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WEEKENDER
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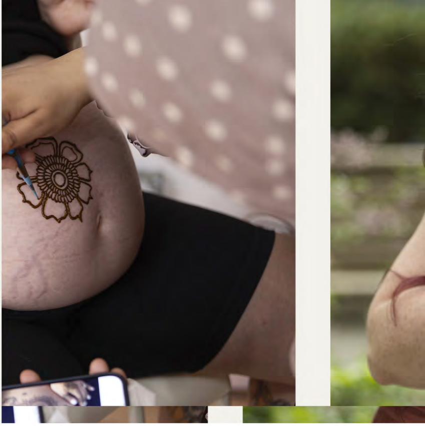
Issue №36

The gift of her life

In Canada, women give birth to children for others without payment – surrogacy for money is illegal there. For some, it's an expression of charity; for others, it's a way to heal their past.

Katrin Kuntz reports from Toronto (Canada)

23 min



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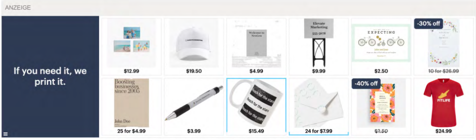
It's the tenth week of her pregnancy. Janet Harbick, 40, is lying in a fertility clinic in Toronto , Canada , looking at a monitor. A cloth covers her genital area. "The heartbeat is excellent," says the doctor, looking at the ultrasound image. The brain is developing well. Two legs, two hands, the embryo measures 3.5 centimeters, about the size of a small apricot.



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Harbick will not see the child's first steps, will not play with him, will not dry his tears.

"I'm calling the fathers," she says, pointing her smartphone at the screen. Two men from Germany answer. "Look, it's waving to you," says Harbick.

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"Wow, there's so much to see," one says. "The fingers, the head." Then there's silence for a moment. Everyone knows that a miracle is happening here. The miracle of a new life, a miracle of medicine—and the miracle of human cooperation across national borders. For Harbick is carrying a child who is not genetically related to her, and whom she will hand over to its fathers after birth.

She's giving a gift, that's how she sees it. And you don't take money for gifts.

Janet Harbick is a so-called altruistic surrogate mother, a choice she made. She sits next to her husband, Daniel, in the waiting room of the Create fertility clinic in downtown Toronto, a cheerful, energetic woman. While she waits for her next appointment, she talks about her births. Occasionally, she tosses back her eggplant-colored hair. Sometimes she gets confused by the details, filling pauses for thought with her bright laugh. "I just had too many," she says.

Surrogate mother Harbick in Toronto: "The gratitude in the parents' eyes is incomparable" Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Harbick has given birth to ten children, and an eleventh is on the way. Five of her own and five for couples who are unable to have children. Harbick calls the children "my surrogate babies."

There's the first girl, born in 2018, who now lives with her fathers in France. The second girl moved to Spain with her Argentinian fathers. Janet carried the third girl for fathers from Calgary, Canada. The fourth child was born as the brother of the French girl. And the fifth child, again a girl, is one year old and lives in Toronto. The current pregnancy may be her last. "My doctor says it's enough," she says.

Harbick is in contact with all of her "surrogate babies," and she's friends with some of the parents. She receives Mother's Day greetings from all over the world.

Harbick and her husband live in a Toronto suburb. Daniel works at a supermarket and accompanies Janet whenever he can. He holds her hand during labor. During a surrogate pregnancy, she lost a twin, and a newborn had to be put in intensive care. She often feels nauseous, so she has to lie down. Why does she do all this?

"I love being pregnant and I love babies," says Harbick. "It's my calling." The gratitude in the parents' eyes is incomparable.

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Die Frauen, die sich für diesen Weg entscheiden, gehen ihn freiwillig

Janet Harbick is one of the most experienced surrogates at the Ontario-based agency Canada Fertility Consulting (CFC). Harbick also works in administration and is training to be a doula, or birth support worker. She originally wanted to become a teacher, but then babies got in the way.

CFC, the agency, connects Canadian surrogate mothers with couples from several countries seeking a child. Many are interested in the Canadian model, possibly because surrogacy there means more than just a transaction for money. The agency requires a relationship between the intended parents and the woman carrying the child. The three must get along and share similar ideas, otherwise no child will be conceived. "The parents have to touch my heart," says Harbick. "It's that simple."

