The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Classic MT: Learning from Romania

Foreign adoptions of Russian children anything but easy

By Judi Buehrer

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Moscow Guardian staff: It's time for the Moscow Times

ith this issue, the Moscow launches a new newspa- in English, written, pro- and managed by most of ame people who worked iously at the Moscow rdian. he Moscow Times, pub- by the Independent Press will appear on Tuesday and Friday mornings.

Most of the staff of the Moscow Guardian left their old jobs last week to form the Moscow Times with the idea of greatly expanding on the work begun one year ago when the Moscow Guardian first appeared as the "news source for Moscow's foreign community."

The Moscow Times offers a "Community" section filled with the same foreign community news that constituted the basis of the Guardian — including the Community Bulletin Board and columnist Michael Hetzer's "Moscowville" column. But coverage builds upon that foundation to include city news, national news, investigative news features, a much expanded business section, as well as a more complete calendar. Even the broadsheet format reflects the staff's desire to offer a newspaper with a more diverse coverage of Moscow.

As with the Guardian, the Moscow Times will be delivered free throughout Moscow, its commercial operation supported by advertising. Shortly, however, the newspaper plans to launch a subscription drive for home delivery.

The offices of the Moscow Times are located on the fourth floor of the Radisson Slavjanskaya Hotel, beside Kievsky Vokzal, 2 Berezhkovskaya Naberezhnaya, 121059, Moscow. Telephone: 941-8945 for editorial.

ighting moves loser to western zerbaijan

EBORAH SEWARD SOCIATED PRESS

ijan — An emergency session Azerbaijani parliament opened day in the capital of Baku amid that Armenian shelling had 10 people overnight in the dis-

Gunmen fired into the air to clear a path for ambulances and trucks carrying the wounded to a World War II-era hospital train outside Agdam, where the surgeons sometimes operate without anesthetic.

"Sleep. Food. They don't matter to

George Kellogg clowns around with adopted daughter, Valentina. (Photo: O. Pohl)

Party archives open but offer few surprises

BY BETSY MCKAY
STAFF WRITER

An American journalist wanted to research the Cuban missile crisis. A Russian historian was looking for material on the Soviet Union's 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia. And a Russian woman thought she might find out about her family.

Each of these hopefuls thought they would find what they were looking for when the Soviet Communist Party Archives opened to the public on Monday. But all three came away disap-

TMT archive

In the lead up to The Moscow Times' 25th anniversary, every week we'll be republishing an article from our extensive archive, selected by current or former staff.

We kick off the Classic MT series with The Moscow Times' first ever front page story "Learning from Romania," on the adoption of Russian children by foreigners.

In 2012, Russia passed the Dima Yakovlev law, banning the adoption of children by Americans. But this article shows that Russia's complicated attitude towards foreign adoption has deep roots.

The article has not been redacted in any way.

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If there was a lesson to be learned from the disturbing accounts of babies being sold in Romania, Russian officials in charge of adoptions and Western consular officials have found it.

The world winced last year as the Western press exposed sales of babies by Romanian parents who took the cash and rushed out to buy televisions and VCRs. To prevent "exports" of babies reminiscent of the Romanian experience, Russian government and Western consular and immigration officials are carefully scrutinizing adoptions of Russian children by foreigners.

According to consular officers at the United States, Swedish, Canadian and French embassies, the number of children adopted by foreigners has increased steadily because of three factors: the unraveling economy of the former Soviet Union, gradual acceptance of adoptions by foreigners and termination of foreign adoptions in Romania.

Until late 1990, the Soviet Union did not allow foreigners to adopt Russian children. The law was changed mostly because of increasing number of orphans and abandoned babies — a statistic that ranges from 500, 000 to 700, 000 depending on whom you ask. But the Soviets added restraints, allowing foreigners to adopt only children that Russians were unlikely to adopt. These youngsters, tagged by the Russian press as "second hand," reflect cultural taboos concerning physical or biological defects, the child's age or race.

The first adoptions by foreigners occurred last fall when a Swedish family adopted two girls, setting a trend that has been escalating steadily. Americans account for the majority of Russian children that have been adopted: In 1991, the U. S. Embassy in Moscow issued 35 visas —16 of them in December alone — for youngsters adopted by American families. The pace continued in January when 18 visas were issued, and through Feb. 24 with 15 more. The momentum is also apparent at the Swedish Embassy, which has processed about 20 visas and has four in the pipeline. The Canadian Embassy has processed two adoptions, with l5 pending. The French have adopted two children, with four families waiting.

