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Geborener Deutscher®

A Newsletter for German-Born Adoptees and Their Birth/Adoptive Families

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Learning German

Is It Necessary? How Long Does It Take? What Are the Available Options?

by William L. Gage

Probably the biggest and most daunting obstacle to the pursuit of *any* international search is the language barrier. Unless a child is adopted by people whose linguistic background is the same as or similar to the child's, chances are that the child will not be afforded any opportunity to learn the language of its genealogical forebears.

This is particularly true in the cases of German-born adoptees, who were, generally speaking, completely assimilated into the American cultural landscape. Unlike their Asian counterparts from Korea or Vietnam, e.g., German-born adoptees do not *look* foreign, and are, therefore, generally not *perceived* as foreign, either by their adoptive parents or others.

Yet it cannot be denied that the German-born adoptee's *cultural* heritage is as foreign to his American self as is the Korean or Vietnamese adoptee's. And in both cases, if the adoptee chooses to search for his birth family, that "foreign" cultural heritage stands as a sometimes-insurmountable barrier to the search.

Is It Necessary?

It has been amply demonstrated by many that learning German is *not* a prerequisite to beginning to search; nor does lacking fluency seem significantly to hamper the progress of the search. Correspondence with *Jugendämter* and other individuals or groups in Germany with whom it may be necessary to correspond in the course of searching usually may be effectively conducted in English.

Typically, the point at which the possible necessity of learning German becomes manifestly apparent is at the *end* of the search, i.e. at the *beginning* of the reunion process; for it is usually only then that one discovers the true nature of the term "language barrier"; it is usually only then that one finds out whether or not it will be possible even to communicate with the people for whom one has been searching! And, because one cannot always count upon the ready availability of a translator (*Dolmetscher*), learning German becomes a reasonable and logical step in preparing oneself for the reunion which one seeks (and which is very likely to occur, barring the unexpected death of either party).

How Long Does It Take?

For an individual seeking to learn a *second* language, even learning the basics can be both time-consuming and problematic. For the searching German-born adoptee, however, it is not necessarily essential that one become fluent; often, a simple, child-like vocabulary coupled with a rudimentary understanding of basic grammar will suffice to permit the adoptee to communicate with any non-English-speaking birth relatives. Needless to say, a pocket or larger German-English dictionary would be invaluable in any case.

The time needed to acquire an elementary fluency may be reasonably brief in many cases. One thing that works in the English-speaking person's favor is the similarity between English and German grammar; the two languages have a common "linguistic genealogy." Words like *kommen* (to come), *gehen* (to go), *senden* (to send), and *sehen* (to see) highlight these common roots. Too, both languages have borrowed heavily from one another over the years, giving native speakers of each a small common vocabulary.

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Search Journal

by Michael Taylor

(Part Two of Two)

In the Fall of 1988, I was in my car one afternoon listening to a radio talk show in which they were discussing adoptees' rights, open records, etc. The guests were local and they announced their group's telephone number over the air. Curious, I called them the following day and told them my situation. They gave me Leonie Boehmer's name and telephone number, so I called her. At that time, I was told that it was a relatively simple undertaking to locate an American, German-born adoptee's birth mother in Germany, and Leonie sent me some materials.



Actually, I originally requested my file data from the INS in November, 1988, but it must have gotten lost, as I never received anything from them as a result of that request. Meanwhile, I lost some interest in pursuing the search and let the matter drop until the next year, after the family reunion in South Texas. This time was a different story.

After receiving my sister's letter, I immediately wrote her and sent her some pictures. We talked to each other over the telephone within the next ten days, and could not believe what each other was hearing. She has a German accent, but speaks English as a first language now. I talked to her husband and her sons the next time we talked. My wife and I flew to Montreal at the end of April and stayed with them three days. This was an experience very difficult to describe. By that time we had written each other and talked over the telephone many times, but it felt very strange for me to see and touch, for the first time I remembered, someone who was related to me. But it went much further than that.