Janet Harbick (right) with her eldest daughter and granddaughter: The state recognizes the importance of having children and starting a family, but does not want to make a market out of it Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Several hundred women in Canada give birth for others, with approximately 50 prospective mothers for every woman. With CFCs, it often takes over a year for a match to be found. Unlike in other countries, such as the USA , Ukraine , or Georgia, it is not permitted to pay surrogate mothers in Canada. The intended parents may reimburse verifiable expenses—lost wages, trips to the doctor, a massage, or some of the shopping—but they may not offer the woman any additional money. No invitation to dinner, no bouquet of flowers.

Canada has banned commercial surrogacy with the goal of preventing women from being exploited. The state recognizes the importance of having children and starting a family, but does not want to turn it into a market. Anyone who violates the Assisted Human Reproduction Act of 2004 faces fines of up to 500,000 Canadian dollars or up to ten years in prison.

The women who choose this path do so of their own free will. But of course, surrogacy isn't entirely altruistic. The agency CFC earns money. And Janet Harbick also benefits from it – "because I feel fulfilled," she says. "I feel great when I bring babies into the world." For other women, the motives run even deeper.

The protection of liberal, human rights-oriented freedoms—bodily autonomy, equality, freedom of conscience—counts enormously in Canada. Few places are reproductive rights as free as here. Abortion is decriminalized and permitted throughout pregnancy. In downtown Toronto, a clinic promotes altruistic surrogacy on a billboard featuring two men. The message: Not only the woman who gives birth can be a parent.

Retreat for surrogate mothers in Toronto: A concept that offers a lot of freedom and voluntariness Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

"Every now and then someone calls me a human trafficker or a prostitute," says Harbick, "but not often."

*

Familie, das sind ein oder mehrere Menschen,
die ein Kind wollen und lieben

At Harbick's home, they're having tacos on this May evening. The family gathers at the table: Janet, her husband, and their five children, ages 12 to 22.

Harbick's house is in the suburb of Oshawa, where she grew up. There's a swimming pool in the garden, family photos on the walls, and a snake terrarium on the floor. A tally sheet with the children's names hangs on the wall—those who don't do their chores have to pay.

When you ask her teenage children how they feel about their mother carrying babies for others, they shrug. "She just likes it," says the eldest. Harbick's husband, Daniel, says, "I've only ever seen her pregnant."

When her own children were small, they were interested in the babies in her belly, Harbick says. Now, that's lessening. She's the one who can't stop getting pregnant. "But I can't take care of the babies myself anymore. It's too much work," she says.

Surrogate mother Harbick with her family at dinner in Oshawa: "The better a couple's story, the more surrogate mothers become aware." Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Surrogate mother Janet Harbick and her husband Daniel: The expenses are generously calculated and certainly support the family. The focus is not on finances. Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

The approximately 35,000 Canadian dollars she submits per pregnancy as expenses is generous and certainly supports the family. Financial considerations aren't the main focus, says Harbick. Less experienced surrogate mothers submit around 25,000 Canadian dollars to the agency. By comparison, a surrogate mother in the US earns about twice that amount or more per pregnancy.

At Harbick's agency, people of all orientations can apply for surrogacy. Harbick prefers to work with male couples. "Most men know little about pregnancy; they trust me." They don't interfere, and they're often enthusiastic – unlike many heterosexual couples, who often have a difficult journey behind them. Harbick says, "I'm not sure I could handle the emotional impact of a woman who can't have children."

Like online dating, it all starts with a match.

Harbick has created a digital profile of herself, which is sent to couples through the agency. It includes a photo of her family in pajamas in front of a Christmas tree. She writes: "I'm looking for a fun, loving couple looking to start a family or expand their family. I'd like to build a strong relationship with the intended parents that will last beyond the pregnancy. A lifelong friendship would be great!" She also says she'd like to stay with her regular doctor and: "There will be plenty of bump photos!"

If couples are interested in Harbick's profile, she receives their booklet and a video. There, the prospective parents introduce themselves and explain their conditions for an abortion. If everything fits, the three partners sign a contract after the initial initial meeting. This contract might stipulate that the surrogate mother may not come into direct contact with cat feces due to the risk of toxoplasmosis, or that she may not smoke. Harbick leaves the decision about a possible abortion to the couples – "but I don't perform abortions for nonsensical reasons, like someone who doesn't actually like the baby's gender," she says.

