

HAARETZ

Dead at 21: From a Gang Rape at a Tel Aviv Club at 17 to a Life of Prostitution and Addiction

M. died of an overdose on a busy Friday morning, bystanders sidestepping her prone body. A charity worker who befriended the 21-year-old says women in prostitution continue dying far from society's gaze.

Vered Lee Jan 13, 2017

On January 6, 21-year-old M. was fighting for her life as she lay on a Tel Aviv street corner. K., a homeless woman addicted to drugs, was the only person who tried to offer her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, while also asking passersby to call an ambulance. "She was in terrible shape, and it's clear she had been lying on the ground for a long time without anyone going near her," said K. afterward.

The Magen David Adom ambulance service said an intensive-care ambulance went to the site at 11:30 A.M. and found "a young woman, unconscious, without a pulse, not breathing." The medics tried to resuscitate her but to no avail. A few minutes later, they declared her dead at the scene.

M. died of an overdose. She first came to the city's old central bus station – a hotbed of drugs and prostitution – when she was 18. I remember her from a chance encounter, during which she talked fluently about herself. She broadcast feelings of distress and confusion, alongside a fragile, deceptive strength.

She was born in Israel. Her parents divorced when she was young, and she spent time in various institutions. At 15, she began using drugs.

"When she was 17, she went out with a friend to have fun in Tel Aviv," recalled lawyer Roni Aloni-Sadovnik, who represented her during a trial in 2013. "They spent the night roaming around Allenby Street, drinking alcohol and taking 'Mr. Nice Guy'" – the Israeli name for synthetic cannabinoids.

"When they got to the Allenby 44 nightclub, the guard invited them in," Aloni-Sadovnik continued. "The last partiers had already left the club. The girls debated, but eventually they went in and sat at the bar. "The three workers plied them with alcoholic drinks until they lost consciousness – and then gang-raped them. After the rape, the nightclub workers dragged M. and her friend out of the club and threw them outside, on the sidewalk, half naked. Early the next morning, passersby found the girls and called the police."

When I ran into M. in the old bus station, I didn't know about the rape, the trial or how her spirit had been broken. The only thing I sensed when she spoke was a clenching of my heart at her tender age, and a strong desire to rescue her from that cursed spot. M. visited the bus station periodically. She lived for a time in an emergency shelter run by Saleet, an organization that helps prostitutes. The shelter – which Saleet operates on behalf of the Social Affairs Ministry in cooperation with Tel Aviv Municipality – gives prostitutes a bed, food, shower, clothes and psycho-social care.

Natalie Mordechai runs the shelter. She said she met M. for the first time about three years ago. "It was moving and sad to see such a young girl so severely addicted to drugs," she recalled. "That she had been drawn into prostitution was also heartbreaking, given her young age."

M. used crystal meth, Mr. Nice Guy and Hagigat (also known as cathinone). But soon after she first came to the old bus station, she joined Saleet's rehab program and tried to wean herself off drugs. "I was shocked by the difference I saw when she wasn't under the influence of drugs – and that's the moment I fell in love with her," said Mordechai. "I saw before me an intelligent, charming, aware, very nice, sweet, smart, wonderful girl."

But M. never managed to get clean, and eventually returned to the cycle of drugs, prostitution and psychiatric hospitalization. "A beautiful 18-year-old girl with empty eyes," Saleet eulogized her on its Facebook page. "The numerous blows she had suffered were very visible on her beautiful face – in its sorrow, its pain, its lack of faith that anything could be good. ... She'd visit the emergency shelter, try to lift up her head, and fall again."

M. rotated between the streets and lengthy stays in psychiatric hospitals, but she was never able to escape the "cursed cycle" of drugs and prostitution, the post added. About two months ago, after yet another lengthy hospitalization, M. returned to Saleet's shelter for treatment. "We met a young woman of 21 who, because of her prolonged use of drugs, looked much older," Mordechai said.

Saleet's Facebook page described her as having "a blotted-out soul in a broken body. Her despair was etched deeply into her face."

Her final attempt to break free of drugs and prostitution once again failed, and it was clear that M. was now seeking to end her life, Mordechai said.

"She would come to the emergency shelter every few days for a few hours, and then immediately seek to return to the street, so as not to be in an enclosed space," Mordechai recalled. "She couldn't be still. We tried to protect her, to keep her with us, to stay and eat a little more, to rest.

"Two weeks ago I genuinely begged her, 'Come back and sleep here tonight.' But ... I already had the feeling that her time had run out. I had the feeling that this was the last time I would see her. Yet even so, I didn't believe it when I got the news that she was dead. It was very hard for me to digest this," Mordechai added, tears streaming down her face.

M. was the 35th prostitute to die in the eight years since Saleet began operations – and she was also the youngest.

"It's a tragic death that hit us all very hard," Mordechai said. "Perhaps because of her young age, and perhaps because she suffered so terribly in her short life."

She paused for a moment before adding: "Something in me broke when K., the homeless woman, told me how her life ended. It's a terrible death, and so lonely. She was invisible in her death. We all dreamed that she would manage to change her life. The heart breaks at such a waste of a young woman's entire life.

"The years pass, but women in prostitution continue to be invisible to society," Mordechai continued. "There's a sense now that the public mood with regard to prostitution is changing, but I personally don't feel it. I think the hellish reality of prostitution isn't really changing, and women in prostitution continue dying far from society's gaze."

Aloni-Sadovnik summed up M.'s brief life by quoting the eulogy given by her brother. "He said he was certain she was now in paradise, because she had already been through hell here on earth."

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