

# UKRAINIANS CHARGED WITH STEALING BABIES FOR OVERSEAS ADOPTIONS

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By James Rupert  
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Ukrainian authorities are investigating what they say is a ring, involving local doctors, that stole or bought newborn Ukrainian babies and supplied them to foreign couples. Records from the investigation show that at least a handful of the infants are living in the United States as adopted children.

Ukrainian authorities said they have arrested and charged two doctors, and are investigating others, for having taken newborns from their mothers in 1993 and 1994 and sold them for profit. A doctor who has helped investigate the case said physicians involved in the scandal sometimes obtained babies by falsely declaring that the infants had died -- and then sold them to foreigners, including Americans. He said local and provincial officials used falsified documents to quickly approve the infants' transfers abroad.

The scandal is the latest of numerous controversies surrounding adoption by Westerners of infants from the former Soviet Union. Last summer Ukraine halted foreign adoptions amid allegations of scandal. And in recent months Russia's president and legislature have battled over how far to tighten adoption rules there.

The "baby affair," as it is called here, is raising a political storm that could complicate current efforts to resume foreign adoptions in Ukraine. Ukrainian journalists and Volodymyr Kolesnik, the doctor helping investigate the case, said the criminal inquiry has been delayed for months by officials who have destroyed records and are attempting a cover-up.

Also, according to Kolesnik, the children exported from Lviv may suffer from the effects of drug abuse, alcoholism and illness of their parents -- circumstances of which adopting couples in the United States are likely unaware.

Col. Bohdan Tokarsky of the Internal Affairs Ministry declined to discuss details of how the children were sold or for how much, "because this case is before the court." But he said babies who had been sold were then adopted by foreign citizens and "in the process, lies were told. . . . The adoptions might be found illegal."

Officials here have said about 120 children were sent from Lviv Province to the United States before Ukraine suspended foreign adoptions last July. But they have not said how many of those adoptions they regard as suspect.

Newspapers in Lviv said about 100 babies were sold to couples in other countries. One newspaper, Express, quoted sources in the Internal Affairs Ministry as saying babies had been sold for as much as \$50,000. Neither the scale of the alleged baby selling nor the prices involved could be confirmed.

Copies of records from the investigation -- and the story of one Ukrainian baby taken from his mother and adopted by an Iowa couple -- suggest that a network of Ukrainian health workers and bureaucrats targeted the infants of poor, single women.

Kolesnik and police investigators quoted in local newspapers said the doctors lied to women who gave birth in hospitals in the region, telling them their children had been stillborn or had suffered horrible birth defects. When the mothers insisted on seeing the children, the women were offered money to sign declarations giving up custody of them.

Kolesnik, who served last summer on a commission that investigated reports of baby selling, said he had seen documents suggesting that children had been illegally separated from their mothers in a hospital in the small town of Kamyanka-Buzka. He said that when he returned to check other records, they had been destroyed.

There is evidence that the ring may have operated across wide areas of Ukraine. Records from the investigation, reviewed by The Washington Post, showed that women came from other regions to Kamyanka-Buzka with their newborn infants to have the births falsely re-registered in the town.

Kolesnik said doctors also certified that the newborns suffered illnesses that required treatment overseas -- one of the few conditions under which Ukraine permitted foreign adoption. On the basis of the false birth and medical records -- and declarations signed by the mothers giving up custody -- officials of Kamyanka-Buzka district (similar to a U.S. county) issued papers re-identifying the infants with American names and permitting their transfer overseas.

Records showed that local papers permitting a baby's transfer abroad typically were issued within 10 to 20 days after the birth was recorded, Kolesnik said. Such swiftness seems unusual, compared with the slow pace of adoption procedures in other parts of the Ukrainian bureaucracy. For example, a circular from the U.S. Embassy in Kiev for couples planning adoptions warns that "the waiting period for adopting a healthy child under {age} 7 is said to be 10 years" in the capital.

The false documents issued by officials in Lviv Province are precisely those required for obtaining a U.S. immigrant visa for a child being adopted by Americans. The U.S. Embassy in Moscow issues such visas for much of the former Soviet Union -- and until last summer, did so for Ukraine.