The increased interest has triggered skepticism in the Russian press that foreigners are buying Russian children. Others in the media fanned the controversy with criticism of the Russian government for offering only "defective" children to foreigners.

Consular officers of four embassies say they have heard of no cases involving transactions of cash for kids.

An article in Komsomolskaya Pravda Feb. 14 alleged foreign adoption agencies were charging $10, 000 to $20, 000 for adoptions. But consular officers say that agency fees, generally $6, 000 to $8, 000, are justifiable charges for home studies and medical examinations of adoptive parents, fees for documents, legal fees and transportation costs for agents who identify and match the children and parents. In addition to those costs, parents typically spend $3, 000 to $5, 000 in travel expenses when they come to Moscow to pick up the children.

Private adoption between individuals, though rumored in the press, is virtually impossible, said one Western diplomat. "One cannot say if such transactions do occur between individuals, but it would be virtually impossible for an individual to get all the documents for

the child, both through the Russian government and from the West. None of the adoption agencies would have anything to do with such an adoption."

Consular officers also point out two other restrictions aimed at controlling adoptions. They must be arranged by foreign adoption agencies — not through individuals, as was the case in Romania — and they must be coordinated by the Moscow Adoption Center.

The Russian Ministry of Education created the center in September 1991 to establish procedures and control adoptions. The system now requires adoptive families to work with agencies that have representatives who identify adoptable children in orphanages, assist in negotiations with local officials and interpret and prepare translations.

Once the child is identified and matched with a foreign family, approval must be received from the adopting country's immigration agency to have the child classified as part of the family. The child must also have medical examinations and meet immigration health requirements. A host of other forms must be processed for a passport and visa. On the Russian side, there are several stages of approval required, from the local orphanage director and mayor all the way through to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A consular official at the French Embassy, who also wished to remain anonymous, noted that some corruption had been evident last year, "but things are getting better organized now." Until the new system and the Central Adoption Center was created, French adoptions occurred through the families of Russian emigrants to France. The official said that money did exchange hands in some cases, but "no one disclosed amounts. I like the new system — it will be more difficult, but better," she said.

But the center has also drawn criticism for requesting "compensation" and for slowing the adoption process for foreigners.

A French diplomat said she complained to the Ministry of Education last year after a center employee requested "assistance or compensation" for the center. "I understand that they face difficult situations, but aid and adoptions must remain completely separate," she said.

Lubov Selyavina, director of the Moscow Adoption Center, acknowledged it has received gifts of office equipment, such as a fax machine and a computer, from foreign adoptive families.

But she called them offers made in appreciation and not the result of solicitous remarks. "We work very hard here and are very poor," she said. "Our salaries are less than 600 rubles, and we don't have modern equipment."

She said any donations of cash "are all given to the orphanages or kindergartens where the children have lived. Our policy is to send gifts of money to them. If not, the children wouldn't get all they need, the clothes, food and care and medicine."

In its past six months of existence, the center has established databases on 200 adoptive children and prospective Russian and foreign adoptive parents. The only center in Moscow, it is funded solely by the government and receives no money from Russians or foreigners for processing fees.

Only four categories of children may be adopted by foreigners: handicapped children with

developmental or physical defects; kids whose parents have been substance abusers, or had psychiatric problems, or sexually transmitted diseases; older children; and racially mixed children. Selyavina said the majority of the 200 children identified as adoptable do not meet the requirements for foreign adoption. The ones who do, she said, are "not severely ill." She described their deformities as ranging from cleft pallets to missing limbs.

"These children would not be adopted here. They have been abandoned at the maternity hospitals," she said. Such children remain in orphanages because they carry a social stigma and also because Russians cannot afford medical costs to cure or care for children with special needs.

Most of the parents who have adopted these children consider their defects as minor. In the West, the kids will bear no stigma as they do in Russia, they say. As one adoptive parent said, "We have the wherewithal to help this child. Whereas if a Russian could or would adopt her, they couldn't afford to help her."

While disorganization is apparent throughout the social and economic system in Russia these days, the country seems to be doing one thing right. Steeped in officialdom, adoption procedures depend on a very bureaucratic system that may help avoid another Romania.

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