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

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Search For the Past

by Kathleen Riley

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Part One of Two

I always knew I was adopted, but it never really mattered to me.

A roomful of relatives would joke about how all of the men in the family have the same bulbous nose and trademark receding hairline—and I'd chuckle along. Their blue eyes would meet my green eyes, and we'd share a moment they couldn't possibly understand.

My adoptive parents are *my parents*. My adoptive brother is *my brother*. It always felt strange when people would ask what it felt like to be adopted. I never knew anything else. It's hard to feel a loss for something you've never had.

I wouldn't trade my relationship with my parents for anything. Like all families, we've had our ups and downs. But I felt loved. And I felt fortunate to be their child. They are wonderful people, devoted parents, and role models for me for the rest of my life.



Kathleen *(left)* **and Ursula**

The circumstances surrounding my birth, however, were a mere abstraction. Other kids heard their mother's stories of what it was like to be pregnant with them. They might remember their younger siblings being born. They knew without question what nationality they were.

But my relatives weren't related to me. As much as I loved them and felt a natural part of the family, I didn't have their heritage or share any of their physical characteristics. Adopted children miss that bond.

Think of looking at your hands, face and eyes in the mirror ... and not knowing anything about the other bodies or the other faces that lent them their shape and uniqueness. Those who aren't adopted will never know this feeling, nor its importance to those who do.

I accepted the fact that I would never know these details; I'm not sure why I wasn't more inquisitive. Maybe I was afraid to ask questions for fear of what the answers might be. It could have been fear of hurting my adoptive parents' feelings. Maybe it was a combination of both.

But lingering thoughts of my mysterious "flesh and blood" parents confused and troubled me, especially around my birthday. Usually I managed to suppress those thoughts, but they never left my mind completely.

When I entered my early 20s and began entertaining thoughts of having a family of my own someday, I decided it was time to be brave and ask some questions.

My medical history was just a big red "X" on the back of my medical forms. Some of those blanks needed to be filled in.

Continued on pg. 2, col. 1

Search Journal

by Mary Holtzman

I was born in Germany on October 8, 1952. I was raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, the oldest of eight children. My seven brothers and sisters are the natural children of my adoptive parents. Although, I look very different from my brothers and sisters, I grew up never knowing I was adopted.

When I was 21 years old, I accidentally found out I was adopted. I could not look for my birth family. My mom (my adopted mother) denied that I was adopted. Then the time came that I could look for my birth family in Germany. I tried on my own, with no luck. I didn't know where to go for help. Then, I received the names of William Gage and Leonie Boehmer. Thank God! I felt hopeful again. Leonie never gave up.

I prepared myself for rejection. I always knew that was a possibility. One day, in September of 1992, Leonie called to tell me she had found them. I had received a letter from my sister. It is a beautiful letter. I still read it over and over. Some of the letter reads as follows:

Dearest Mary,

I am your sister Mona. My heart is running over for happiness and pain because of your letter. I have already been crying so much today, I am again fighting my tears. I have known about you for many years because our mother told us about the sad story. "Us" means, you still have another sister, Sylvia, she is the oldest, 42 years old. Sylvia was married for 12 years in the USA in St. Paul/MN. At that time Mutti gave her the names and addresses of your adoptive parents to search for you. We have thought about you so often and talked about you!

I still can't believe it, I am shaking all over. When did you find out that your parents are in Germany? Did you know about me and Sylvia? Do you know that your name is "Petra" and not "Mary"? What color are your eyes? Mutti only was allowed to see you once and she thinks your eyes were brown like hers. Sylvia and I have blue eyes like our father.

I have 100 questions for you. Now it is on my shoulders to tell our parents very carefully. Mutti is very weak, she was sick often and has a weak heart. I am afraid to tell her about you for fear she is going to collapse because she loves you very much! She has shed millions of tears about you, it will again be very bad in October before and on your birthday! Then she lays only in her bedroom and cries and always says the same thing: "She is also my little girl." Often I have cried with her because I could not find the words to comfort her.