We were awake for long hours, talking. Monika had tried to find me a number of times, all unsuccessful, and her husband told me how much our contact had helped her. There had always been something missing in her life, it seemed. Our visit was over before it began, it seemed to me. It was very difficult for me to leave my newly found sister. I felt that we were family as soon as we met.

While we were at her house, my mother called to speak to me for the first time in 37 years. It was very difficult for both of us; she has so much guilt and is very hard on herself. When I took the phone from Monika, I did not know what to say. We talked a little, but she was very nervous. But by the end of our conversation, we were comfortable with each other and she called ***(cont. on pg. 4, col. 1)***

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Germans and Computers: Do They Mix?

By Peter Gumbel (*Wall Street Journal* Staff Reporter)

The following article appeared in THE WALL STREET JOURNAL, issue of April 17, 1986

HANNOVER, West Germany — Martin Coyle has learned the value of patience during his eight years of selling computers in West Germany.

"The Germans are very cautious and conservative," says the British-born salesman. "They want to test it, feel it, squeeze it, smash it with a hammer before they're prepared to buy it."

That may be an exaggeration, but his experience is by no means unique. To the frustration of international computer makers seeking to expand quickly, Germans have taken their time to warm to computers in their homes and offices.

The reasons vary from shortages of decent German software to the late introduction of computers in schools. Part of the blame lies in a tight distribution setup that makes it hard for newcomers to reach the public. And there are those who maintain that Germans are culturally less receptive to new technology than their European neighbors.

But dealers like Mr. Coyle, who runs a flourishing computer-distribution company, are finding that their patience is beginning to pay off. With the computer boom in the U.S. and Britain seemingly on the wane, the German market is on the rise. And, for a country of West Germany's size and economic importance, a period of solid sales growth would be a major boon for the industry.

"In 1986," says David Evans, a market researcher at Apple Computer Inc. in California, "Germany will probably be the biggest market in Europe for the first time" for personal computers costing more than $1,000.

Forecasts for German growth vary. Otto R. Oechsner, the managing director of Deutsche Olivetti G.m.b.H., for example, reckons that PC sales will rise about 20% this year from last year's estimated 200,000 units. Intelligence Electronics, a Paris-based research group, says that as many as 320,000 professional computers in the $1,000-to-$10,000 range could be sold this year.

Amid hopes of a boom, there are still voices of caution. Several bullish forecasts of computer-sales growth in Germany at the start of the 1980s proved wildly over-optimistic, and analysts are wary of being tripped again. For them, many of the reasons that made selling computers here are arduous in the past still hold true. "The German market doesn't take off," says Richard B. Seymour, director of Britain's Apricot International Ltd. "It taxis."

That was certainly true until 1984, when the pattern of sluggish growth was broken. During that year, the number of $1,000-to-$10,000 computers sold in Germany surged 70% to about 160,000 units, and growth was rapid again last year.

There still seems to be considerable untapped potential. One measure of it is the degree of penetration among Germany's 500,000 small and specialized handicraft businesses, which employ a total of four million workers. Although this sector is often referred to as the backbone of German industry, only 5% of the companies, ranging from builders to furniture makers, are believed to have computers.

In bigger concerns, too, German white-collar workers have generally lagged behind their counterparts in Britain and France. Intelligent Electronics estimates that about 5% of German white-collar workers use computers, slightly fewer than in France and compared with more than 7% in the United Kingdom.

But, as Ralph M. Deja confirms, trying to form conclusions from statistics can be misleading. Mr. Deja heads Apple's German operations, which overestimated the prospect for German growth. As a result, Apple Computer G.m.b.H. cut its work force by 25% last year, shed almost half its dealers and recently announced a reorganization.

"If you don't take into account the psychological factors, you make mistakes," Mr. Deja says. "You can't take California and transplant it to Germany. You'll run against the wall if you do that."

