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15 Months Later, Boy Rejected by U.S. Mother Lives in Orphanage

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Artyom Savelyev getting into a van after his arrival in Moscow last year.

Seven-year-old Artyom Savelyev will find a new family in Russia in no time, children's ombudsman Pavel Astakhov said last year after his adoptive U.S. mother shipped him home unaccompanied on a plane.

The rejection of Artyom in April 2010 prompted threats to ban the adoption of Russian children by American parents and ultimately an adoptions treaty signed by the top U.S. and Russian diplomats in Washington this month.

The treaty should have been named in Artyom's honor, Astakhov said in an interview Wednesday. But the boy, now 9, remains in an orphanage, more than a year after he was promised new parents.

Savelyev's adoption has been delayed by red tape and worries about his psychological

condition, not over a lack of willing adoptive parents, his caretakers said. But these are the same factors that keep any Russian from adopting one of the country's 150,000 parentless children.

Other similar causes celebres have resulted in mixed success as well: Of two children brought back from abroad in recent years, one was taken back by her biological mother, but the other remains in an orphanage.

Artyom Savelyev was adopted from an orphanage in the Primorye region town of Partizansk in September 2009 by single mother Torry Hansen of Shelbyville, Tennessee. On April 8, 2010, the boy arrived in Moscow on a plane, alone and with a note from Hansen saying he was psychologically unfit.

Astakhov said in May 2010 that several Russian families were prepared to take in Artyom and most likely a diplomat family who spoke English and Russian would be selected to ease the boy's re-adaptation to Russian life. Astakhov said the boy would be adopted within a month.

But the prediction proved overly optimistic, in part because a Moscow court only formally canceled the boy's U.S. adoption last month, Astakhov said Wednesday.

"I have no doubts that Artyom will find parents," Astakhov said by telephone.

But Alexei Shnykin, who works at the Moscow orphanage caring for Artyom, said he was not so sure.

The boy has learned to love several adoptive families, including Hansen, but all have abandoned him, causing lasting psychological damage, Shnykin said.

"We are afraid that the situation might be repeated in a new family, and we don't want to traumatize the boy," he said by telephone.

He could not predict how long it would take for Artyom to be ready for re-adoption, but added that Savelyev is treated well and went to summer camp recently.

Another Russian child, Denis Khokhryakov, now 13, made headlines last September when the authorities brought him back from the Dominican Republic, where he had lived since 2004.

Denis' story is anything but a happy childhood. The son of an alcoholic single mother, he was adopted in 2003 by a Russian couple who left him the next year in the care of a Dominican taxi driver. Media reports said he might have been traded for cocaine — a plausible story, given that his Russian adoptive parents were later jailed for drug trafficking.

Denis had lived in a Dominican orphanage since 2008 and forgotten Russian. Astakhov said last fall that Denis would get a new family, but he has remained in an orphanage outside Moscow.

"No one has expressed a desire to adopt the boy," said orphanage director Sergei Albertov.

Denis' biological mother, Natalya, sought to have the boy returned to her but was denied custody, Albertov said by telephone. He added that the boy has mastered Russian again and made many friends at the orphanage.

Astakhov, who visited Denis in the orphanage after his return, said the boy needs more time to adapt to Russia.

But teens have less chance of being adopted in Russia, said Natalya Panina, a blogger and a mother of an adopted child.

Moreover, the adoption process is notoriously cumbersome, which causes many families interested in adopting a child to drop the idea, scared off by the paperwork.

Some 150,000 children are available for adoption nationwide in 2009, the Education and Science Ministry said in October, citing statistics from the latest year available. Of them, 8,900 were adopted and 77,000 were placed in foster families, who receive 11,000 rubles ($400) a child every month from the state.

But some 8,300 foster and adoptive families were stripped of children in 2009, ministry official Alina Levitskaya said in October. In 105 cases, families were charged with abuse, including 24 instances in which the children died or suffered permanent injuries, she said.

By comparison, U.S. families have adopted 60,000 Russian children since 1995, and 15 of them died at the hands of their adoptive parents, Astakhov said earlier.

President Dmitry Medvedev addressed the matter in 2007, when he served as first deputy prime minister in charge of social issues, urging parents to adopt more actively. Last month, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called for the introduction of parental classes for Russians and foreigners who adopt Russian children.

But leading by example is a powerful teaching tool in any society, and neither Medvedev, who has a 15-year-old son, nor Putin, the father of two adult daughters, have adopted children themselves.

The majority of children available for adoption have living parents who have lost custody for various reasons. Not all biological parents are lost causes, as evidenced by the example of Natalya Zarubina, whose young daughter, Alexandra, was adopted by a Portuguese family in 2005.

Zarubina gave birth to the girl in 2003 while working in Portugal as an illegal migrant. She was later deported, while the girl, renamed Sandra, remained with a local couple whom she had been living with full-time.

In 2009, Zarubina sued to have the girl returned to her and won the lawsuit despite reports that she had a drinking problem.

Alexandra could not speak Russian when she returned but has since forgotten Portuguese, said Tatyana Bondareva, the children's ombudswoman in the Yaroslavl region, where the family lives.

Her mother has found a steady job, overcome her drinking problem and become more "reasonable," Bondareva said by phone. Alexandra, who is also cared for by her grandmother, finished first grade in May in the village of Prechistoye.

"It's not New York and it's not Europe, of course, but you can live there," Bondareva said.

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