Continued on pg. 4, col. 1

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Search For the Past *by Kathleen Riley*

continued from page 1

My parents kept a social worker's handwritten document buried for 24 years, awaiting the day when I would ask to see it. That day finally came in late May 1990. They presented it to me in a sealed, yellowed envelope with the words "*To be opened only by Kathleen after she is 21*" scrawled across the front.

This document held what is called non-identifying information: factual details about an adoptee's birth, brief physical and social descriptions of the child's parents, perhaps the reason the child was placed for adoption. Nothing listed is to reveal the identity of the biological parents. In almost every state, it's the only legal information an adoptee is allowed to have regarding his or her adoption.

Although my parents smiled and reassured me that I would be pleased with what I was moments away from learning, I still took a deep breath before I opened the envelope. My life was about to change permanently.

The document said my birth mother had come to this country from Germany in 1965 as a pregnant, single woman of 27. I could see where names had been deleted, but my adoptive mother had penciled in "Ursula," the name she had overheard during the adoption proceedings.

The document explained that, after the death of Ursula's mother two years previously, she was left with only a father with whom she never felt close. She didn't feel ready or capable of raising a child by herself. And she was not interested in marrying my father, who was a young student at the time.

Ursula had a friend from a German boarding school who was married to an American and lived in Kansas City, so it seemed only natural for her to plan an extended "vacation" and stay with her during her pregnancy. Her friend would arrange for my adoption with a local maternity home. No one in Germany, except for my father, would ever know the truth.

I was placed with my adoptive parents a few weeks after my birth in February 1966. The document described my mother *(loves classical music, language arts, had classes at the Sorbonne)* and father *(his whole life revolves around art)*, and both sets of grandparents.

It went on to imply that Ursula returned to Germany later that spring. I was astonished at the long list of coincidences—I had always done well in language-related areas and had known since my early childhood that I wanted to be an artist. The whole thing seemed incredible.

I felt like I had just read the story of someone else's life—like one of these "out-of-body" experiences I'd heard other people describe. An aching lump grew in my throat; I choked back tears. What I held in my hands was *my life*, before I assumed the identity my parents gave me.

I kept my thoughts to myself. It was all so weird. My mind was racing: Who was this Ursula? Is she still alive? If she is, she's living on a completely different continent. What does she really look like? The words "short medium-brown hair with fair complexion" didn't help me imagine her face.

I had now gone beyond just the desire to know my medical background. I needed to find out who this woman really was. Without realizing it at the time, I was about to embark on a quest that would forever alter my life's course. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had to dig deeper; as impossible and insurmountable as that task seemed. I knew I had to try.

Much has been written about the children of adoption, the mothers who gave them away, and the endless, painstaking process they endure to find one another. It seems there isn't a soul who doesn't have an opinion one way or another about the subject. Negative outcomes are common; I was warned repeatedly by friends and acquaintances about the dangers of opening up my past. Maybe it was purely ignorance, but I never felt a sense of trepidation. Somehow, I knew my situation would be different. Despite all of the obstacles of time and distance, I had a sixth sense that I should proceed.

I learned of a vast network of people across the country, both professionals and dedicated amateurs, who are devoted to the cause of helping adoptees and their birth parents reunite. With their help, and the added support of a group here in Springfield [IL], it took only a matter of months for me to obtain the information I learned some adoptees search for a lifetime.

One crisp October morning in 1990, a phone call from a woman assisting me with my search brought a major breakthrough. I learned Ursula's full name, her date and place of birth, even the company she had worked for before coming to the States.

Incredible! This information was crucial, essential for me to make any progress. I couldn't have been more lucky or thankful.

Barely able to concentrate at work that day, I found myself repeating Ursula's full name over and over again. I listened to the peculiar way it rolled off my tongue; it was strange and foreign, yet familiar in a crazy sort of way. I paired her last name with Anette, the name I discovered she gave me when I was born. Wow, I thought. That's who I would have been.

From that point on, I struggled through another three months of correspondence with searchers, sent letter across the ocean to places of business in Germany, and made weak attempts at translating their responses. My poor German-English dictionary was taking a beating. I had reached the point where I needed to learn German better, so I enrolled in classes at Lincoln land Community College and Sangamon State. Every day, the mail brought hope of a new piece of information.

