

Matt Shea in Poland

The far-right former WA representative has been quiet lately until he turned up last week at a hotel in Poland, surrounded by Ukrainian orphans

By Luke Baumgarten
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Late last week, a Polish-born lawyer living in Dallas named Marta Milan began reaching out to people in Spokane, asking for any information they could offer about Matt Shea — the former far-right Washington state representative turned hardline evangelical pastor.

Something strange was happening in a small, historic town in eastern Poland, and Shea seemed to be at the center of it.

At least 60 Ukrainian orphans had appeared and were staying at a boutique hotel and writer’s retreat called Dom Dziennikarza — which translates to the Journalist’s House — in the town of Kazimierz Dolny, with a population of just over 2,500 in Lublin Province. The children are apparently under the care of a group purporting to be a nonprofit that hosts Ukrainian orphans in America called “Loving Families and Homes for Orphans.”

Matt Shea is traveling with that group, and the reason they ended up in Kazimierz Dolny appears to be Shea’s connections to a far-right evangelical pastor, fringe political leader and minor YouTube celebrity named Pawel Chojcecki, who has connections to Polish fascists and has been a Shea ally since at least 2018.

Their presence in the town created a storm of suspicion that went viral in Poland and led local residents to appeal to municipal authorities and eventually the embassies of both Poland and the United States.

The concern stemmed from a number of factors, not least of which is the fog of war brought on by the Russian invasion and the tremendous fear and uncertainty that has spread from Ukraine to Poland, and especially the Lublin region, which borders both Ukraine and Belarus.

These fears were exacerbated by the intentional or unintentional secrecy of the Loving Families group and — for people like Marta Milan and Polish journalists who have covered the story — Shea’s presence near the center of it all.

The Timeline

It’s hard to pin down exactly when Shea and the orphans arrived at the Journalist’s House, but in a Facebook post discussing how long he had been “on the ground in Ukraine and Poland,” it seems likely he entered Ukraine around March 1.

By March 7, there had been enough concern from the community in Kazimierz Dolny that the Journalist’s House posted a letter to its Facebook page from Loving Families and Homes for Orphans, attempting to explain the organization’s intent.

The letter thanks the people of the town for their generosity and asks for any additional help they can provide. They say they are a Texas-based organization led by Irina Sipko and that the children are from an orphanage in Mariupol that was destroyed by Russian forces.

They also contend, “We are in direct contact with the governments of Ukraine and the United States, supported by the highest levels of politicians, international and local church leaders as well as dozens of companies from Ukraine, the USA and Poland,” but provide no supporting evidence for this.

Marta Milan says the letter made the situation worse, less for what it said than for what it lacked:

- Despite referencing Sipko, the letter was unsigned.
- It gave no indication of a previous connection to the Mariupol orphanage.
- The adoption organization’s website was broken.
- It also seemed as though the letter was not written by someone with any sort of grasp of Polish. Milan says: “I believe the original announcement was translated from English to Polish by Google translate or something similar because the Polish version does not always make sense and is grammatically incorrect — like any regular Google translation.”

How closely could this organization be tied to Polish authorities if they couldn’t write a letter in passable Polish?

Also important for a lawyer like Milan: The organization has a state incorporation but no discernable federal nonprofit designation and no federal nonprofit tax returns on file.

Perhaps most importantly, Milan says the letter didn’t even address the community’s chief concern: Rumors had been circulating that an unknown group of Americans were planning to take the children back to America as quickly as possible, stoking fears of human trafficking.

The Journalist’s House post didn’t get much engagement on Facebook, but others referencing the letter did.



Matt Shea on stage in Poland.
Photo illustration by Valerie Osier.

One post in particular went small-town viral on March 7, and two days later that same poster followed up to say she had reached out to local authorities and the Polish embassies of both Ukraine and the United States. She said the US embassy staff assured her they were taking the concerns seriously.

Katarzyna Lazzeri, a reporter for TVN24, a Polish 24-hour news station (and subsidiary of Discovery Networks), traced the rumor of pulling the orphans out of the country to one of the volunteers in Shea’s entourage. Via email with RANGE, she outlined the questions she asked Shea and how his responses fell short of an adequate explanation:

“After they came, one of the American volunteers informed local authorities that they wanted to take children soon to the United States of America (to Ukrainian families living in the USA). First, [that is] against Polish law. Second, we asked the pastor Matthew Shea to show any documents that would confirm he has a right to do it. He only gave the name of the foundation but with no contact information or even signature. For me, the big question is whether this organization has a license that gives it the right to conduct adoption processes.”

Rather than provide that information — or offer any context for the statements from the volunteer about taking the kids out of the country — Shea and Chojcecki pivoted

to labeling the concerns a Russian disinformation plot.