Harbick explains that prospective clients can attend webinars at the agency where they learn how to create the perfect profile. "I want to know why they're here. What goals they have for the baby, and how they plan to explain its origins," says Harbick. "The better the story, the more surrogate mothers will be interested."

For Harbick, family doesn't necessarily consist of a father, a mother, and a child. Family is one or more people who want and love a child. A community of responsibility beyond biology. It's a concept that embraces a great deal of freedom and voluntariness.

And it's becoming more popular. According to the agency, many prospective parents are now moving from the US to Canada. This is partly due to US President Donald Trump. He is rolling back reproductive rights nationwide and attempting to restrict the principle of birthright citizenship. If he succeeds, children of foreign intended parents would no longer automatically be US citizens, but would only have the citizenship of their parents at birth, or in the worst case, no citizenship at all, unless the parents' home countries apply the principle of parentage. It would be unclear for parents whether they could legally bring their child home without any problems.

I WOULD ABSOLUTELY
LOVE
TO BE YOUR
SURROGATE
Officially
MATCHED
Medically
CLEARED
Proud
urrogate
Their bun,
my oven.

Cards from the surrogacy agency CFC for all pregnancy participants: "We do so much more than just rent out a uterus." Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

In Canada, every child born there becomes a citizen. For new parents, it's usually not a problem to apply for the necessary papers to leave the country and register as legal parents there.

In many European countries, reproductive freedoms are not as extensive or have recently been restricted. For example, Italian couples face penalties if they have a child carried abroad by a surrogate mother. Surrogacy is prohibited in most EU countries, including Germany. Laws in many places are still strongly influenced by conservative Christian morals. Many believe that a child should only be conceived naturally in a marriage between a man and a woman.

The urgent desire to have children among people who don't follow a traditional model or who face biological obstacles doesn't disappear because of this. Rather, it results in dubious agencies operating in the area – and poorer women in less strictly regulated countries, such as Romania or Cambodia, tend to be exploited.

Die Frauen sind stolz darauf, anderen einen Lebenstraum zu erfüllen

Two days after the clinic visit, Harbick is standing with 30 women in an airy room in downtown Toronto. Yoga mats are laid out on the floor, a floral altar stands in the center. Magnificent fruit bowls are draped on the buffet.

In the coming hours, a retreat, a meeting for surrogate mothers, will take place here. Harbick, wearing a flowing dusty pink dress, floats from one woman to another.

There are some who are heavily pregnant. Others have just lost a fetus. Others are participating for the first time, and there are women who were surrogate mothers years ago and are still part of the community. Some of them don't have jobs, others earn good money, some are single, others are married.

One of the women tells how a heterosexual couple stopped communicating three months after the birth. "Was it just a transaction?" she asks herself. Another says she feels guilty because she has undergone several failed embryo transfers and believes she is disappointing the intended parents' expectations. A third says she loves being pregnant – "but I don't want the responsibility." A fourth gave her surrogate baby to parents from Paris six weeks ago. "I can't believe I actually had a spinal injection during birth," she says. "It was so dangerous." A woman sits crying in the corner. She gave birth two days ago, gave up the baby, and lives as a single mother with a young daughter. Only her aunt looks after her.

Participant of the surrogate mothers' retreat in Toronto: Some say they did not have a happy childhood Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Surrogate mother Harbick (right) at sound healing in Toronto: Many tell stories in which they experience recognition, love and gratitude Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

The women in this room share the belief that everyone deserves a happy family. And they are proud to help others fulfill their lifelong dreams. Many of the women speak of their surrogacy as a great achievement. One says, "We do so much more than just rent out a womb."

At ten o'clock, Leia Swanberg stands in the middle of the room. Her short hair is bleached blonde and her blue eyes are intense. She owns CFC, the largest surrogacy agency in Canada. Harbick and she have known each other for a long time. Swanberg offers her retreats as a spin-off of her agency under the name "Sacred Surrogacy."

On Facebook, she promotes Sacred Surrogacy as a "transformative journey that allows us to resolve our own birth trauma and redefine our narratives." Swanberg says she wants women to be clear about their motives. This approach resonates with many women here.

Some say they didn't have a happy childhood. Some were adopted and experienced violence or sexual assault. Others have even given a child up for adoption. Quite a few women live on welfare. They all tell stories of experiencing recognition, love, and gratitude.

