# THE BABY TRAIL: A special report.;Adoptions in Paraguay: Mothers Cry Theft

**By Diana Jean Schemo**

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Gladys Gomez's shoes are torn, her fingernails ragged and her blouse threadbare. But the picture she keeps in her pocket, of the daughter who disappeared almost three years ago, is still pristine, wrapped in plastic like a personal shrine.

Miss Gomez, 23, said she left her daughter, Cintia Carolina, then 14 months old, in the care of a cousin while she went to visit her godmother nearby on the night of Aug. 28, 1993. When Miss Gomez returned a few hours later, her only child had disappeared. Relatives later told her that the cousin, who is being detained on charges of stealing the child, had sold Cintia for international adoption.

On the strength of a court order granting her an hour's access to court files last month, Miss Gomez found a girl she thinks is her daughter who had been adopted by an American couple in December 1994. Vowing to bring her child back through the same court system that apparently sanctioned her adoption, she is working with a lawyer from a nonprofit organization.

On a park bench after glimpsing the records of the girl, she gazed at Cintia's picture. "She's going to feel bad," Miss Gomez said. "She's not going to know me anymore, but I want her back."

With the end of the 35-year dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner and the opening of Paraguay in 1989, the number of international adoptions here has skyrocketed. In 1986, according to figures from the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service, there were no adoptions of Paraguayan children by United States couples. Last year, the United States Embassy in Asuncion counted 410, making this small nation of four million the leading South American supplier of children for adoption to the United States.

Couples pay thousands of dollars to American adoption agencies for what they presume will be aboveboard adoptions. But an investigation of Paraguayan adoption procedures, including interviews with prosecutors, birth mothers and outside experts as well as a review of several contested cases, suggests that many babies put up for foreign adoption are sold or stolen. In many cases, experts say, a stranger, sometimes posing as an evangelist, will offer to pay a pregnant woman's medical expenses and then claim the infant as payment. In other cases, mothers, or women posing as mothers, may sell children, usually for up to $400, or a lesser amount accompanied by radios, shirts, sweaters and other goods, said Ruben Riquelme, director of the Judicial Center for Investigations, which is attached to the prosecutor's office.

Experts say they do not know what share of Paraguayan adoptions are illicit, but the incidents are common enough that the Government has tried to suspend all foreign adoptions and has begun an investigation of a judge whose signature was found on adoption files at a lawyer's house where a stolen baby was discovered.

Perhaps most troubling, despite numerous legal checks to prevent children from being stolen, sold or given up under coercion, the system appears to assure none of this.

Mr. Riquelme blamed an elaborate assembly line of corruption: lawyers, nursery operators, doctors, psychologists, notaries and fake birth mothers, all operating under the semblance of legality, overseen by a judicial system left over from the Stroessner dictatorship.

In September, Paraguay suspended new international adoptions for a year to revise its regulations. But adoption lawyers filed so many applications just before the suspension began that adoptions continue unabated, according to figures contained in the files of the Judicial Center for Investigations.

On March 6, Paraguay's new Supreme Court chief, Raul Sapena Burgada, removed the two judges who had approved the vast majority of international adoptions, Sonia Tellechea de Miller and Victor Llano. He also announced an investigation of Judge Tellechea, whose signature reportedly appeared on scores of adoption files that had illegally made their way out of the courts and were discovered in a raid on an adoption lawyer's home. In the raid, an infant whose mother had reported her stolen from the Red Cross Hospital in Asuncion was found.

The surge in foreign adoptions and tales of stolen children have raised an outcry here, stirring a backlash against the adoptions and stimulating scare stories about children being sold for prostitution or for organ transplants. Per Engebak, chief of the Americas Section of Unicef in New York, said there was no proof such practices were actually occurring. But he said he was troubled by the absence of safeguards.

The Embassy One More Check In the System

The uncertainties prompted the United States Embassy here to begin interviewing biological mothers and, in case of doubt, suggesting a DNA test for proof of parentage. The practice is common in embassies in countries where international adoptions have come under suspicion, including Guatemala, El Salvador and India, and Ukraine and Georgia of the former Soviet Union. But Mark Jacobs, a United States Embassy spokesman here, said DNA tests were rarely requested, and none had resulted in rescinding adoptions.

Sometimes, lawyers claim that biological mothers cannot be found and the embassy has, in all cases, relented and allowed the adoptions to go through, Mr. Jacobs said."Basically what we're trying to do is put another check in the system," he said. "The bottom line for me is that the Paraguayans have called a suspension to put their house in order."

Adoption lawyers deny there is any need to steal babies, and say rather that they are offering a better life to children who would otherwise wither in streets or orphanages. "I would be doing this even if I weren't paid for it, because I think it's right," said Andres Nissim Pessolani, an adoption lawyer.

Mr. Nissim said he sometimes pays the medical expenses of pregnant girls brought to his office, provided that he trusts the person who accompanies them, but he denied he does so to receive the baby for adoption. "I also give anonymous donations to many charities," he said.

Mr. Riquelme, however, doubts the altruism of those who make their livings off foreign adoptions. "Lawyers and pro-adoption people will tell you, 'We are solving social problems, the majority are not good mothers. They're merchants, really, and we're Don Quixotes,' " Mr. Riquelme said. "But these Don Quixotes drive around in Mercedes Benzes and talk on cellular telephones."

American couples who come here are not always eager or able to investigate the source of adopted babies. Many have sought children here after being turned down for adoptions at home because of age limits on adoptive parents. Others said they were driven abroad by stories like that of Baby Jessica, whose American birth mother changed her mind and succeeded in reclaiming her daughter from adoptive parents.