On March 10, Pawel Chowecki’s right-wing YouTube channel Idź Pod Prąd (“Go Against the Tide”) wrote that the concerns were “Russian propaganda against American aid” and accused the controversy of scaring other Ukrainian orphanages into refusing help. It’s vital to note that no other media outlet has corroborated this story.

Shea also railed against the accusation that he or Loving Families and Homes for Orphans were engaged in human trafficking, saying his organization (he didn’t specify which organization) had made an “award winning documentary” against sex trafficking.

That same day, TokFM, a large, mainstream Polish radio station, reported that authorities had checked on the kids and they were healthy, and that the matter was being referred to family court.

By March 14, in an interview with SDP, a Polish news outlet that Lazzeri characterizes as “conservative, far-right,” Shea continued to push the Russian disinformation line while clarifying that the orphans would be staying in Poland:

“Matthew Shea, a spokesman for Loving Homes and Families for Orphans and a pastor of one of the Evangelical churches, commented on the Moscow fakes: ‘Such a fantastic lie could only arise in a sick

head. Neither we nor our partners have any intention of taking the children to the US. Moreover, it is neither legally nor organisationally possible,' Shea emphasized."

The Pastor and His Flock

Besides Shea, the two major players in this story are Paweł Chojecki and Irina Sipko, and their personas couldn't be more different.

Chojecki, his church Kościół Nowego Przymierza ("Church of the New Covenant"), and his YouTube channel Idź Pod Prąd ("Go Against the Tide"), have been under scrutiny in Poland for years by Stowarzyszenie "Nigdy Więcej" ("Never Again" Association) — a Polish anti-racism, anti-xenophobia and far-right watchdog group.

According to Rafał Pankowski of "Never Again," in addition to his pastorship and YouTube channel, Chojecki is a leader in the 11 November Movement, a small, far-right political party he co-founded with former Polish presidential candidate Marian Kowalski, "a former leader of the fascist National-Radical Camp ONR."

Pankowski uses quotation marks when referring to Chojecki's religious operation, but says it is well funded and has diff-cult-to-document ties to the U.S.:

"The 'church' is a very small evangelical sect, consisting of Chojecki, his family and some followers. It is, however, very well funded, owns real estate etc. — apparently thanks to U.S. links (we don't know details of these links). The main form of their public activity is through many hours of daily broadcasts on YouTube."

In a report "Never Again" produced documenting xenophobia and Sinophobia in Poland surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, Chojecki's name comes up at least a dozen times on discrete dates throughout 2020, sowing the conspiracy that COVID is an intentional biological attack. In one passage, "Never Again" documents a long diatribe Chojecki posted to his YouTube channel in which he claimed "the World Health Organisation has infected the whole world," and that not only have communists taken over the United Nations, "The UN was precisely created with the participation of Russian and Chinese communists." The section concludes with, "Wherever you look — whether at the Health Organisation or at the Polish military academy, there are communist spies everywhere."

Chojecki is also vehemently anti-Catholic — uncommon in a country that is over 90% Roman Catholic and less than .5% Protestant — but to Pankowski, that's of secondary importance. "Chojecki has been publicly extremely offensive towards Catholics," he says, "but the main issue from the point of view of the 'NEVER AGAIN'

Association is not his religious beliefs but his right-wing extremist political propaganda activities."

Shea and Ukraine

Matt Shea has connections to Ukraine through his wife, Viktoriya, who was born in Kharkiv and met Shea in Spokane. Boris Borisov, a former Spokane city planner and current pastor of Pacific Keep in West Central Spokane, says he had heard that Shea was in Poland to help with orphans, and that doesn't surprise him.

"Lots of my Slavic friends are trying to get their loved ones from Poland to the U.S.," he says.

Shea's connection to Loving Families and Homes for Orphans appears to be through Irina Sipko. In a Facebook post from March 8, Shea shares a "Go Against the Tide"-produced video of the journey from Ukraine and talks about traveling with the orphans from Mariupol and members of Viktoriya's family.

The post begins, "LOVE ALWAYS WINS IN THE END," and Shea tags Chojecki and Sipko.

Prior to his arrival in Poland, Shea had kept a low profile for almost a year, a marked departure from his previous six terms in the Washington Legislature where he was ultimately accused of "domestic terrorism against the United States" for his role in three armed conflicts, including using his legislative office to try to extract intelligence from FBI officials during the Malheur standoff.

[Editor's note: Idaho District 1A Republican Rep. Heather Scott, of Blanchard, also featured heavily in the report on Shea's alleged activities, depicting her as one of his close associates, including at the Malheur standoff in 2016.]