Agency owner Leia Swanberg at the retreat: »Pure Empowerment« Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

A woman describes how she carried a baby for an Indian couple and, at 33 weeks, was invited by the entire extended family to a so-called "baby shower" in honor of the expectant mother. Six months after the birth, she became pregnant for another couple.

Another, who previously gave up a baby for adoption, says, "The term 'altruistic' is inaccurate. I have to be thankful." Helping a child find a loving family is indescribable.

Workshop leader Swanberg invites the women who have something to grieve to sit in a circle. She says, "You may feel what you need to feel." Some women sit with their heads bowed. They wrap black scarves around their heads and cry.

Surrogate mothers in a so-called grief circle: What sometimes remains is phantom pain Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Partner exercise at the surrogate mothers' meeting in Toronto: "The responsibility lies 100 percent with the parents" Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Janet Harbick stays on the sidelines of the exercises. She's participated in such retreats many times and seems largely immune to spiritual impulses. "I'm a mother, a grandmother, I'm great, I'm funny," she says during a partner exercise. "I'm someone who hates people who eat with their mouths open, someone who asks the same questions over and over again."

At one point, the women are asked to write something they want to get off their chest on a piece of paper. One after another, they drop the paper into a bowl of water, where the ink dissolves. One woman lets out a loud scream. When they return from the bowl of water, Janet Harbick is waiting with a tray of pistachio macarons.

It was in 2017 when, after having five children of her own, she wanted another baby. "Not another child," her husband said at the time. The two discussed surrogacy as an alternative. Harbick says she found the agency through a Facebook ad.

Her doctor had actually advised her against another pregnancy. She has high blood pressure and diabetes. However, after several tests, her blood pressure stabilized.

The children are not conceived from Harbick's eggs, but from an egg donation—this is common practice in surrogacy in Canada. "I'll house them for nine months," says Harbick. "In a nice, fluffy king-size bed."

The contract usually stipulates that a surrogate mother will avoid establishing a parental relationship with the child. Harbick is clear about this. Of course, she loves these children, but she doesn't hold them: "The responsibility lies 100 percent with the parents."

Surrogate mother painting henna at the retreat: Some women are able to heal their relationship with their mothers by carrying a child for a woman who desperately wants to become a mother Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Typically, they cut the umbilical cord. Then the baby lies skin-to-skin with Janet Harbick for 20 seconds until she hands it over. "I know it's not mine."

She saw all the children again afterward, at least in photos. "I do want updates," she says.

Not everyone is so relaxed about it.

The fourth trimester, the three months immediately following birth, is critical for many surrogate mothers. The women have given up the baby, but their bodies often want to be with a child. Some surrogate mothers have contractually agreed to breastfeed for at least a few days after birth. Some fall into postpartum depression, and many suffer.

Some experts argue that a surrogate mother should be allowed to keep the child as an expression of her reproductive self-determination. However, according to people familiar with the Canadian surrogacy scene, such a case has never occurred. Most have children of their own. When you talk to the women at the retreat about this, many react with almost outrage, as if the very question were absurd.

But what sometimes remains: phantom pain.

* * *

Leihmutterschaft als Parallele zur Sexarbeit, was die Kontrolle des eigenen Körpers angehe

That evening, Leia Swanberg waits, exhausted, in a hotel lobby. She wants to explain why she connects the surrogate mothers through the meetings. "We know the impact of drugs on pregnancy," she says. "And we're beginning to understand the impact of loneliness."

Swanberg had carried three children as a surrogate mother before establishing her agency. Her past is not without controversy: In 2012, police investigated her for allegedly improperly paying surrogate mothers and egg donors, thus de facto facilitating commercial surrogacy. She ultimately pleaded guilty to three violations and paid a fine of 60,000 Canadian dollars. It was the first and so far only conviction under the Assisted Human Reproduction Act. Swanberg's face was featured in newspapers for weeks under the headline "baby saleswoman."

"It didn't hurt my business," she says today. "Parents simply realized that there was someone there who could help them have a child."

Agency boss Swanberg: For her, surrogacy is a highly political act Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

Where Harbick is at a loss for words, Swanberg relishes the exaggeration. For her, surrogacy is a highly political act. It has parallels to sex work, says Swanberg, in terms of controlling one's own body. In a social climate—such as that in North America—standing up as a woman and "respecting, honoring, and using one's own body" is self-empowerment.

