ending', I have the hardest time comprehending Nastya's ability to overlook the hardships she endured, which was a common sentiment among the women I encountered throughout my fieldwork. To the Western eye, the happy outcome should not even matter, and the dues should be paid for the sufferings, physical abuse, and captivity. And it is my role that keeps me awake. Is it that they do not know any better, or am I too caught up in the idea of what the world should be, and how the humans should be treated?

Again, I have a feeling that I've done nearly everything over my time in the field - from arriving to the club among working women and getting as close to the feeling of

what it feels to be one, to chain-smoking with the subject in order to start a conversation or to lighten up a heavy story. I've learned that in order to get a story, one does need to hunt, but most importantly, one needs to be an accepting observer. I consider my most successful and fruitful interviews to be the ones where I did the least amount of work (except the smoking of course). I did not push my subjects and I barely spoke. Often, I had to patiently sit through an awkward hour of silence, while bending and folding anything handy (a toothpick for the most part). It was so important to wait silently until the moment when the women were ready to talk on their terms.

One of the difficulties that I faced throughout the interview process was comprehending and reconstructing women's stories. Since I was not allowed to tape record our conversations, I took notes during the interviews, from which I rebuilt the stories at the end of an interview day. The significance of not having a tape recorder is the level of comfort for the subjects. There is less of a fear of a permanent record. Also, not having tapes eliminates the potential for the breach of confidentiality. However, most of the life experiences that women shared with me were sporadic. They would start with something very general and then jump in to some very graphic details and then provide more background in the middle of the story, then they would remember something else completely irrelevant – I like to compare that experience to riding a life roller coaster.

This project gave me an opportunity to address the questions that I feared, to make sense of the phenomenon that I could never understand - educated, beautiful, middle/upper class Russian women choosing sex industry and the society that fails to recognize the 'wrongs of such choices'. Growing up in the Russian Far East among

women who later became my first subjects, I questioned the casual nature and openness of material relationships.

One important observation I made throughout this project was that I was right about the casual attitude in Russia, yet I was wrong about its extent. The majority of the participant observations that I conducted took place in nightclubs, lounges, vacation resorts, etc. and exposed me to the life outside of my research question. I was able to see where the casualness of sex-work in Russia fits among other social issues. For instance, cocaine use is a valuable asset to a cool social image or as they say in Russian - это в теме. It is openly talked about, almost bragged about as a recreation available to золотая молодежь (golden youth).

This is one of themes that I want to further explore in the future - the significance of the general casual attitude in Russia. Where else in the world do mothers pay for private erotic dancing lessons for their thirteen year old daughters? Where else does being a recreational drug user earn you positive recognition? Perhaps this occurs universally in small social circles, but not to the degree and extent that I saw in Russia. I don't know whether it is Russia or me who has changed in the last seven years since I've been living in the US, but I feel it is Russia who is becoming unrecognizable.

What is next for me? Last year I applied and got accepted to several Masters and PhD programs. I deferred a few in favor of a one-year contract with Google. My current plan is to finish up the contract and pursue my advanced degree the next year. I plan to finish the manuscript in graduate school. I have not decided on the university yet, but I have some amazing options. UCSD was very interested in the subject of my research and the fieldwork I've conducted, so I see a great potential there. I am also considering

several masters programs that will allow me an avenue for a more practical application of my knowledge.

I cannot express enough gratitude for the Judith Lee Stronach Baccalaureate Prize program and all the people who supported me throughout the process. This has been a truly incredible opportunity and it would not have been possible without them. The Stronach grant gave me an opportunity to experience the difficulties and rewards of research early on in my academic career. It has also shaped me as a person. I've learned to be flexible and tough, understanding, but with a sense of direction. Most importantly, it taught me so much about myself and people. Thank you!