"We are aware of no cases in which a child has been sold' in the former Soviet Union," a spokesman at the embassy said, adding that he was "not in a position to comment" on the events in Lviv. Detailed records on

U.S. immigrant visa applications are kept by the Immigration and Naturalization Service rather than by embassies.

Copied records in four cases reviewed by The Post showed that babies registered as having been born in Kamyanka-Buzka were sent to the United States -- three to the Cleveland area and a fourth to Iowa.

The baby sent to Iowa was Olga Ushakova's son, Vitalik.

In Ukraine's depressed economy, Ushakova lives at the bottom. She is a 25-year-old Gypsy, an ethnic group that faces racial prejudice in Ukraine, and an alcoholic. She is unemployed and survives on a meager pension she receives as a handicapped person, having years ago had a lung removed for what she said was tuberculosis.

Last weekend, she answered the door at the filthy, two-room apartment she shares with the impoverished, deaf-mute parents of her ex-husband. Dressed in a dirty sweater and jogging pants, Ushakova stood in the doorway and talked about herself and the birth of her son in the fall of 1993.

Shortly after she gave birth to the boy in a Lviv maternity clinic, she said, "one of the {hospital's} people came and said he was dead. I said I wanted to see him anyhow."

Another person came and said the baby was alive, but "he's deformed. He's not healthy. You wouldn't be happy with a sick child," Ushakova said she was told. She said the baby eventually was brought, "and he wasn't deformed."

She brought the child back to the apartment and a few days later, she said, "a man came and said, You can't keep him here. . . . Sign him over to us and we'll keep him until you get {your own} apartment.'

"He said he would give me money if I went with them to Kamyanka-Buzka and signed papers" to give up the baby, Ushakova said.

"There was no room here," she said, so she agreed. She insisted that she did not take any money.

Later, Ushakova said, when she went back to the Lviv maternity clinic in search of the son she thought was institutionalized, "they told me he had died."

In Kamyanka-Buzka, Kolesnik said, records showed that the boy had been born there, rather than in Lviv, on Oct. 1, 1993. On Oct. 18, the district administration issued a document giving the boy an American name and listing the names and Iowa address of his new parents.

The American woman named on the document, reached at home in Iowa last week, confirmed to a Post reporter that she and her husband had adopted a Ukrainian child. But when told that the call concerned a

scandal over foreign adoptions in Ukraine the woman said, "I don't think we want to be a part of that story, thank you," and hung up.

In Ukraine, the scandal has raised a political tempest -- and Kolesnik and some politicians have warned of a cover-up.

Last July, about the same time that Ukraine's parliament suspended adoptions by foreigners, an anonymous caller to a Lviv newspaper alleged there had been sales of babies from the hospital in Kamyanka-Buzka. When reporters from the paper visited the hospital, they were forced out and their notebooks taken. The Lviv prosecutor's office -- prompted by Kolesnik and his employer, a prominent trade union -- appointed a commission, including Kolesnik, that reported back further evidence of falsified records.

Nothing happened for four months, Kolesnik said. Then, last month, local papers published detailed allegations, and within weeks, two doctors were arrested. One, Bohdan Fedak, was the head of the Kamyanka-Buzka hospital during much of 1993 and 1994. Since then, as head doctor of Lviv's main hospital, he has been nearly the top-ranking physician in the province. The other person arrested was the deputy chief doctor at Kamyanka-Buzka.

Since the affair emerged in the press, investigators from Lviv Province's organized-crime unit and Ukraine's national prosecutor's office also have joined the probe. In Ukraine's centralized bureaucracy, the potential for corruption from the affair reaches higher. During the period being investigated, all permits for foreign adoptions of Ukrainian babies had to be approved in Kiev by the office of a deputy prime minister.

The illegal adoptions also may have involved American or Ukrainian adoption agencies, since it is virtually impossible for individual American couples to navigate the bureaucratic and language barriers to adopting children from the former Soviet Union. Special correspondent Megan Garvey contributed to this report from Chicago.

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