It's difficult to pin down psychological factors. But the relatively slow acceptance by Germans of new-fangled household gadgetry such as microwave ovens, cable TV and cordless telephones suggests that they are resistant to new technology.

They even have a long word to describe the phenomenon: "*Technologiefeindlichkeit*," or enmity towards technology.

According to a recent survey by the Allensbach polling institute, 54% of the population view computers negatively, a figure that dwarfs the 31% who actually like them. And, more so than almost any of their neighbors, Germans believe computers make everyday life more difficult, restrict character development and cause loneliness, it found. "In no other European country is there such a strong expression of angst about computers," Allensbach says.

The most obvious indication of cultural differences is in software, especially at the home-computer level. While people in Britain and the U.S. lap up frivolous games, Germans seem to favor more serious, logical programs. "Star wars, space invaders and all war games are almost unsellable in Germany," says Harold Speyer, European general manager for Commodore Electronics Ltd., the market leader for home computers. The company's best selling program in Germany? "Chess," he says.

Apple Chairman John Sculley says national attitudes toward work help shape the market for PCs. While the habit of maintaining a strict separation between office and home is a drag on demand, he says, the German love of efficiency buoys it.

"We don't see Germans buying PCs and taking them home," Mr. Sculley says. "Germans don't take work home; Americans do."

Ende

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Learning German

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What are the Available Options?

It is suggested that the reader consider the following list of possible options:

Public Libraries often offer tapes, records or videos with booklets and dictionaries (conversational German, 20 lessons).

Bookstores and **Music stores** often sell Berlitz phrase books (phonetics and spelling), German newspapers and magazines or cassette courses developed by U.S. State Department ("Audio Forum").

Local **Community Colleges (Adult Education Department)** may offer conversational German courses.

Berlitz School of Languages offers intensive courses in conversational German, as well as grammar and writing skills.

Berlitz also offers "Think and Talk® Programs" by mail from **Berlitz Publications, Inc., Dept. 4800, P.O. Box 506, 900 Chester Avenue, Delran, NJ 08075**. The cost for each is $145 plus $7.50 shipping and handling (includes: 7 audio cassettes, 2 illustrated manuals, bilingual pocket dictionary, portable tape player and an attache case to hold it all). For credit card orders, call: (800) 228-2028, Ext. 151 and ask for Dept. 4800. The German version has Item No. 66186 (NY and NJ residents must add the applicable sales tax.)

Contact a 3rd- or 4th-year **University language student** for possible tutoring.

Through the local **Public School System**, you may be able to contact an exchange student program coordinator to get in touch with students from Germany who might be willing to help with conversational German, or you may be able to host such an exchange student yourself.

Through **German Clubs** you may be able to contact German-speaking members, or their relatives, who might be willing to help with translations and learning the language.

Many **newspapers** and **magazines** carry advertisements for mail-order language courses or tutoring; check the classified advertising section of newspapers, and look especially in periodicals aimed at international travelers, particularly in-flight magazines of international airlines with routes to the countrywhose language you wish to learn.

In Summary

If a German-born adoptee wishes to be able to communicate with German birth family members, a grasp of the German language is essential. How long it will take will depend upon the degree of fluency one wishes to achieve. Finally, the available options for learning any foreign language are many and varied, ranging from self-teaching tapes, books, video tapes or television programs, to formal school-based instruction, to tutoring by native speakers or language students. ***Ende***

Book Review *Germany: The Empire Within*

Reviewed by Christopher Hitchins by Amity Shlaes

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Those who may have seen the epic-length movie "Heimat" a few years ago will be well-prepared for the material for this short tour of the modern German psyche. The Germans always have had a very strong sense of nationality; perhaps a strong sense rather than a secure one. And the territories peopled by German speakers and German nationals never have been unified under any one stable or democratic regime. Since the end of World War II, there have been three German-speaking states in Europe—the two Germanies and Austria—and even now that there is only one big one and one small one, there remain large German-speaking groups outside the borders of either.

