
Selling Souls

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William O'Reilley, a senior lecturer in Early Modern History at the University of Cambridge presented a lecture on November 6 on his upcoming book '*Selling Souls. Trafficking German migrants, Europe and America, 1648–1780.*' The event was prepared in collaboration between the Faculty of Humanities of Charles University and CEFRES (Centre Français de Recherche en Sciences Sociales).

Selling Souls, which has been completed over the course of nine years, investigates the history of seventeenth and eighteenth-century German emigration to North America as well as Central and Eastern Europe. During this period trafficking had a different purpose to its role today, it worked to speed up the establishment of new settlements in America and Eastern Europe. However, what is similar to trafficking as we know it, is the conditions that the migrants had and still have to endure, the mortality rate aboard such vessels in this period was as high as 18%, with migrants being lured into a false sense of security before the reality of their future was made evident.

Generally, in Early Modern Europe, travel was seen as something that could both threaten and could also promise a better future. Travel encouraged curiosity and curiosity encouraged travel. There was a desire for change overcoming many citizens. This particular story of migration began at the end of the 17th century, with recruiters who were commonly known as locators beginning to emerge. These individuals were motivated by wealth and were sent out into the landscape to drum up migrants, promising both opportunity and unlimited resources. They were unjust in their approach, and can be seen as little more than slave traders.



The statistics show that during this period 120,000 Germans were moved across the Atlantic, and over 850,000 moved to South Eastern Europe. For O'Reilley, it was only through unravelling the lives and motivations of the traffickers that he would be able to fully understand the history of what was happening during this time of mass migration.

When O' Reilley began his research it seemed like a somewhat archaic idea. However, following the outbreak of the Arab Spring and the increasing refugee crisis, a widespread interest was sparked. A migrant in current society is defined as a person who moves from one place to another in order to find work or better living conditions. However, in the 17th century they were often seen in a more negative light, viewed as a deserter or at least an egotist.

Throughout the lecture O'Reilley told stories which he had learned through his research, allowing him to set the scene of what was really happening. One story that O'Reilley regaled which held particular poignancy began in 1751 with a man named Tshudi. Tshudi was locator who had returned to his home village appearing as a successful young man who had traversed the seas and thus he had returned to share in his success.

In 1767, Tshudi sailed a boat of migrants from Rotterdam back to Pennsylvania under the false pretense of new opportunities, and in a German newspaper a complaint was published which declared him a 'mad trafficker.' Three men who were aboard this particular vessel recounted that Tshudi had deceived them. He had entered their village claiming that his mother was coming with them and so he was a trusted man, he asserted that half the people on the ship knew him to be a priest, five men were even forced aboard because he claimed to have known their confessions.

However, following this complaint, Tshudi chose to fight back, publishing a further letter to the newspaper entitled 'A trafficker who seeks to repair his reputation.' He quoted the Bible and effectively took apart the three men, declaring one to be a homosexual, the other to be a thief and the third man to have been left by his wife.

This story is just one of many which shows the stance of these locators and the conditions that the citizens had to endure. What can be taken from O'Reilley's extensive research is that these traffickers were selling the dream of a new world. They combined human resource management skills with sales skills to deceit citizens with the false hope of a better future. For them ignorance was a commodity. They were traders in the market place of knowing, and not-knowing and they bridged a gap as is done today of economic security, freedom and literacy. Without their action, this huge migration that occurred during this period would have been inconceivable.