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Review of Raymond Bechard's "The Berlin Turnpike: A True Story of Human Trafficking in America"

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I. The Long Road to Redemption

"The Berlin Turnpike: A True Story of Human Trafficking in America" (Sons of Liberty Press, 2011) might have been author Raymond Bechard's best hope for literary redemption. His previously self-published book, "Unspeakable," was unique among books written by authors who allege to rescue victims of human trafficking in that it did not describe even one rescue by Bechard or his organization, despite having rather notoriously asserted he had "through direct intervention... assisted in saving over 3000 young people around the world and in the U.S. since 2003" (Ahava Kids website, 2008).

It might have been his best hope for redemption after the Attorney General recognized the disparity between these claims and the capabilities of a two-person staff and a shoestring budget and subsequently charged Bechard with diverting charitable donations for personal use. Certainly this must have been what compelled him to declare in the Introduction to "The Berlin Turnpike" his intention to let "[h]istory, the facts, and the victims speak for themselves.... *Here, the agenda is not personal...or financial*" (p. ix, emphasis added).

There is much of interest in this book, but not in the way the author intended. On the contrary, the scholarship, the book's organization, the focus within and omissions from its content and even the unscrupulous manner in which the book has been marketed leave much to be desired.

It was the book's unscrupulous marketing that first caught this reviewer's eye. I had typed what I thought was the URL for the Connecticut Coalition Against Trafficking into my web browser only to find myself at Raymond Bechard's website for the sale of his book. He or someone associated with him, had purchased a domain containing the organization's name. The Coalition wasn't alone. Love146, another

organization that combats human trafficking reported that the Bechard website was the landing zone for URLs containing *its* name. Whether there are other organizations affected, I do not know; but these websites are designed to provide information, including hotline information, to the public. A fine anti-trafficking advocate, I thought, who markets a book in a way that could potentially misdirect victims needing the number of a hotline.

II. Organization of the Book.

The book is organized into 8 sections and 119 chapters. The section titles, “Day One,” “Day Two,” etc., are meant to denote the days of the *U.S. v Dennis Paris* trial. The chapters range in length from one to twenty-three pages. The chapters, which will be described more fully below, pertain to (1) the history of the Berlin Turnpike, (2) historical matters related to the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and so-called “white slavery” (prostitution) in America, (3) contemporary issues concerning human trafficking or, more narrowly, sex trafficking, and (4) the task of “letting the victims speak for themselves” which, in this case, consists of edited trial testimony from *U.S. v Dennis Paris* and excerpts from interviews with alleged trafficking victims.

This fourth item comprises a large expanse of the book -- over 80 pages by the time one reaches the end of Day Two at around page 200. This material is fragmented and interspersed with chapters on the above topics, so that a given witness’ testimony might be divided into five or so blocks divided by discussions of the other topics mentioned above.

Sometimes the relation between the chapters is tenuous and relies merely upon a similarity of date or location. To successfully divide narrative in this way relies upon strong parallels in content, such as found in David Batstone’s “Not For Sale,” but in the present case the method seems designed to spare the reader a lengthy sojourn through the history of the Berlin Turnpike. Indeed, even within a given chapter the content may vary widely. For example, in what appears to be stream-of-consciousness writing, Chapter Forty-four describes: the end of prohibition, economic recovery after the Depression, the Great Hurricane of Connecticut, Katherine Hepburn hitting a hole-in-one, how the author’s father camped with the Boy Scouts near the Berlin Turnpike, the opening of the Silas Deane Highway and the life of Silas Deane (the person).

Aside from the main body of text, the book contains a set of addenda, and a pair of reference entries entitled respectively, “Bibliography and Notations” and “Reference Resources” [sic]. Additional reference material, e.g., audio transcripts of interviews, are said to be available at the author’s website. One addendum, containing a biography of Judge Droney, is copied verbatim from the judge’s website without any citation. Undoubtedly this was an oversight on the author’s part, but it gives the impression that the text consists of the author’s words when in fact it does not. This reviewer was unable to find the audio transcripts for the interviews at the designated website so is unable to attest to their accuracy. Researchers should be wary when citing this book.

III. History Lessons.

The various chapters about the history of the Berlin Turnpike describe its creation; how business along the Turnpike was affected by such events as the Depression, the end of prohibition, the Cold War, etc.; events such as a car accident involving George M. Cohan; the waning of the once thriving drive-in cinema where Bechard would sneak a peak at as a child; and how the Turnpike has become a home for seedy hotels and adult establishments. The book takes its name from the equally detour-pocked road, because it is one of the locations where Dennis Paris prostituted adults and minors.

