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News

Ukrainian gets life for human trafficking of workers in U.S.

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Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — A Ukrainian convicted of smuggling desperate villagers to the United States to work in bondage was sentenced on Monday to life in prison plus 20 years.

A prosecutor said 52-year-old Omelyan Botsvynyuk's human trafficking operation was "modern-day slavery."

Botsvynyuk and his brother forced crews to work long hours cleaning stores, homes and offices in Pennsylvania and other mid-Atlantic states for little or no pay, a jury had found. Botsvynyuk also used sexual and physical violence to intimidate workers, the jury found after a four-month trial last fall.

U.S. Attorney Zane Memeger said the trial evidence and testimony "painted a picture of the defendants' depravity and inhumane treatment" of the workers.

"This is a case that cries out for justice on behalf of victims who entered this country for better opportunities but then found themselves living a nightmare," Memeger said.

Nine workers who testified at the trial described being raped, beaten or threatened by Botsvynyuk, who denied the accusations when he testified and glared and shouted at prosecutors after the October verdict.

His brother Stepan Botsvynyuk faces up to 20 years in prison for racketeering when he is sentenced Tuesday. He was acquitted of extortion.

Prosecutors described the defendants as the enforcers of the enterprise in America while brothers in Ukraine served as recruiters. The recruiting was easy, given the lack of economic opportunity, they said. Two other brothers named in the indictment are fighting extradition from Canada, while a third has died.

Omelyan Botsvynyuk's lawyer, Howard Popper, did not immediately return a call for comment Monday.

At trial, the defense argued that the workers testified only to get special visas set aside for trafficking victims and to avoid returning to Ukraine. They said the workers would say anything to get the visas.

At least five of the nine workers who testified may apply for the T-visas, prosecutors said.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Daniel Velez told jurors the operation amounted to "modern-day slavery ... hiding in plain sight."