Some women are able to heal their relationships with their mothers by carrying a child for a woman who desperately wants to become a mother. There are women who became pregnant through rape and find strength in entering into a pregnancy out of love. "Pure empowerment," says Swanberg.

Clients from all over the world are unlikely to have any inkling of such theories. While Swanberg also offers retreats for them, most come with the goal of fulfilling their desire to have children as quickly as possible.

It's not easy. Because women in Canada don't carry children primarily for financial reasons, the process becomes more human—"and more unpredictable," says Swanberg. She tells of surrogate mothers who experience a personal crisis and back out shortly before an embryo transfer. And of people who want to text their surrogate mothers five times a day, which overwhelms her.

Kosten von bis zu 105.000 Euro, bis man ein Kind in den Armen hält

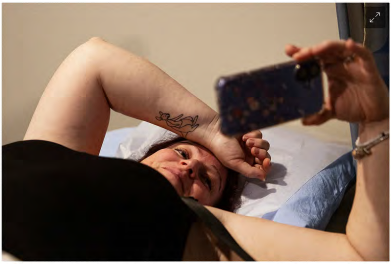
"I wouldn't have time for something like that," says Harbick, sitting on her sofa at home. She chose the German couple because she liked their style and their professions. No more can be said to keep the fathers anonymous. Harbick recently lost one of their babies in the eleventh week. This is her second attempt.

Harbick knows how difficult this path can be for future parents. She's seen the videos on Instagram of male couples from all over the world playing and reading with their nephews. They write in their short bios how many embryos are already ready in Canada.

"Some come with only one embryo," says Harbick. "Then there's no cushion to fall on if it doesn't work right away."

Everything went great with the two German men, she says. They quickly came to an agreement.

"Janet sets her mind on something and wants to do it right away. It may have been an advantage that our embryos were already in Canada, so we could start at any time," say the two future fathers from North Rhine-Westphalia in a video call. They are around forty years old, work full-time, and have been together for ten years.



Surrogate mother Harbick during a phone call with the intended fathers: They want to create a picture book featuring all the people who contributed to the child's birth Photo: Della Rollins / DER SPIEGEL

It was always clear that they wanted to become parents. The two considered adoption ("poor prospects as fathers"), then fostering a child ("What if the child is torn from the family again after three years?"). At a fertility fair in Germany in 2022, they heard about surrogacy.

"As a male couple, we had opportunities in the USA or Canada," they say. Countries like Ukraine and Israel, for example, have not opened their markets to gay foreign couples. So they called US agencies, where they were quoted prices equivalent to between 155,000 and 180,000 euros. They liked Canada's altruistic model. While the waiting time for a surrogate mother is considerably longer than in the USA at just over a year, the costs are somewhat lower. Agencies have spoken of up to 105,000 euros before holding a child in your arms. They have to pay for the egg donation, the surrogacy agency, the clinic, legal counsel, and the surrogate mother's expenses.

More on the topic

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By Heike Klovert

Reproductive medicine: Didn't God also need the surrogate mother Mary?
A guest article by Peter Dabrock

Depending on whether there is a miscarriage or other complications along the way, it becomes more expensive. Foreign couples also incur costs because they have to take out insurance for around €20,000 for the baby, say the German intended fathers, in case the baby needs to be admitted to intensive care after birth. Since their child will eventually live in Germany, healthcare in Canada is not free. The couple flew to Toronto to donate sperm to the clinic; their egg donor arrived three months later, so the eggs could be fertilized fresh. The embryos were frozen until a doctor implanted the first one into Harbick's uterus.

The future fathers haven't yet furnished their room or converted their car to be child-friendly. But they have thought about how they want to tell their child's story: They want the child to meet Janet Harbick. They plan to give the child enough strength in case there are comments at school about two fathers. And they want to create a picture book featuring all the people who contributed to their birth.

Janet Harbick wants something of each child she brings into the world to remain with her. On her sofa, she displays her left arm with a large tattooed bouquet of flowers. Each flower belongs to a child. A daisy for one born in April, a lily of the valley, a rose for a baby born in June.

The German fathers' baby is expected in January, a boy. Harbick's skin will be a carnation.

WEEKENDER

S+ These Canadian women give birth to children for others – out of charity

"I like being pregnant and I love babies; it's my calling," says one of the surrogate mothers.

3 min