

# Father Labors Through Adoption Process

GAIL STROCK  
Mifflin Co. Correspondent  
LEWISTOWN (Bedford Co.)

— When Tom and Lisa Heckman of Lewistown decided to bring a baby boy into their world, they went through the usual expectant parent process, but with a couple of differences.

First, they decided to adopt. From there they planned and waited and waited as most parents do. As time drew near to choose a child, one thing became very clear — only one of them could travel to Romania for their son. After much thought, Tom boarded a plane, along with Rev. Doug Holder, another father-to-be, for what he thought would be a three-week trip. But, as sometimes happens, the process took longer than expected and Tom's stay lasted 4½ weeks. As Tom labored through the slow-paced legal process to adopt their son, an anxious Lisa paced the halls back home.

Tom Heckman told his story to 100 women attending Spring Homemakers Day at Hartman Center, Mifflin County. It was through many miracles that we got our son, he began. "God has helped us." We give all the glory to Him."

When Tom left for Romania on April 21, 1991, little did he know that the son he would be bringing home was born the day before. "I saw him when he was eight days old," Tom reflects.

Tom and Lisa, along with their daughters Courtney, 13, and Brooke, 11, first began searching for a child through U.S. adoption agencies. "In the U.S., if you have children of your own, it's practically impossible to adopt."

Through contacts with doctors and lawyers, the Heckmans then searched a five-county area. Finding little hope, Tom and Lisa, by chance, tuned in to the television program "20/20" which described the problems facing children in Romania. Boarded by Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and Hungary, Romania remains a country with one of the lowest standards of living in Europe.

"I had heard of cultural shock and thought I was prepared for it,

but I didn't prepare myself enough," Tom explained.

"Under the communist system, all females had to have at least four children, or they were taxed heavily. They wanted to build the population for Romania to become a main power. But most people cannot afford to keep the children. So they would have the children at the hospital and then leave."

That's what happened to a nine-month-old child Tom saw first. But because the parents couldn't be located, adoption was not possible.

"Thank God there was a woman who had a child at home, brought him into the hospital to have him examined and the doctor knew our attorney and told her that this baby will probably be left here because she had three prior children and had left them."

"You have to realize," Tom went on, "these are not terrible people. They're great people, proud people, but if you have no home and absolutely no way to keep a child alive, what would you do? When you know they have at least a 50% chance of surviving in a hospital. Now what I'm saying is that even in the hospital, half of them will die."

When Tom arrived in Tirgu Mures, a city in the center of the country, he and Doug stayed with an upper-middle class family who offered them couches to sleep on, a gas-fired hot water heater beside the tub, and a pull-string toilet. Within a week, Tom saw his 8-day-old son. But he soon learned that each paper to be notarized, each office to be visited, each step of the process took several days. After a while, Tom and Doug learned their system. "A pack of cigarettes and a pen can get you in in half an hour. That's the way you do things there. You give them something for what they're doing and it'll get done a whole lot faster."

After seeing the baby, Tom turned doctor and examined it. The Heckman pediatrician in the U.S. gave Tom a short course in doctoring and a stethoscope. He checked the baby's heart, sto-



Thankful to be together again as a family, Tom and Lisa Heckman stand with their three children, Courtney, 13, Brooke, 11, and Lance, 1. Last year, Tom spent five weeks in Romania to adopt a child. He saw eight-day-old Lance a week after arriving in Romania, then spent 4 weeks working through the adoption process.

mach, glands and liver. As one of the adoption requirements, the baby was tested for AIDS. "When a child became malnourished there, they gave them blood transfusions. That's how AIDS spreads," Tom explained.

Tom and Doug's court procedure followed. "Women are second-class citizens there. When we went through court, the two mothers stood along the wall and we were seated comfortably. Unfortunately they (the women) couldn't help their situation. These two women didn't have jobs or husbands."

"After we went through the court and had legally adopted the children in Romania, we took them to Bucharest and there was a whole page full of requirements that we had to fulfill."

"One was that we had to have that adoption translated from Romanian into English and notarized. We had to have the children examined again. We had to have blood tests. We had to have all these things done before we ever had an appointment at the U.S. Embassy for our visa interview."

During that time the men and children lived in a two-room apartment. Doug adopted a 14-month-old cousin of Tom's baby. Because of the black market for babies Tom and Doug were told not to talk to or trust anyone. In spite of that, the landlord called the police, complete with machine guns, and they needed to present their legal adoption papers as proof.