Finally, in late January 1991, while the rest of the world's attention was riveted of the Persian Gulf War, I learned my mother's exact whereabouts.

A request to German authorities for Ursula's birth certificate yielded her married name, her address, even her telephone number. She was alive and well and living near Cologne, married to a man who wasn't my father.

Through the whirl of my excitement, I suddenly came face to face with reality: My own mother didn't know me. Save for the first few hours or days of my life (I didn't know for sure), she had never even seen me.

I decided I would send Ursula a letter, with photos of me ranging from babyhood to the present day. I calculated the time involved in sending it so it would arrive on my birthday the next month. This letter had to be perfect. I agonized over every word, making sure they were carefully chosen and didn't sound intrusive. How should I begin? How can I ease the shock for her? How can I phrase this so she'll know I'll leave her alone if that's what she wants?

I tried to let my personality show through as much as I could. Yet, I thought, should I leave some questions unanswered so she can't resist contacting me? Should I say "Love, Kathleen?" I must have re-written that letter a million times. Even finding the right stationery was a dilemma.

I finally folded everything up and headed for the Federal Express office on a cold, rainy, dreary day in February. Believe it or not, the moment I handed the package to the clerk behind the counter, it *thundered* outside. I almost asked for it back.

Then came the waiting game. At night I wondered if I had done the right thing. Would Ursula's husband accidentally receive the envelope, open it and fly into a rage? Or maybe Ursula would open the package and immediately burst into tears—her dreams of finding me at last coming true. Would I be a disappointment to her? Would I look so much like my father that she would be overcome by bad memories? Or would my letter be the answer to her prayers?

Six nights later was the night before my birthday. I sped home after work to grab my mail before running off to German class. It was still too early to expect anything, but maybe, just maybe, this would be the night I would receive a response. I took the steps two at a time to my mailbox, then returned to my car while I quickly sorted through catalogs and bills.

I nearly threw away the telegram by accident. Upon closer examination, I realized the envelope really was a telegram, not just a piece of phony junk mail in disguise:

DEAR KATHLEEN:
HAPPY BIRTHDAY AND ALL MY BEST TO YOU.
YOUR LETTER MADE ME SO HAPPY.
LETTER WILL FOLLOW.
LOVE URSULA

I sat in my car and stared at the paper in my hands. Was this really an answer from the woman who gave birth to me? Could this moment possibly be happening? My heart felt as if it had stopped. Right there in my hands, I held the best birthday present I could have ever hoped for.

(To be concluded in the next issue)

Briefe (Letters From Readers)

April 8, 1993 (postmark)

Dear Mr. Gage,

First off, let me thank you with all my heart! Your newsletters have kept faith installed within me. Now let me tell you my story.

I was adopted at the age of 2½ years by parents from the state of Georgia named Cunningham. They had had one son of their own, but he died at the age of four from epilepsy. They wanted children very much, but were unable to conceive any more due to a medical problem with my mother. After about seven years, they decided adoption would be a way to show love for each other and for a child.

My father was in the USAF, stationed in Frankfurt, West Germany. They adopted me, and a 13-month-old boy who was not related to me. I was 2½ and named Micheala, and my new brother was named Thomas. They changed my name to Patsy Michelle and my brother's name to David Thomas.

We grew up in nice homes and lived in many different places. We finally settled in Florida in 1976 and soon thereafter, my father retired after 21 years in the service.

My life was somewhat normal, but difficult for me. We knew we were adopted from a very young age. My brother always adjusted very well to anything. It was like the son they lost was replaced by him. It seemed that he was on a pedestal—he could do no wrong. I know I shouldn't have felt that way about my family, but I did.

I always got everything I wanted in life. By the time I reached the teen years, I was very rebellious. I just felt like everything I did wasn't good enough, and being adopted didn't help. It was like I was given away because I wasn't good enough for anything. I finally got to the point that I contemplated death a time or two, believing that no one would miss me.