Readers will vary in terms of how insightful they find the chapters that deal with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, its legacy of racism, and “white slavery.” I happened to know the stories of the Amistad trial and John Brown but not that of Prudence Crandall; so I benefitted at least from that. Also interspersed among the chapters are quotations from a study on prostitution commissioned under John D. Rockefeller that are as accurate today as when the study was conducted. The chapters are peppered with a few lines concerning contemporary events, such as the Reardon/St. Francis Hospital child abuse case and the 2007 home invasion and murder of the Petit family, although the reason for this is unclear.

IV. Human Trafficking.

The chapters devoted to contemporary issues in human trafficking fall into two categories: those in which Bechard describes current policy (such as the TVPA and its Reauthorizations or recent measures taken against Craigslist) and those in which Bechard is critical of contemporary policies, policy-makers, advocacy groups, service providers, the media, and law enforcement officials. I will have considerably more to say about Bechard’s distorted commentary later in this review.

As for Bechard’s presentation of current policies and anti-human trafficking activities, readers may want to note that the subject of this book is sex trafficking, specifically, sex trafficking in Connecticut. It neither examines labor trafficking (although we have had cases in Connecticut) nor the international dimension (such as those cases handled by the International Institute of Connecticut). This is not problematic, unless the reader is interested in the broader topic, since sex trafficking is itself a *big* topic. Nevertheless, one would hope to learn how the TVPA and its Reauthorizations have been implemented within Connecticut. How is the TVPA effective in ways that its predecessors (such as the Mann Act) were not? Are there limitations to its enforcement? Furthermore, what provisions for victims are secured under the act, and how are they implemented within Connecticut? There is not one word in this book about the distribution of federal funds for victim services: who are the recipients and what services do they provide?

V. The Voices of the Victims?

The chapters of the book that consist of what Bechard refers to as letting “the victims speak for themselves” fall into two categories: trial testimony from the Dennis Paris case and the text of interviews with several alleged victims with whom Bechard has apparently come into contact.

The chapters that consist of the testimony of plaintiffs, defendants and other witnesses along with attorneys’ opening and closing statements constitute a large portion of the book. We learn the victims’ stories and see how difficult it was for them to testify in public. We see how difficult it is for prosecutors to make their case when confronted with a cunning defense attorney and jurors who might be susceptible to societal biases concerning persons they view as ‘prostitutes’, ‘juvenile delinquents’ or ‘drug-users’. Still, I am hard put to regard testimonies carefully circumscribed under direct- and cross-examination by plaintiffs’ and defendant’s attorneys as the best way to let victims “speak for themselves.” For a victim- or survivor-centered perspective, I would recommend readers turn to Theresa Flores’ “The Slave Across the Street” or Rachel Lloyd’s “Girls Like Us.”

The remainder of the “victim-centered” aspect of the book consists of excerpts from interviews with women who are identified as trafficking victims. The only one to whom significant time is devoted (excerpts occurring in 19 chapters) is called “Marie.” Marie tells us about her rather normal childhood, of her association with a boyfriend addicted to drugs, about her entrance into prostitution, about how she avoided detection while meeting johns at a casino, etc.

The Marie episodes are interesting as much for what they do not say as for what they tell us about her life. In Chapter Two, when we are introduced to Marie, she is being driven by Bechard to work; the 2-page chapter recounts their conversation along the way. So, after 3,000 rescued victims in a dozen countries, we are introduced to one with whom Bechard has had some role to play. Indeed, on the Internet Marie has written,

My name is Marie and I am a victim of human trafficking and slavery. I was put into the care of Ahava kids two years ago by the court... Ahava kids saved my life!! For four months they actively sought help for me in every aspect possible. not to mention the emotional support and lifelong friendship I gained through out my stay with them. When no one else was willing to help, they were!! They helped me out with court, kept me hidden while I was being hunted, found me counseling, fed me, clothed me. Most importantly taught me that what happened to me wasn't my fault. They put so much effort into taking care of me. No one else would have done that. Not even my own family. I was a full time job! Still to this day I work very closely with them. <<http://pittsburgh.greatnonprofits.org/reviews/profile2/ahava-kids-inc>>

Having written himself into the book, it is noteworthy that Bechard does not elaborate upon his own qualifications or those of any individual or organization with whom Ahava Kids collaborates in providing professional counseling, social work or medical care for victims. What treatment philosophy does his organization implement? What sorts of care plans has it utilized, and what are their outcomes?

Survivors of human trafficking tend to require intense and long-term counseling, often including treatment for alcohol or drug addiction. In fact, there is no account within this book of any of the professional services afforded within the state to victims, not even the important work conducted by the Department of Children and Families.

