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Russian Surrogate Moms Attract Foreigners

By Marina Ivankiva

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Russia is one of the few countries in the world where commercial surrogacy using in-vitro fertilization is legal.

ST. PETERSBURG — When Maria, a 29-year-old St. Petersburg resident, gave birth to twin boys in June, it was not the beginning of a new chapter in her life.

Rather, it was the completion of a job: Maria is one of a growing number of Russian surrogate mothers. She was paid to carry and give birth to the twins by a Finnish couple who were their biological parents.

Maria, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, is divorced and lives with her 4-year-old daughter in her parents' apartment. She graduated from St. Petersburg's University of Cinema and Television and was a successful businesswoman before her husband left her.

She said she adores children and can't imagine anybody's life without "these little angels."

Like most surrogates, Maria says her motivation is to help people who can't have children. But when asked how she will spend the money, she said she has a lot of problems to solve and things to buy.

Maria is religious, and one of the first questions she asked the would-be parents was: "Have your parents blessed your decision?" She said that before making a decision, she talked to her priest and from time to time during the program went to church to light a candle.

Outside of church, Maria did not speak to anyone about the surrogacy except her mother and a friend who lives in the United States. Even her father did not know about his daughter's new job. Maria did not see any of her relatives during the program, which she said she found extremely difficult, and tried not to speak to the other mothers at her daughter's playground.

Surrogacy is a relatively recent social phenomenon in Russia. The first recorded example of it was in 1995, when a young woman whose child died a few days after birth had another baby with the help of a surrogate mother, according to Maxim Kiyayev, a lawyer for Rosyurconsulting, the first company to arrange surrogacy programs in Russia.

That surrogate was compensated by the woman after the birth with an apartment. At the time, there were no regulatory laws in place for such an arrangement.

Russia is now one of the few countries where commercial surrogacy is legal, along with South Africa and Ukraine; it is also legal in some U.S. states. In Austria, Sweden, Germany, France and other U.S. states, it is illegal, and in Norway, a woman faces five years in prison for donating her eggs. In other countries, including Britain, Australia, Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands and Canada, the surrogate cannot be paid for her role.

The twins carried by Maria for the Finnish couple heralded the launch of an international program by Rosyurconsulting. Founded more than 10 years ago, the company opened a St. Petersburg office five years ago. Since then, 60 surrogate births have successfully taken place, and the company's Moscow office carries out 100 in-vitro fertilization treatments every month.

Natalya Kacheyeva, a manager at the St. Petersburg office of Rosyurconsulting, is responsible for finding and choosing suitable egg donors and surrogate mothers. The company currently has about 40 candidates in its database. The main criterion is that candidates should already have their own children.

When asked to describe the typical social portrait of would-be surrogates, Kacheyeva does not hesitate.

"They are young, lower- or lower-middle-class women with no higher education. They generally do not have enough money to support their family and no education to find a good job," she said.

Kiyayev added that they are typically single, divorced or widowed women from small towns.

Surrogate mothers in St. Petersburg are paid an average of 800,000 rubles to 900,000 rubles ($26,000 to $29,000) for their services. Additional payments are required of would-be parents who want a surrogate mother who lives in St. Petersburg or a mother with higher

education.

Surrogates typically say they do it to help people who do not have children, but they are all paid for their help. But is surrogacy a real job? Both Kacheyeva and Kiyayev and their colleague Sergei Bobrov, a gynecologist, agree that it would be ideal if surrogates treated their pregnancy as a job. But they said that in reality they do not, which sometimes leads to unexpected problems, such as medical complications or even miscarriages.

The social portrait of potential parents is more difficult to ascertain. There are many types of people who want families, including single parents of both sexes, couples who need a sperm or egg donor and couples who are able to conceive but not carry a child.

The only thing all clients have in common, according to Kacheyeva, is they all want children. Kiyayev said Rosyurconsulting's clients are usually successful businessmen around 40 years old.

These people have purchasing power and sometimes think they can buy everything they don't or can't have. Bobrov said it can be difficult to work with people who believe that starting a surrogacy program is like going shopping.

Until earlier this year, clients could choose the sex of the child, but that practice has been banned. Some parents even insist on the surrogate mother being a particular sign of the zodiac, Kacheyeva said.

At the beginning of a surrogacy program, once a surrogate mother has been selected but before the contract is signed, Kacheyeva and Kiyayev organize a brief meeting between the parents and the surrogate. With Russian programs, this is usually the first and last time the parents and surrogate meet.

Foreign couples tend to get more involved, according to Rosyurconsulting. The office's entire staff confessed to being surprised to see that the Finnish parents came to support their surrogate, Maria, every time she had a doctor's appointment.

After the contract is signed, the process begins. Once an embryo is created and transferred into the uterus of the gestational carrier by in-vitro fertilization, the difference between natural pregnancy and surrogacy is minimal and mainly depends on the doctor.

Bobrov said the medical world in Russia is still very closed-minded when it comes to surrogacy.

"Most doctors, not to mention nurses, are very judgmental and suspicious of surrogacy and are deeply prejudiced against it. They do not understand it and cannot accept it," Bobrov said.

On Bobrov's maternity ward, where he has worked for more than five years, the situation has improved, and the staff have become more tolerant, he noted.

After the delivery, the surrogate signs all the necessary documents, and her job is done. She is advised not to see the child, but if the parents have no objections, as in the case of the Finns, she might pay them a visit and even hold the child in her arms. But in almost all cases, both sides part forever in the maternity ward without ever seeing each other again.

Before the delivery, Maria said she had never left her daughter for more than one day at a time and that as soon as she was discharged from the maternity ward, she would run home to see her own child.

Although surrogacy is officially legal in Russia and the procedure has been worked out over the course of several years, there are still many gaps in the law. There are no regulations on single male parents, for example, and no regulations on using a man's sperm or woman's eggs after that person has died.

Kiyayev said it is essential that the surrogate be obliged to waive her rights to the child. Currently, Russian surrogate mothers are allowed to keep the child if they change their mind, and neither the client nor the company can make them give it up.

Prospective parents can also elect not to take the child, as happened in a case profiled on Channel One television in January.

The genetic parents of a child being carried by surrogate mother Zinaida Rakova, a resident of Ulyanovsk, said they would refuse to take the child five months into the pregnancy. Rakova decided to raise the baby, a boy named Andrei, as her own.

After Andrei was born, the genetic parents asked to take him, but Zinaida rejected their request.

Kiyayev also cited some extraordinary situations that have to be accounted for and regulated by the law: "What if the parents die while the surrogate is pregnant? Or the surrogate dies during pregnancy?"

In addition, what if the Russian Orthodox Church, which does not approve of surrogacy and is becoming more and more influential in the country, instigates a move to ban it? Kiyayev said that surrogacy in Russia is classified as infertility treatment and that in light of the country's negative demographic trend, the church would be unlikely to do anything to oppose it.

He cited a priest from Saloniki who, when asked by a parishioner who was desperate for a child and asked the priest to bless her decision to use a surrogate, replied: "If science can make it happen, then God needs it too."

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