

Strict law pushes Polish women to have abortions abroad

November 3 2016, by Monika Scislowska



In this photo taken on Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016 a doctor prepares to carry out abortion procedure in the operating room in the hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate

pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

While the streets of Warsaw have been engulfed by vehement protests over the government's plan to further restrict abortion, individual Polish women are struggling daily to find ways of ending their unwanted pregnancies.

Monika, 19, had recently split up with her boyfriend when she realized with horror that she was pregnant. With no partner, no money and years of education ahead, she felt an abortion was her only option. But abortion in Poland is illegal in most cases and even when she tracked down a doctor rumored to bend the rules, he refused.

So Monika did what many Polish women before her have done—packed a bag, crossed the border into Germany and had an abortion in a place where it is safe and legal. Many have also gone to the Czech Republic, Slovakia or the Netherlands.

"I feel good now," she told The Associated Press from her hospital bed after ending her 7-week pregnancy in Prenzlau, Germany. "I would have had no one to leave the baby with and would not have coped financially. I was not ready to face this."

Poland, like the United States, is a society deeply divided over abortion. The Central European nation has one of the most restrictive laws in Europe and a government loyal to the Catholic church that wants to further restrict abortions. But a recent attempt to impose a total ban on abortion outraged many Polish women who held street protests that

forced lawmakers to abandon that idea.



In this Oct. 27, 2016 photo 22-year-old Ewa from southwestern Poland talks to The Associated Press about why she has just had an abortion at the town hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Polish women come to Germany and to other countries to have abortions because Poland's abortion law allows termination of pregnancy only if the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from rape or incest or the fetus is irreparably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

Now the ruling party is pushing for a near-total ban—a move that seems to be creating new support for abortion rights.

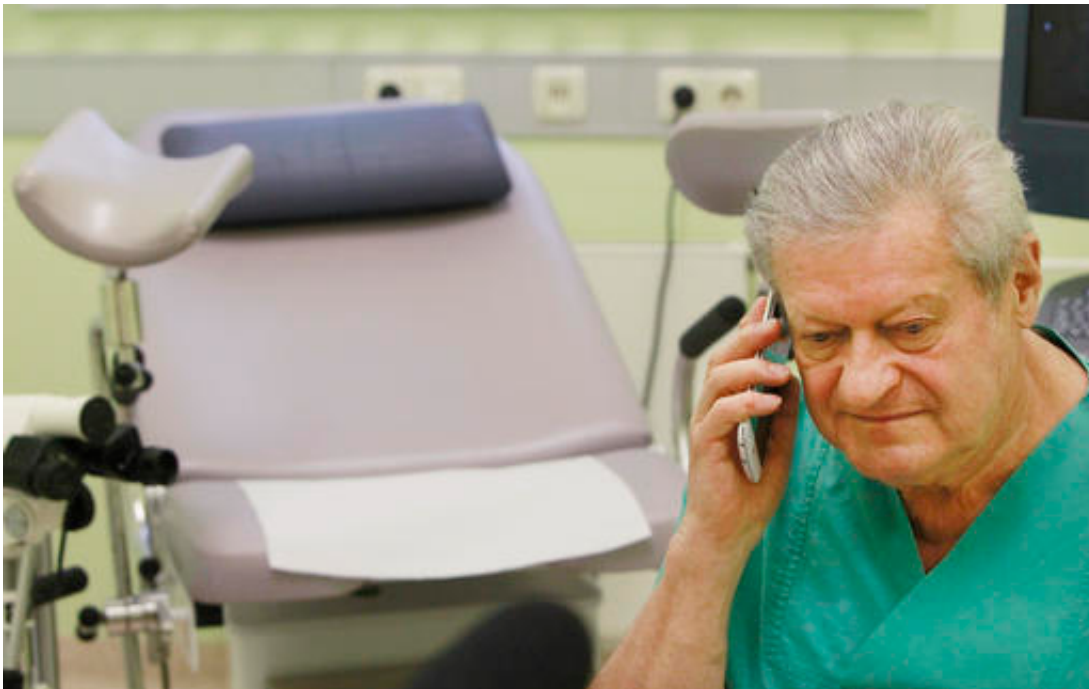
Another Polish woman having an abortion in Prenzlau, 22-year-old Ewa, said the recent protests made her aware that abortion was possible abroad.

"Other women who wrote on the internet about their experience helped

me take the decision," she said. "I thought it would be worse, but it's OK now. I feel fine."

Both women refused to give their full names or hometowns, afraid of being identified and condemned back home in the heavily Catholic nation.