For the next 2½ weeks, Doug and Tom cared for the children with food, formula and diapers they brought from the U.S. Then came another surprise. Doug was needed at home! "So I was keeping two children alone in an apartment in Bucharest for 5 days," Tom laughed.

During that time, even the most competent parent deserved to worry. "I worried that they would get sick. I saw the drug stores there, the long lines, the ¼ hour wait. They mix their own drugs. Thank God neither boy got sick."

Tom arrived back in the U.S. on May 24, 1991. "I know why people kiss the ground when they get home. If I wouldn't have had a suitcase and a baby in my arms, I would have too!" Tom laughed.

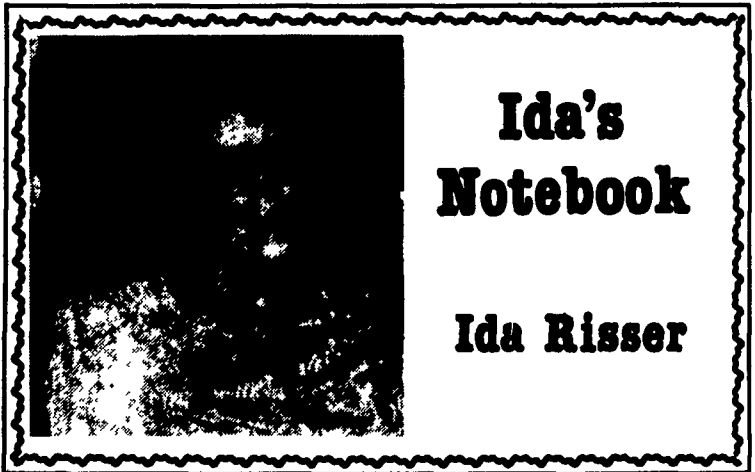
Eight days later, on June 1, Romania closed down adoptions.

Lance Heckman, once Szolt (Joseph), is now a healthy one-year-old.

To celebrate his birthday, Tom reread the journal he kept while in Romania and remembers the

expectant parent process.

Tom laughs and says "My wife sent me to another country and put me through the labor for our third child. So I'm going to celebrate Mother's Day too!"



My husband and I both like to go fishing. But, for months something always gets in the way of our taking a day off. Last week we finally set aside one day to go to Opossum Lake in Cumberland Co. The Pennsylvania Fish Commission maintains the area.

As Allen wanted to leave home at 4 a.m. and I thought 6 a.m. was early enough, we compromised and left at 5 a.m. The weather was beautiful and we easily found the lake. Several people were there ahead of us. This time we did not take our boat and so we fished from the shore. It was interesting to watch a loon as it dived for fish. I was amazed at the length of time that it could stay under the water. There were many bright green bullfrogs nearby who entertained us with their deep voices. Even a

water snake went swimming by as we caught one pan fish after another and put the smaller ones back. We lost track of the number caught, but we did bring seven home including two catfish that Allen skinned. We hope to go again if we get all of our many gardens in good shape.

I was thoroughly surprised by the Bible Study group that met in our home. As I came into the living room from the kitchen, I found a big basket of gifts setting in front of my chair. They decided to give me a kitchen shower. The gifts included many gadgets that I'd never think to buy for myself plus hand towels, place mats, and a cookbook. They told me they'd done it because I share my garden produce with them in the fall.

## Don't Toss Your Old Sewing Machine

CREAMERY (Montgomery Co.)— Are you in the market for a new sewing machine? If so, don't toss your old machine, if it's in good working condition. Especially needed are machines with zig-zag and button hole capabilities. The Montgomery County 4-H Program is looking for used portable machines that need little or no repairs for 4-H members to use at their sewing club meetings. A new 4-H club in Pottstown is especial-

ly in need. Your donation is tax deductible, of course, and you can be sure that it will be used with much pleasure.

If you would like to donate a portable sewing machine (not one in a cabinet) to 4-H, call Helaine Brown, 4-H Agent, at (215) 489-4315. Or drop it off at the Montgomery County 4-H Center, located on Route 113, between Routes 73 and 29, near Skippack.



Never lacking for love or attention, Lance Heckman spends some time with Dad. Tom says it is hard to believe that one year ago this month, he was in Romania.