During the process of reunification, Chancellor Helmut Kohl more than once created dismay by his willingness to speak to mass rallies of "Silesian" Germans—those who hail from what is now Poland. The political culture of these people is often disturbingly irredentist, and it was with loud expressions of disappointment that they saw Herr Kohl finally agree that the current border with Poland is recognized as legal and unchangeable. The Poles were made very nervous by the Silesians because once before in history the presence of a German minority had been made a pretext for imperialist intervention. This was the famous Sudeten question, concerning the large and allegedly oppressed German community in pre-war Czechoslovakia.

Early in this book, the author goes to a weekend rally of Sudeten *Volk* in the city of Stuttgart. Her account of it is absorbing. In the convention center: "Benches in its vast halls are lined with tables under signs bearing names of lost places that today have Czech names: Marienbad, Karlsbad ..."

Is this nostalgia and sentimentality or is it what used to be called revanchism? Either way it is big business politically—the Bavarian right has been making the Sudeten cause for years, both in the sense of fund raising and of the emotions. Shlaes quotes Mayor Manfred Rommel of Stuttgart as telling his Sudeten audience, by way of a quotation from Schiller that might strike many Americans as coming from Thomas Wolfe: "Forward is the way to go, because you can't go back again." (This Rommel is the son of Hitler's North African proconsul—Shlaes might have pointed out that he meant that Schiller remark to be taken seriously and always has been among the foremost Christian Democratic opponents of any untoward displays of nationalism.)

However, as she does point out, the two most celebrated Sudeten Germans of our century were Franz Kafka and Sigmund Freud. In other words, there is no getting around this discussion without some painful recollection of the *Judenfrage*—the Jewish question—and the unappeasable memory of its attempted final solution. Here, German *Angst* gets a chance to display resentment and to transmit it to future generations.

As Vaclav Havel has been among the few to acknowledge, the Germans of Czechoslovakia were treated barbarously after World War II. Deported *en masse*, they were also expropriated and often massacred, starved and handled with extreme cruelty. It is not necessary to argue about whether this is the moral equivalent of the Holocaust, if only because it self-evidently is not. More compelling is the fact that it is not understood, admitted, even known about. But those who seek to understand the Germans have a duty to know what is on their minds, and on the minds of the thousands of ethnic Germans now emigrating westward to the "homeland."

Shlaes holds the political position that is sometimes characterized as "neo-conservative," and is also incredibly young. Her writing suggests to me that she finds a tension in the fact that the most anti-Communist Germans are often the most revisionist when it comes to recent German history. (She also commits herself to trite and misleading generalizing, as in her statement that "Historically, far-right and far-left parties were born out of economic hardship.") Still, she uses the tension as a good journalist should and employs it to convey an impression of unresolved memory, unredeemed nationalism and undiscussed history, merging the intellectual toll of all three.

The suggestion of her title is that, for now, the German aspiration to oneness and greatness is a private, interior belief. Will the German Europeans become like the German Americans and assimilate their once-intense yearning into a wider project? This is not a question that should preoccupy Germans alone. ***Ende***

THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE

French Court Outlaws "Surrogate" Motherhood

In a ruling issued late on Friday, May 31, 1991, the French equivalent of our Supreme Court, the Court of Cassation, reversed the decision of a lower court, ruling that so-called surrogate-mother contracts "[subvert] the institution of adoption" and are, therefore, illegal.

The decision was rendered upon the appeal of the French government in a case in which a Marseilles woman gave birth in February, 1988, to a baby girl after being artificially inseminated with the semen of a man whose wife was infertile. The court case originated when the French government sought to have the contract invalidated. Although the birth mother had surrendered the child to the couple as agreed, the Court did not require the child be returned to her.