My parents slowly told me answers to my many questions. I always knew I was born out of wedlock, which was fine with me. I learned my mother's name and the name she gave me. To me, that was a big deal! But not until I was already married did all of this information really sink in.

I had given birth to a baby girl myself and decided that it was time to find out who my mother was and where she is. I felt like I had to, for my daughter's sake.

It took me four years to actually send off information to Leonie Boehmer. I just felt that I would be rejected and didn't feel that I could handle that. But about ten months ago I decided, what the hell! And, to my surprise, Ms. Boehmer called me right away after receiving my papers to tell me that I indeed had a great deal of information about my mother.

She was 32 years old when she had me. She was born in Salician, Germany, but remained near the Waldenburg area until the 1970s.

Ms. Boehmer kept in almost constant contact with me over the next nine months, but I believed in my mind that she would never find my mother—until the night I got a call from her—on March 15, 1993 at 9:30 p.m.

She said, "Michelle, you'd better learn German!"

I said, "Are you joking?"

She told me she'd found my mother living in Wiesbaden, and that she'd married a fellow by the name of Mann about a year and a half ago.

I don't think I can explain my feelings at that moment! I felt so fulfilled as a person. I felt complete.

Leonie told me to write a letter asking the questions I wanted answered, but every time I tried to write it, I drew a blank. It was so weird.

The next morning, after I took my children to school, I came back home and decided to call directory assistance in Wiesbaden to see if my mother had a telephone. Can you believe it? She did! I was in shock!

I called the number and a young man answered. I asked if a woman named Hildegard Mann lived there, and he answered yes. I began to cry.

I asked if he knew if she had a daughter born in 1966. He didn't know. He told me she was at work and to call back around 7:00 p.m., their time—1:00 p.m. here.

I called a friend of mine who speaks German and asked her if she would come over around one o'clock to translate for me. She agreed.

At one o'clock, we called and the young man answered again. My friend asked my questions for me and, to my surprise, she was most definitely my mother! She was so excited to hear from me. She thought I'd been living in Germany all these years. She said she didn't want to give me up for adoption, but had no means to care for me.

She had had a daughter, born in 1961, and a son, born in 1962. The daughter was sent to live with her aunt—my mother's sister—while my mother kept my brother. She said she lived in a children's home with us up until she decided to put me up for adoption.

They bothered her with the idea of adoption; they told her I would be better off. She had kept me with her for 2 years in that home.

That in itself was a surprise to me. I believed that she really did want me to know it was impossible for her to provide for me, so she did what she had to do, and that was adoption.

I also learned that my father was a northern Italian-American and that he had no concern for me. His name was Michael Cooper. But I am not going to look for him, because I am content with what I now know.

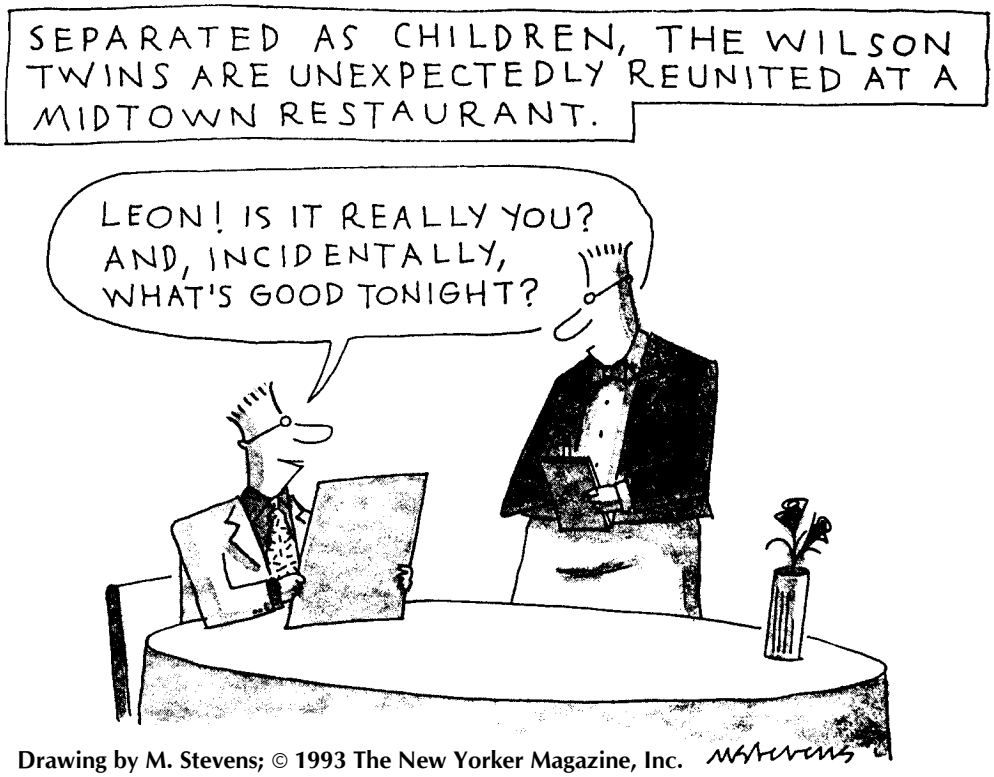
My mother had five children. The first three were Dagmar (1961), Michael (1962) and me (1966); we all had different fathers. Then came the last two, who have the same father: Thomas (who answered the telephone), who's 21; and Claudia, who's 20.