"Here, you never have to worry that the mother will come after you to claim her baby back," said a woman who has become a friend to many adoptive parents at the Gran Hotel del Paraguay, where many of them stay. "Most of the mothers move around so much, and they're so poor they could never find you, anyway."

Since adoption lawyers hand over the babies as soon as the foreign parents arrive, new parents grow instantly attached to the children, and by the time the tedious legal formalities are completed they think of the child as their own. By then, it may be all but impossible to admit any doubts about the adoption.

The Mother The New Daughter Never Came Home

As Elena Almada neared the end of her second pregnancy in July 1994, a woman came through her neighborhood selling jams, offering friendship and help. When labor began, Mrs. Almada said the woman whisked her to the hospital, dismissing Mrs. Almada's calls for her midwife and for her sister.

In the hospital, Mrs. Almada said, the stranger gave her cola spiked with tranquilizers to ease the pain of delivery. Instead it clouded her mind, and she struggled to understand what she saw: the jam seller was claiming to be her sister-in-law, and a man she had met only a few days before claimed to be her new daughter's father, she said.

Two days later, the woman sent Mrs. Almada home in a taxi, promising her daughter would arrive shortly, Mrs. Almada said. The baby, Maria Liz, never came home.

Initially, Mrs. Almada said she was told her daughter was ill. During the next few days she was given papers that, she said, she was told to sign to get her daughter back, unaware she was surrendering her for adoption. "My breasts were very full, they hurt," Mrs. Almada said. "I said, 'I'm sure my baby is hungry.' "

Mrs. Almada said she only realized that her daughter was being put up for adoption when Reinaldo Canale, a lawyer whom the woman had presented as a friend, drove her to the American Embassy for an interview in January 1995.

"Are you going to give me my baby back?" Mrs. Almada remembers asking the consular officer who interviewed her. He showed her the papers she had signed before, and explained she had consented to an international adoption. "I felt like he had hit me," she said.

The consulate gave her the address of the Paraguayan prosecutor, but when Mrs. Almada went there the next day Mr. Canale appeared with a court psychologist to block her way, she said. The psychologist stroked Mrs. Almada's long dark hair, and told her she was young, and should enjoy life and forget the baby, Mrs. Almada recalled. But Mrs. Almada said she was horrified, and asked: 'Don't you have children? I'm halfway crazy now without my daughter.' "

She said she had begged Mr. Canale to arrange a meeting where she could see her daughter. At the appointed meeting, the lawyer showed up without the girl, but with Karl F. Zerbey, the American who had come from York, Pa., with his wife, Diana B. Whitehead, to adopt the baby.

Mrs. Almada said she tried to persuade Mr. Zerbey to give up her daughter, at one point weeping and falling to her knees as her 5-year-old son watched. "I said: 'Give me back my baby. Don't take her away. If you do, I'll come after her.' "

But the mother was not sure how much Mr. Zerbey understood of her pleas in Spanish.

The lawyer, Mrs. Almada said, directed the interpreter not to translate everything, and threatened her with jail and with removing her older child if she pursued her claim.

Mrs. Almada tried to block her baby from leaving the country, by going to local television stations and bringing suit against Mr. Canale and others for baby trafficking. As a result, a Paraguayan criminal court issued an order barring the American couple from leaving the country with child, who was renamed India Rose Whitehead Zerbey.

When they tried to fly home in September 1995, they were turned back.

Mr. Canale, in court testimony, denied that he had taken Maria Liz against her mother's will and said he had found the child in a private baby nursery. In a telephone interview, he said Mrs. Almada had signed consent forms and the adoption had been reviewed by the Supreme Court.

The Americans After the Return, Criminal Charges

Ms. Whitehead, reached at her home in York, said she, her husband and the baby had left Paraguay overland the day after they were barred from flying out.

"The document that they provided us with stated that we could not leave the country by air, and so the following day we left by car," she said, although the order, a copy of which was obtained by The New York Times from Mrs. Almada's lawyer, makes no such distinction.

There are criminal charges pending against the couple now in Paraguay for violating a judicial restraining order, and Mrs. Almada and her husband are also suing the couple and their lawyer, accusing them of kidnapping their daughter.

Ms. Whitehead said she was unaware of the charges. The couple have filed no judicial response to the charges in Paraguayan court. Ms. Whitehead said that she trusted that Mr. Canale had done nothing illegal, because he had come highly recommended from a lawyer in the United States, and because the United States Embassy had agreed to work with him.

"The circumstances surrounding our child's adoption were carefully scrutinized by the American Consulate, and due process was served in Paraguay," she said.

Mr. Jacobs, the embassy spokesman, said he could not comment on Maria Liz's adoption for reasons of privacy, nor discuss her birth mother's interview. "Obviously we make an absolutely best faith effort to ensure that everything is aboveboard, but we can't second guess the Paraguayan judiciary," he said.

Ms. Whitehead said the lawyer asserted that the baby's birth mother had been declared unfit and that the alternative to adoption was sending the child into foster care. In fact, Mrs. Almada has not been found unfit, and continues to raise the son who accompanied her to the meeting with Mr. Zerbey.

Though Mrs. Almada did not get to see her daughter that day, she did go home with two small photo albums. In them, her daughter wears beautiful clothes and headbands, and laughs happily with her adoptive parents. Mrs. Almada used to keep the pictures under her pillow, though she would wake up crying through the night. Now, she has put the pictures away, but dreams of her daughter's return.

"She might not get accustomed right away, but with time she will," Mrs. Almada said. "And the other mother cannot give her the love that I can."