In rebutting the lower court ruling, which had held that surrogate motherhood should be viewed as a legal "expression of free will and individual responsibility for those who do it without any concern for profit," the French Solicitor General, who represented the government before the high court, argued that "the human body is not lent out, ... rented out, [or] sold"; and that it should be illegal "to arrange for a child to be abandoned, to reduce a woman to be[ing] merely an incubating womb."

A government witness, Jean Bernard, chairman of the National Committee on Ethics, testified that, while infertility is a "terrible unhappiness," "there are other solutions," and that "when there are thousands of orphans waiting throughout the world," adoption should be encouraged.

The French government began cracking down on surrogate-mother agreements after the French Minister of Health ordered the three primary associations which recruited women for that purpose to be dissolved in 1988.

Some East Germans Were Forced to Give Up Children

According to the Berlin newspaper, *Spandauer Volksblatt*, citing documents found in a cellar in a Berlin district council office which were made public on May 23, 1991, the East German Minister of Education, Margot Honecker, wife of the former Communist leader, Erich Honecker, had ordered the confiscation of children from political offenders in the 1970s and handed them over for adoption to "approved" families.

East German officials had always denied reports of such goings-on in the past.

OBITUARY

Prof. Dr. Christa Hoffman-Riem, author of, among others, the 1990 book *The Adopted Child: Family Life with Double Parenthood*, died on August 8, 1990 at the age of 52, according to a report in the *Adoption Researchers' Newsletter* of June 3, 1991. Prof. Dr. Hoffman-Riem, a sociologist, taught at the University of Hamburg.



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again later to talk to me. This was a very strange and wonderful experience. I felt as if I had been talking to a ghost; part of me knew that this was my mother and the other part was telling me that I was an American, a Texan.

In the letters I wrote to Marga at the beginning, I assured her that I had no blame to place on her. I told her that we can always look back on something and see the mistakes we may have made. But, we do not have the ability to see these mistakes while we are making them (too bad!). I told her that I knew that she did what she thought was best for me at the time, and that she should go easier on herself. She told me that it only makes her feel bad to hear nice things from me; it makes her feel even more guilty. But, she is working through it now and I think she will be alright with time.

We visited her in Frankfurt during the first two weeks of September. We all went—Cheri, the kids and two of Cheri's single sisters. After our long flight from Dallas, we emerged into the airport waiting room and there she was! She looked very nice, and she walked directly towards me until we touched. We hugged, kissed and looked at each other without very much talking. She was a little hesitant, somewhat shy and quiet, but very determined to see this thing through. She then met everyone else (the kids had long since been told about their "*Omi Marga*" in Germany) and we walked toward the exit.

I again felt somewhat out of place, that this was not me; that Marga, this nice, quiet German lady, was not my mother, that I was in Dallas, not Frankfurt. But we all went to the hotel, then she and I rode the streetcar back to her apartment nearby. This was the beginning of a very happy two weeks together. I found that we share the same sense of humor, we both chew ice, we have a similar smile, we both would rather eat ice cream than almost anything else; our political views are similar, also. She and I are both very particular about little things like the way our books are arranged. We both read a lot. But mostly, we enjoyed being together; she became a very real part of our family during our visit.

We were together, all of us, nearly every day, all day. She played a lot with the kids, and they really liked her. She had scheduled her vacation from work so that she could be with us as much as possible. She speaks English fairly well, and I speak German passably, so we had no communication problems. I met both of my aunts and two of my cousins. None of them spoke any English at all, except for my cousin Roland who works as a translator.

My older aunt is very sweet, three years younger than my mother. She showed me pictures of the family through the years, and she treated me as the long-lost nephew I am to her. I have a picture of me sitting on her lap when she was 17 years old. My younger aunt is only nine years older than me, is very vibrant and full of life. She took a couple of days off from her job to be with us and treated the kids to a trip to the zoo. In all, we were fully accepted as part of the family and were welcomed with open arms. It was really an overwhelming feeling for me.