I have now sent pictures to her and written to her. I have also spoken to her many times on the telephone. Let me tell you, I am the happiest woman, and my life is now content. I couldn't begin to ask God for anything else!

My mother sent me pictures of me as a baby. I had never before seen pictures of myself at any age younger than 2½. My daughter looks just like me when I was her age! I also favor my brother and sisters. It's a great feeling, knowing you have features in common with others.

My mother and younger brother, Thomas, are planning to come to Florida in August, 1993, for two weeks. Then, in October, my two sisters are coming to see me and my family. I am also hoping to be able to travel to Germany one day! *— Michelle Crews*

Fernandina Beach, Florida



Drawing by M. Stevens; © 1993 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc. M. Stevens

I just called Vati, I only said you have to be strong for Mutti. I read him your letter and he said with a broken voice, "Oh my God—Petra." If you want to come home that would be more than nice, I would give anything for that. I am your sister and I love you! When can I see you and take you in my arms and squeeze you?

All my love, your sister

Mona

This was more than I dreamed of. I wondered what the sad story was? I had a family that loved and cried for me. They had looked for me. I called my Dad, I told him, we had found them, and I had two sisters. He was very happy for me. Then he said, "Are you sure you have just two sisters? There has to be more. They told us there were more. They told us, you were born premature, your parents already had a bunch of kids and couldn't afford to take care of you, so they put you up for adoption."

The next day I talked to my birth parents for the first time. Papa cried, "Petra, my Petra." Mutti was crying, "Petra my little girl, I only had you for a day and a half and they took you away. I never saw you after that." She kept talking about two old ladies from the Caritas. I didn't understand. I knew that when we were together I would learn the story behind my adoption. I knew my German family were in a lot of pain.

I was planning to go to Germany. My American family were happy for me, but my sisters and brothers were afraid they would lose me as a sister. My Dad knew I had to go to Germany, he wanted me to go. He too was afraid he would lose me. I told my Dad, I loved him. He would always be my Dad. I am a lucky person, I have two families, my heart is big enough to love you both. In Nov. '92, my sons Evan, Michael, and I went to Germany to meet our German family. I was filled with nervous excitement. Who did I look like? Although, they loved the baby born to them would they like the person I am today? Would I like them? What was the story around me that was so painful for them?

Meeting my birth family for the first time was absolutely great! The 2½ weeks in Germany we did so much hugging and kissing! I grew up so far away, and yet, I'm so much like my birth family. They are such beautiful people. I'm so lucky. I have two families to love. For the first time, I know who I look like. I have my very own family and medical history, something I never had.

My sons and I couldn't get over what a beautiful country Germany is. I was only a baby when I left, but it all seemed so familiar.