In Poland, abortion is only allowed through the 12th week in cases of rape or incest, if the woman's life or health is in danger or if the fetus is irreparably damaged. Poland had 1,040 legal abortions last year, but experts say the true number of abortions is at about 150,000 per year in the nation of 38 million. Women import banned abortion pills from elsewhere, travel abroad for the procedure or resort to secret, unsafe abortions by non-medical people looking to earn money.



In this Oct. 27, 2016 photo gynecologist, doctor Janusz Rudzinski, a Pole who has lived and worked in Germany for 35 years, listens to a call of a Polish speaker asking about a possibility to have an abortion in his surgery at the city

hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

Reproductive rights activists are denouncing the Polish government's plans for an even more restrictive abortion law. The proposed change would also ban abortions in cases of fetuses with genetic defects like Down syndrome or even if they have no chances of survival upon birth. This way the born child can be "baptized, buried (and) have a name," ruling party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski said.

In fact, even abortions allowed by law are often denied to women due to a large number of doctors who declare themselves "conscientious objectors."

"The current law does not work in practice," said Krystyna Kacpura, the executive director of the Federation for Women and Family Planning.

"Women are clever and always find a way to avoid government obstacles. We are in the center of Europe; it's easy to go by train, plane, bus and car to another country."

Karina Walinowicz, a lawyer with Ordo Iuris, a Catholic group that has pushed unsuccessfully for a total abortion ban, said the law plays an important role in teaching people right from wrong.

"Abortion is homicide performed on a person at a pre-natal stage when the person is weakest, incapable of defense," Walinowicz said.



In this Oct. 27, 2016 photo doctors and nurses prepare an abortion procedure in the operating room in the hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

A leading polling institute in Warsaw, CBOS, estimates that at least one in four Polish women have probably had an abortion, but very few will admit to it. Several young men speaking Polish were in the waiting room at Prenzlau hospital, but denied their partners were there for abortions.

Monika was given an appointment within a week of calling Dr. Janusz Rudzinski, a Pole who lives in Germany and heads the hospital's Department of Gynecological Oncology, Special Operating Gynecology and Aesthetic Surgery.

During two hours that he spent with AP reporters, Rudzinski answered at least eight calls in Polish. Each time he assured the caller that abortion is legal in Germany through the 12th week. He said the hospital performs about 20 abortions a week on Polish women.

"This is not the most pleasant procedure, but the thing is, that if you have demand for them for some reason or other, then someone must perform them," Rudzinski said, sitting by an ultrasound machine.

In one case, a woman called from Poland's southeastern region of Rzeszow, saying she had tried an abortion on herself using a wire and had a high fever and acute abdominal pain. Rudzinski suspected she was developing life-threatening sepsis and told her to go immediately to a hospital.



In this photo Oct. 27, 2016 photo a woman walks in front of the city hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in

danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

Rudzinski also said a network called "the abortion underground" has developed in Poland, so the number of foreign abortions is falling.

"Three out of four (illegal) abortions are now done in Poland, but not by doctors. Tailors, shoemakers, artisans are performing them to make money," he said.

Since abortion pills are banned in Poland, Rudzinski said some Polish women take pills for stomach ulcers, which can provoke an abortion but can also damage the fetus' nervous system if the pregnancy continues. Those pills can also be fake.

"My patients sometimes tell me they have taken 50 pills, which is an almost lethal dose, but they are doing fine, and the pregnancies are continuing," Rudzinski said.

Those who can afford it seek real abortion pills from the Dutch organization Women on Web through the internet, but they can be confiscated by customs authorities.

"Nobody draws pleasure from having an abortion. There are always some reasons for it, bigger or smaller," Rudzinski said.



In this photo taken Thursday, Oct. 27, 2016, gynecologist, doctor Janusz Rudzinski, a Pole who has lived and worked in Germany for 35 years, is pictured in his surgery at the city hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)



In this Oct. 27, 2016 photo gynecologist, doctor Janusz Rudzinski, a Pole who has lived and worked in Germany for 35 years, speaks during an interview in his surgery at the city hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)



In this Oct. 27, 2016 photo gynecologist, doctor Janusz Rudzinski, a Pole who has lived and worked in Germany for 35 years, speaks during an interview in his surgery at the city hospital in Prenzlau, Germany. Up to 20 women from Poland come to the hospital every week to terminate pregnancy because Poland's law, one of the most restrictive in Europe, bans abortion except for cases when the woman's health or life is in danger, the pregnancy results from crime like rape or the fetus is incurably damaged. (AP Photo/Czarek Sokolowski)

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