Kids Korner

Part of the Brigham family now, 3-year-old Dimitry, wearing glasses, eagerly joins in the fun with his adoptive parents, Kathie and Chris, and his new sisters and brother. Dimitry, who had spent nearly all his life in a Russian orphanage, came to Brigham's suburban Washington, D.C., home four months ago.

Dimitry Finds A Home

By Joy Aschenbach
National Geographic
News Service

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Fourteen tiny beds in a Russian orphanage, toddlers tucked in for the night. Little voices calling, "Papa, Papa," as Chris Brigham walked into the room.

The sight and sound suddenly and forever gripped his heart.

Brigham had traveled all the way from Fairfax, VA., to Vyshniy Volochek, a city about 220 miles northwest of Moscow. He had come for blond, 3-year-old Dimitry.

Within a week, the frail, cross-eyed boy was headed for his new home in suburban Washington, D.C., with Brigham, 39, a manager in a real estate development company.

Dimitry was one of 8,195 children from about 80 countries who were granted adoption visas from the U.S. State Department in fiscal year 1994.

Reflecting the changing world political situation, more countries are now making children available for foreign adoption than in the past. They include Russia, China, Vietnam and several Eastern European nations.

"There were many anxious moments, many leaps of faith along the way," Brigham recalls. "It was a mind-boggling, exhausting experience, but I went there with no intention of backing out. You cannot enter this international adoption process without the willingness to accept whatever comes of it."

A few months later, in sweatshirt and blue jeans, bespectacled Dimitry is racing through the red brick house and climbing up on Kathie Brigham's lap.

"Mama, I want a Coke," he says. He now speaks only English. An operation has corrected his eye condition.

Both Brighams say that Dimitry, nicknamed "Dema," completes their dream of having four children. They also have an American-born adopted daughter and two biological children.

Welcoming Dimitry culminated a six-month adoption process through an agency in Potomac, Md. Along the way, there were heartaches.

The Brighams had become attached to a Ukrainian boy, Alex, through his photograph, and were looking forward to making him theirs.

But before they could, Ukraine shut down foreign adoptions last July as a step toward overhauling its system. Countries sometimes make such cutoffs with little warning.

Until they actually had their arms around Dimitry, Kathie Brigham says, "we were worried we'd lose both."

This January, President Boris Yeltsin vetoed legislation that would have halted foreign adoption of Russian children. Only children in Russian orphanages who officially have some type of health problem can be placed with foreign parents.

Adoptions to the United States account for about half of the world's international adoptions — far exceeding those made to Western Europe, Canada and Australia. But foreign children represent only about 15 percent of all U.S. adoptions.

Traditionally, the largest number come to the United States each year from South Korea. But children from Russia have become the second most popular, followed by China, Paraguay, Guatemala and India.

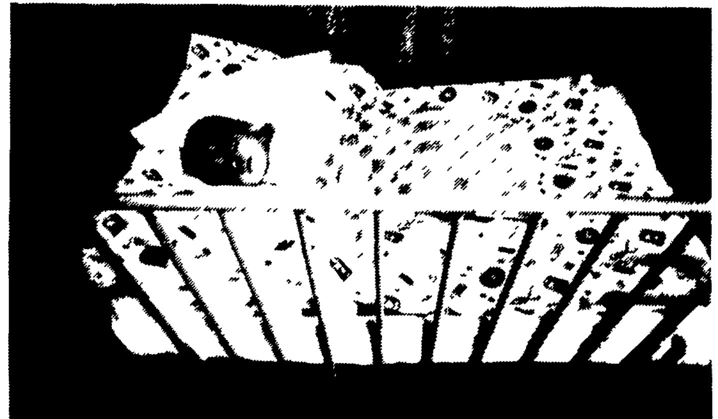
Since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, more than 2,600 Russian children have found homes in the United States. Some 83,000 South Koreans have been adopted since the postwar period of the mid-1950s.

The number of overseas adoptions in the United States peaked in the mid-1980s at 9,000 to 10,000 a year. The decline since is primarily attributable to fewer adoptions from South Korea, whose government has been encouraged its own citizens to adopt.

Adoptions of Romanians reached a high of about 2,550 the year after the 1989 overthrow of the Romanian dictatorship. But Romania has virtually closed off foreign adoptions as part of a crackdown on corruption such as bribery and baby-selling.

Today, most adoptive children from abroad are under age 1; the rest, like Dimitry, usually are no older than 4.

The often tangled issues of termination of the rights of birth parents and determining who is a true orphan are critical for U.S entry, says Rita Arthur, a senior adjudication officer with the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.



Far from Russian orphanages like this one, more than 2,600 Russian children have found homes in the United States since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Only children in orphanages who officially have some type of health problems are placed with foreign parents. Americans adopt the largest number.

The Hague Convention, a new treaty on international adoptions, is "the first attempt to legitimize the whole process and provide safeguards," Susan Freivalds, executive director of Adoptive Families of America, a national support organization based in Minneapolis, tells National Geographic. But ratification is a few years away.

For decades, overseas adoptions have usually been made by older couples and others considered ineligible by agencies in the competition for sought-after American children.

"In international adoption, there are so many children needing families, waiting in orphanages, that the criteria are more flexible and the process moves more quickly," says Linda Perilstein, executive director of a Washington agency that has placed about 350 Russian children.

But overseas adoption can be riskier. Generally these children have more health problems than American children, she says. Information about their medical and family history is sketchy. And language and cultural obstacles have to be overcome.

Yet when children come from abroad, new parents often feel more secure that they are theirs forever. "There is little worry," says Perilstein, "that a birth parent will knock on the door one day and want the child back."