6th Year

Geborener Deutscher®

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

Volume VI, Number 4 *(Issue #21)* *Winter 1994*

German-Born Dutch Woman Finds Her Roots in Michigan

by Kim Kozlowski

(*PRESS* STAFF WRITER)

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YPSILANTI, MI (Sat., 5/29/93) — Ramona and Hank op de Dijk have been planning a trip from their home in the Netherlands to the United States for more than 40 years.

Since the Dutch couple crossed the Atlantic Ocean and arrived in Michigan last week, they've visited several tourist attractions—like the Henry Ford Museum, the Ambassador Bridge and the Gus Macker 3-on-3 Tournament.

But one of the best parts of their trip so far, Ramona said, was a visit to the grave of Robert W. Thomas, the father she's been trying tofind for almost all of her life.

"To find your roots is so important," Ramona, 46, said with tears rolling down her face.

"This is finally the end of a very long story," added Hank, Ramona's husband of 27 years who helped her in the search.

The other highlight of her journey was meeting her seven siblings, who all live in Ypsilanti and have spent the past week trying to catch up on all the years that have kept them apart.

"I thank God that he had the mercy and grace on behalf of my sister to help her find her family," said Darnell Thomas, one of Ramona's brothers.

Ramona recalls asking who her father was since she was 5 years old.

"She always told me, `Every time I look in the mirror, I'm confronted with that question: Where are my roots?'" said Hank, with a hint of a Dutch accent.

Ramona was born to a German mother named Charlotte Becker and an American military father in a southern German village of Hof in 1947.

But she never knew her father's name.

Ramona met her mother for the first time when she was 6 years old because she had been living with a family that adopted her shortly after she was born.

When she asked her mother who her father was, Becker said he was killed in action during World War II. But Ramona knew that couldn't be true since the war ended in 1945, a year before she was conceived.

Ramona said her mother told her many other lies about her father over the years, but she did give her a similar name that eventually helped her find the family of her father.

That name was the subject of many letters sent by Ramona to the Pentagon, the U.S. Embassy, the Veterans Administration and other organizations that she thought could help her locate her father. *Continued on pg. 4, col. 1*



Ramona & Hank op de Dijk *(left)* **, here pictured with Ramona's Michigan brothers & sisters** *(from left to right)***: Duane Thomas, Denise McKeown, Debbie Stallworth, Darrell Thomas & Darnell Thomas**

PRESS PHOTO/MARK MUELLER

My Mother's Day Miracle

by Gabriela Fulcher

Ever since about age 13, when I accidentally discovered that I was adopted, I've pondered about my birth mother. I was confused; I never understood why she gave me up. Once I had become a teenager, I was able to put my mother out of my mind for a while.

Being a teenager without an identity was tough for me. Although I loved my parents dearly, I went through my rebellious times and my parents and I couldn't be as close as I had hoped for.

I didn't think of my birth mother again until I was grown, married and desperately trying to have my own child. I had so many unanswered questions.

It was during this time that I began to think about finding my mother. I remember talking to my sister about this. She felt that it would be best just to leave it in the past, and that it would only stir up pain and heartache.

Well, this was good advice, but I just couldn't get it out of my mind. I went through a five-year struggle with infertility. I wanted a child so much. I wanted to ask my mom questions like: How many children did she have? Was it easy for her to get pregnant? And, last but not least: Why did she give me away?

I knew I had to find her. I also knew it may be impossible, but I had to try. I didn't know where to begin. I was able to receive my genuine birth certificate, which contained my mother's name, birth place and date of birth.

With this information, I contacted the German embassy in Washington, D.C. They directed me to the Heidelberg *Standesamt*.

After several months of waiting and wondering, the *Standesamt* finally responded—negatively! They, in turn, referred me to International Social Services in Frankfurt. By this time, I was still childless and still wanting to find my birth mother as much as ever before.

I had thought many times about telling my adopted parents about my search. I don't really like referring to them as my "adopted parents." They are my *parents* as far as I am concerned. Although they didn't give me life, the loved me, fed me, clothed me, and raised me to be the best that I could be. I love them very much and would never want to hurt them.