On the other hand, Bechard made this astounding claim on a 2010 Guidestar click-to-donate website:

Ahava Kids Safe Houses [provide] urgently needed secure shelter and comprehensive care for young adult victims of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. With two locations, one in Connecticut and one in Georgia, each Safe House has the capacity to care for at least 100 victims annually. <<http://legacy.guidestar.org/pqShowGsReport.do?partner=amex&ein=11-3723593>>

Really? There is no facility in the United States with the capacity to care for 100 victims. When this reviewer visited the facility that Bechard refers to as a safe house, a furnished retreat house owned by a church in Avon, there were no staff, no victims and no more than 16 beds. That facility is no longer available to him, the church's leadership finding a disparity between his claims about its usage and their own observations.

As for Marie, we don't know her full story. We do know that the fundamental goal of all professionals within the fields of social work and counseling who work with trafficking victims as clients is the restoration of the latter to self-sufficiency and independence; and they strive to do so in a way that does not foster dependency upon the professional. This is one of the hardest goals of therapy, because victims often experience Stockholm Syndrome and dissociative disorders that involve a 'loss of self'. For this reason, social workers and counselors work hard to develop the skills necessary to provide compassionate care while maintaining a professional distance. We don't know Marie's full story, only that she appears with Bechard -- someone with no professional background in social work or counseling -- at public events where this book is made available for sale.

If you were to read no other book on human trafficking, you might conclude that Raymond Bechard is the only person assisting victims, but you would have no clue what exactly he does.

VI. “Here, the agenda is not personal...or financial.”

The Marie interviews serve Bechard well. The portion of the book that describes contemporary advocacy denigrates virtually anyone with their hands on the subject (except himself): the media, NGOs, law enforcement and politicians are all portrayed as self-serving or incompetent. Marie pipes right in: maintaining the FBI did not give sufficient priority to her case, that she received ineffective care from an unidentified non-profit; and she even plays a supporting role *apropos* Bechard’s attempt to discredit the Attorney General’s office by claiming that one of her clients was one of Attorney General’s family members. For Bechard to leave this sort of claim unchecked or to assume its truth is irresponsible; but it is consistent with his description of Attorney General Blumenthal’s work to remove ads for adult services from Craig’s list as being nothing more than politically motivated. Readers may want to weigh the credibility of Bechard’s claims against a backdrop that includes the AG’s investigation of his charity’s use of funds.

Bechard bemoans the fact that politicians, NGOs and the media too often repeat unsupported statistics concerning the nature and scope of human trafficking. Yet he does not recommend or even seem to be aware of studies related to victimology or best practices for victim care. To my knowledge, he has certainly not provided any numbers of his own – not even a break down of those 3,000 alleged victims in a dozen countries. To be sure, any concern over accurate data is legitimate but nothing new. Anthony DeStefano’s “The War on Human Trafficking: U.S. Policy Assessed” set out the problem in 2007. Instead of constructively adding to our knowledge, Bechard lists *ad nauseam* all the instances he can find of persons who describe their municipality as “a hub” of human trafficking, including, for instance, Dr. Celia Williamson at the University of Toledo whose own research, unmentioned by Bechard, provides a model for data collection.

One of Bechard’s focal points is that Internet is the *new* Berlin Turnpike, i.e., the new hub for sex trafficking. He is correct that the Internet plays a crucial role in the recruitment of victims and that it affords a degree of anonymity and security to johns. Here, again, as in matters related to the collection of data, he is behind the curve. Readers interested in this topic should read Victor Malarek's 2009 book, “The Johns: Sex for Sale and the Men Who Buy It.” Bechard’s focus is really upon what he perceives as the FBI’s recalcitrance in addressing the problem of on-line exploitation as may be occurring on Facebook or elsewhere on the Internet. I applaud anybody who brings a criminal situation to the attention of law enforcement; the book, however contains no information about what the FBI, the State Police and other law enforcement bodies are doing in regards to internet crime. There is no connection with law enforcement in Bechard’s book. The only positive account is the description of Det. Deborah Scates, one of the arresting officers in the Dennis Paris case, but there is no interview with her or any other police officer.

It’s hard to shake the feeling when reading this book that the author hopes the

reader will think *this is the one guy who gets it – who understands the world of the victim and knows how to provide them with the care they need*. He attacks anti-trafficking groups saying, “the real work to save victims and prevent more from being exploited is sacrificed upon the altar of self-promotion and financial gain” (p. 425). Tell that to the employees of DCF and its subcontractors who are responsible for the care of 62 child victims admitted in just under two years. Tell it to the folks at the International Institute who facilitate care for international victims under the U.S. Department of Justice Project Rescue. Bechard tells us that victim care requires, “one-to-one... self-sacrificing work” (p. 368) but fails even to acknowledge the individuals, organizations and agencies that provide it. This is a tremendous distortion and a disservice to the persons who are doing the work and who are telling us about the work they do.

I do not recommend this book.

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