In Goldstein, we went to the site of the camp on the banks of the Main. It is not a very impressive sight, but it is not an ominous one, either. Nothing remains of *das Lager* today; the land is used as a plant nursery now. We walked through the neighborhood and I saw the schools my sister attended; these were the same schools I would have gone to had my life taken a different route. We walked through the beautiful little park and my kids ran and played like all the little German kids did. Children, and all people, are essentially the same the world over.

We went to the cemetery near Marga's apartment where my *Oma Paula* is buried. My mother goes to *Oma*'s grave two to three times a week, to talk, she says. Her grave is the best manicured in the city, I would bet. We went to Sachsenhausen, to my last address before emigrating. I saw the house where I stayed after leaving Marga. It is a very nice place, on a street with similar buildings, and it is now a doctor's office.

My mother and I had many late-night discussions alone at her apartment. She has been living alone since her mother died in 1974 and she has no one to really talk to. She has a lot of guilt about my adoption. I suppose that she will never completely rid herself of this. She also has a very low opinion of herself, I am sure for the same reason. She has kept all her feelings inside for so long; she finally let them go a couple of times. We had some good cries together, I reassured her as best I could, and life goes on.

One of the hardest things I can remember having to do was to leave her at the airport the day we returned to Dallas. We were both heartsick, knowing we would be so far apart again. I call her every couple of weeks and we continue to write each other; I think she may come to visit us sometime next year. She has recently undergone an operation on her leg, however, and must recuperate from that before her life can return to "normal".

It has not all been fun and games, however, and anyone who begins a search such as this must consider the feelings of everyone involved. And the adoptive parents are really involved. My Dad died in 1985, so his feelings were never a factor in my decision to search. However, I felt very strongly that my Mom would not be able to handle this, so I was determined that I would not let her find out about it. With the information that I had, I felt that I could keep my relationship with Marga, whatever it would be, on a private and confidential basis. Only my wife, Marga and I would ever need to know.

I felt this was possible because of all the factors I have mentioned here: the distance, economics, language, she had not married, she had no other children (at least I thought so at the time), all these things. But, when I received Monika's letter, I knew that there would be much more to this than I had expected. I had to tell Mom. So, I visited with her one day late in March at her home about three hours away, and she reacted as I had anticipated. She felt betrayed, unloved; she thought that this was an end to her family, a breach in its structure. She felt that I had deceived her in some way by not telling her everything from the beginning. I told her that I may not have proceeded with it all if I had known she would find out someday. In short, she took it very hard, almost like a death in the family.

Since that time, we have had many discussions, and time has a way of putting things in their true perspective. She has now seen me return from Canada and Germany, and that I am the same person, and that she and I have the same loving relationship we have always had. She now believes that I did nothing to hurt her intentionally, but we both agree that I should have come to her first with whatever questions I might have about the circumstances of my adoption. She says that she would have told me whatever I had asked of her, and I believe her.

I thought, however, that I could shield her from whatever I found, and she would not have to suffer any insecurity or other negative feelings as a result of my search. This was wrong; if there is any advice I would give to someone beginning a search, it would be to get everything out in the open with one's family and let the problems arise at the beginning. It is inevitable that they will surface, and it is much easier to deal with them, no matter their size, at the start. I must say that my Mom now has really begun to take an interest in all this. She does not feel threatened by these "unknown" people anymore, and has said that she is ready to receive a letter from Monika, who has wanted to write her and meet her for some time now. Strange, isn't it?

So, this brings us to the present time. In retrospect, I would definitely do it all again. After the excitement of the initial discovery, the intensity of emotion while reading the first letters, the wonder as I realize what I am all about, the happiness experienced by myself and others during the reunion period, and the unhappiness experienced by others as a result of it all, I find that I have come full circle in a year's time. For it was only a year ago that I was in the same situation I am in now; I had a loving family for whom I cared very much and who loved me very much then. Nothing has changed between then and now, except that there are more people in my family now. ***Ende***

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