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Gypsies in Slovakia Complain of Sterilizations

By PETER S. GREEN

PRESOV, Slovakia — The morning after Zita, a young Gypsy mother, gave birth to her second child at age 17, a nurse shoved a piece of paper in front of her. Zita, who is illiterate, says she marked three crosses on the paper, and thus unwittingly agreed to be sterilized.

"I don't know what was there," Zita said. "I can't read. I don't care what was on it, because I was in pain."

That was on Feb. 6, 1998. Today Zita is a slim 22-year-old with a sad, shy smile and not much of a future. She and her husband, Krystian, live on the outskirts of this eastern Slovak city in what is commonly called a Gypsy settlement — actually a shantytown of shipping containers and wattle-and-daub huts with no running water.

When a second nurse told her she would no longer be able to have children, Zita recalled, "I started to cry and I screamed for the doctor."

Among Slovakia's poorest Gypsies, it is a woman's habit — in the eyes of most, their duty — to have many children, and women often have half a dozen or more by the time they are in their late 20's.

According to a team of foreign and Slovak investigators for the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights, which published a report last month, doctors in eastern Slovakia have sterilized at least 110 young Gypsy women against their will since the fall of Communism in 1989.

The most recent case they documented in visiting only 40 of Slovakia's 600 Gypsy communities was last fall, and the investigators suggest that despite strenuous denials from doctors, the practice continues.

"Roma women are being sterilized against their will and without their consent, and it's a violation of their rights," said Barbara Bukovska, a lawyer with the Counseling Center for Citizenship and Civil and Human Rights in Prague, and an adviser to the Center for Reproductive Rights.

Slovak doctors deny any form of discrimination, noting that Gypsy women rarely visit doctors before birth and often have infections, in part because of the conditions in which they live.

"Why would we do that?" Dr. Marian Kysely, head of the obstetric ward at J. A. Reiman Hospital, said when asked about the reported sterilizations.

The report says a number of Gypsies — or Roma, as they call themselves — were involuntarily sterilized or coerced into agreeing to sterilization in Dr. Kysely's clinic, but he denied that.

"We have no interest to do it," he said, noting that a quarter of the children born in his ward are Gypsies. "Whether they are Roma or white, we do everything to have a healthy population."

"The Roma from the settlements have no toilets, no showers," Dr. Kysely said. "They are different from the point of view of hygiene." Some Gypsy women who complain of coerced sterilization, he said, may be suffering from untreated gynecological problems.

In its report, the Center for Reproductive Rights said it had uncovered "clear and consistent patterns" that showed doctors and nurses in eastern Slovakia "are complicit in the illegal and unethical practice of sterilizing Romany women without obtaining their consent."

The center's investigators, who included Slovak lawyers, Gypsy social workers and foreign doctors, lawyers and human rights experts, also said that Gypsy women were forced to deliver by Caesarean section far more often than ethnic Slovaks, and that Gypsy women often received substandard care and were put into segregated wards.

To date, the Slovak government has made only a brief inquiry, although the deputy prime minister for minority rights, Pal Csaky, has asked for a criminal investigation of the alleged sterilizations. At the same time, Mr. Csaky has warned that he may file charges against the center and its Slovak representatives.

"If we confirm this information," said Mr. Csaky's spokesman, Peter Miklosi, "we will expand our charges to the report's authors, that they knew about a crime for a year and did not report it to a prosecutor. And if we prove it is not true, they will be charged with spreading false information and damaging the good name of Slovakia."

Ms. Bukovska is now fighting Slovak prosecutors' requests that she turn over all of her clients' records to prove she is not spreading false information.

Dr. Karol Holoman, a prominent Slovak gynecologist sent recently by the Health Ministry to investigate, returned after a few days and denied the charges.

"The first conclusion is that it is not true that doctors prefer to sterilize Romany women," Dr. Holoman told the Slovak newspaper Sme. He said there was no evidence of segregation or of Gypsy women being forced to deliver by Caesarean section more often than ethnic Slovaks.

Every medical file in Ms. Bukovska's records was marked by doctors with a large capital letter R for Romany. Health workers almost never visit the shantytowns, where unemployment is almost universal and families subsist on government handouts.

Gypsies say the police have been harassing those who have spoken to news organizations since the report was released.

The Gypsy women who spoke to this reporter agreed to talk only on condition that their full names and the names of their villages were not used.

Zita's neighbor Maria, who is also illiterate and says she is either 26 or 27, has seven children, aged 4 to 14, and says she can have no more.

When she went to the old maternity ward in Presov to give birth to her youngest child, she said she was lying in a birthing chair when a nurse took her hand and forced her to sign a paper.

"They took me into the room, and I don't know what they did," Maria said. "They told me to sign this paper."

"Now," she said, "what I have is not normal."

According to Ms. Bukovska, who is her lawyer, medical records show that Maria was sterilized on Jan. 29, 1998. Ms. Bukovska says there is simply a typed notation, "The patient requests sterilization."

Maria said she did not speak Slovak well enough to ask the doctor to explain what had happened to her.