Now, for the story around my adoption. I was born at home, at 6½ months, with the help of a woman and dentist that lived in the same building. Mutti and the dentist weighed me. I weighed 5 lbs. I lived at home for a day and a half with no problem.

Then, an old woman from the Caritas and a doctor from the catholic hospital came to the house. They said, "This baby looks ok on the outside, but we have to check the inside." They put me in the hospital. Mutti went back to work.

One day, she went to see her baby at the hospital, but they would not let her see her baby. She insisted on seeing her baby. A nun called the police and had her taken away.

At work one day, Mutti collapsed. She was taken to the hospital. Mutti had continued to bleed from my birth. They tried to stop the bleeding, but could not. Mutti was told, she was going to die because they could not stop the bleeding. She never believed that. She was 22 years old, and strong-willed. She had three babies to raise.

She kept asking to see her baby. She was never allowed to see her baby. Her roommate would check on me, and let Mutti know how her baby was doing, and what I looked like. Papa was home taking care of Sylvia and Mona.

Two old ladies from the Caritas approached Papa. They told him, your wife is sick and going to die. You already have your hands full with two little girls at home. There are people who can take better care of her than you. Papa refused their request.

The ladies from the Caritas kept going to talk to Papa time and time again. Papa went to his mother-in-law for help. My grandmother went to talk to Mutti. Mutti told her that they were trying to take her baby from her. She pleaded with her mother to take the baby home and take care of her, until she got better. Her mother's response was, "No, she is not my baby. She is yours and your responsibility."

Mutti cried, "Please."

"Don't cry about this baby. You can always have another baby." (My grandmother died a month before my German family was found.)

The two old ladies from the Caritas kept going to Papa, asking for his baby. They told him, "your wife will never come home. She is going to die. How will you take care of three little one's?"

Papa was in a panic. He believed he was going to lose his wife. No one would help him. He was scared and didn't know what to do. He signed their papers. Mutti doesn't remember signing the papers while she was in the hospital.

They found a tumor on her uterus. They removed the tumor and part of her uterus. Mutti recovered quickly and went home without her baby. She went to the U.S. Army. She asked them to help get her baby back. (My adopted Dad was in the Army.) They told her there was nothing they could do.

Mutti had it in her mind, that when they went to court, my adopted mom would bring me (the baby) with her. Mutti would tell her story of what happened. Then my adopted mother would give me back to her, and she would take her baby home. My adopted mom never brought me to court.

Mutti cried to the lawyer my adopted parents had hired that she wanted her baby back. The lawyer told Mutti and Papa, it was too late, the baby is not in this country anymore. A nurse had taken the baby to the states. "These are wealthy Americans. They have a big farm in Texas. They can take better care of her than you can."

The lawyer spoke only English to my American parents, and only German to my German parents. Mutti never knew what he was saying to my American parents; they did not speak English. And my American parents did not speak German.

I told my adopted Dad what the lawyer had said to Mutti and Papa. Dad was shocked. They never owned a farm in Texas. "We weren't wealthy," Dad said. "Where did they get that? Maybe they thought we were wealthy because we were Americans." Things weren't good in Germany at that time. A nurse never took me to the states. I went to the states with my adopted parents.

Mutti received a bill for my stay in the hospital. She went to court, and told them she would gladly pay the bill, if they give her her baby back. They said, they could not. She said, give the bill to the people who took my baby from me. She never saw the bill again.

My Papa today still cries and blames himself for losing his baby. Papa, this was not your fault. You were only 23 years old and scared. No one would help you. I love you, Papa. I love both my fathers.

The Church is supposed to be there to help its people. The catholic church did not help us. They caused only pain and sadness. They had no right!

Have we blindly given the catholic church so much power that they can do anything and call it right because they are the catholic church?

So many lies! If I was one child taken from its family, how many others are there?

Thank you again, Leonie. You have enriched my life. You have given back to my German family their daughter and sister. You've given me two families to love.

— Mary ("Petra") Holtzman



***From left to right*: Mona, Eva (mother), Mary Holtzman, Sylvia and Heinz (father)**