Shea was always a political outsider, even in the Washington GOP, but was immensely popular in his Spokane Valley District. The domestic terrorism allegations gave state Republican leadership a little room to move, though, and the party kicked him out of its caucus after the investigation. Shea decided not to seek re-election in 2020. That May, he took a job as campus pastor at Covenant Church and spent much of the pandemic resisting reproductive rights at the church's rolling "The Church at Planned Parenthood" (TCAPP) protest.

He was active in the pandemic-reopen protest scene through mid-2021, but the reopen protests dwindled over time and he had a falling-out with Covenant and TCAPP last May, about a year after they joined forces.

Shea has been notably quiet since, at least publicly. And while he may be cultivating new associations, it even seems as though his influence is dwindling in Spokane Valley.

Loving Families and Spokane's Slavic Community

Though Loving Families and Homes for Orphans is a Texas- and now possibly Florida-based nonprofit, its executive director Irina Sipko lived — at least until recently — in Spokane.

The organization is incorporated in Texas, but does not appear to be a 501(c)3. The site is indexed on Google, but it failed to load in multiple attempts over five days and now the homepage at www.lfhorphans.org/ redirects to a domain registration service. An old, text-only Google Cache of the site doesn't offer very much information, other than to say that the organization facilitates adoptions for orphans. On "Go Against the Grain," Shea gave further detail, calling it, "a hosting organization for Ukrainian orphans in America with Ukrainian families with the intent that ultimately that ends in adoption."

In the organization's incorporation documents from 2018, Sipko is listed as a founding board member living at an address southwest of Spokane near Cheney-Spangle Road. Sipko has also been listed as the owner of Onyx-Pearl Salon and Spa in downtown Spokane, though it appears that business is closed. Several local people know her as a part of Spokane's large Slavic community, though no one we spoke with knew her particularly well.

It now appears she may have moved to Palm Coast, Florida. The house in Southwest Spokane she listed as her residence sold in July 2021.

Last month she registered a new nonprofit with the State of Florida, called LOVING FAMILIES AND HOMES FOR ORPHANS, INC with different board members than the Texas organization.

It's unclear if the organizations are state branches of the same organization or separate organizations. Marta Milan notes it would be easier to incorporate separate branches in their respective states. The only board member the incorporation documents share is Irina Sipko.

It remains unclear if these state-level nonprofits have a federal 501(c)3 charitable designation. RANGE was unable to find any 990 federal nonprofit tax returns on file for any organization with that name. It is rare for domestic nonprofits to operate without a federal 501(c)3. It seems even less likely that a nonprofit engaged in foreign adoption assistance would operate without one.

We were unable to reach Sipko for comment, though if she gets back to us, we will update this story.

While the lack of clarity surrounding Shea's intentions and the incomplete legal details surrounding Loving Families has people in Poland justifiably on edge, it's common for church congregations in Spokane's large Slavic community (The *Spokesman* estimated there are 30,000 Ukrainians alone in Spokane County) to

support orphanages in former Soviet bloc countries.

Borisov says most of the Slavic community in Spokane are first-generation immigrants, meaning family, community and cultural ties to their former homes are still extremely tight, and the people who have made it to Spokane have a strong desire to "share in the economic opportunities they've been able to develop here in the U.S."

Borisov is no longer part of a Slavic congregation, but he says while he was, supporting orphanages in places like Ukraine, Russia and Moldova was common.

"The support would be financial, but also every year teams would go over there to help," he says, "I think many Slavic churches are still very involved, so when the war in Ukraine broke out, many have orphanages they've been working with over the years under bombardment and/or evacuating. They are of course trying to do everything possible to help these groups try to survive the invasion."

Because the need is so great and so many people from outside the Slavic community have been asking for ways to help, Borisov says a coalition of Slavic churches and Pacific Keep put together the Spokane Loves Ukraine campaign to take donations and help ensure they make it to trustworthy organizations and nonprofits in Ukraine and countries like Poland tackling the refugee overflow.

With the information we have, it's hard to know if the plan to take the orphaned children to America as quickly as possible was real, or the result of an uninformed volunteer speaking out of turn. Because of that, it's hard to know whether the decision to keep them in Poland to work through an official process was always the idea or a response to public outcry.

Shea's trip to Ukraine may well have had humanitarian goals: a rescue operation to retrieve Viktoriya's family and orphans in genuinely dire need with at least a tangential connection to Spokane. But in arriving, he's working side-by-side with a regional right-wing religious extremist, partnering with a mysterious nonprofit that no one can track down, offering no provenance and claiming that any concerns are just Russian disinformation.

The local community in Poland is worried about children there, and they deserve answers.

Shea did not respond to a request for comment from us or *The Seattle Times*.

Luke Baumgarten is a longtime regional reporter and the founder of RANGE, a reader-supported publication based in Spokane. Help it grow by becoming a paid subscriber. This article originally appeared March 17 on rangemediaco.com. Visit the website for more information.