I really want to tell them about my search, but I am afraid they won't understand. I will tell them eventually. This has nothing to do with not loving them. There's plenty of love in my heart for two sets of parents.

A real good friend of mine insisted that I keep searching and through persistence and perseverance my efforts finally paid off. International Social Services *Continued on pg. 4, col. 1*

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WILLIAM LEIS GAGE

Search For the Past

Copyright
The State
Journal-
Register

by Kathleen Riley

Part Two of Two

The wait for that letter Ursula promised was excruciating. The anxiety I'd felt before was nothing compared to those weeks of anticipation following her telegram. Weeks went by. Where was it? I even called the post office to see if a letter from Germany was floating around there somewhere, perhaps misdirected.

One day the phone rang at 6 a.m. Partly by the strange hour, partly by instinct, I knew who it was before I even picked up the receiver. I remember pausing, trying to collect my thoughts before I answered.

"Hello?" My voice croaked, unused yet that morning.

"Hallo? May I speak to Kathy?" My mother's voice was high, distinct and elegant; it was charged with excitement. She had the most unusual accent I'd ever heard—a combination of British, French and German all rolled into one.

I said hello again, and she said hello again, and we kept tripping over the top of each other with giggles and gasps for breath. She asked me what time it was for me, then apologized for the early hour. I laughed. I couldn't believe it was her. My mind kept racing as she spoke to me in perfect English. Unable to think clearly, I stumbled around for the right thing to say.

She asked if I'd received her letter, and was genuinely shocked when I said no. She had mailed it just days after she sent the telegram and thought it would have reached me by now. She found herself in the awkward position of having to tell me everything that was in it, which I'm sure she wasn't prepared to do.

She said her letter included pictures of herself, her husband Albert, their 23-year-old daughter, Anna Martina (Tina for short) and 19-year-old son, Carlo.

Wait just a minute—a daughter and a son? A brother and a sister? All of the information I had obtained about Ursula never mentioned any other children; I thought I was the only one. I couldn't imagine being an "older sister," since I'd spent my whole life playing the part of little sister to my brother Charlie. I was shocked and a little bit scared, but thrilled at the same time.

I asked her about my father. She said she had severed their relationship when she returned to Germany after my birth. She had never told a single member of her family about my existence, including her husband of 23 years. When my letter arrived, the wall broke down and she told them everything. They all were very receptive, she said.

We must have talked for 45 minutes—I didn't want to hang up. I wanted to savor the sound of her voice for as long as I could. Finally, I promised to call her the next week, and we said goodbye.

A few days later, I found the long-awaited letter in my mailbox. I took the big brown envelope up to my room And stared at it for a while. I was about to see the faces of my blood relatives for the first time.

Ursula looked completely different from my mental image. I couldn't get over her jet-black hair and petite form. Maybe I'd made a mistake and contacted the wrong person. But her facial features were unmistakable. There was my nose, my smile. She stood next to her very tall and handsome husband, Albert, in the photograph. His eyes looked happy and warm.

My sister's hair was as red as my mother's was black. I stared at Tina's picture the longest, I think, because her face was so similar to mine. We had the same "rounded" look. Carlo's features were sharp and refined, not quite as child-like; still I noticed a resemblance.

Were these people really complete strangers? Even though I'd never seen them before, they looked familiar.

Over the next few weeks, Ursula and I exchanged long letters and phone calls. It was decided that I would come visit them, the sooner the better. I finally bought my plane ticket—I would spend the first two weeks in June with my new family.

What about my parents back home? I had not wanted to share my search with them, honestly believing I'd be continuing it for the rest of my life. I didn't want to upset them for no reason. But now, obviously, I was at the point of no return. It was important for them to know I wasn't trying to replace them. I had to explain, so I made the 6-hour trip back to Iowa to tell them the story from the very start.

To my surprise, my parents adjusted to the news of my discovery without much trouble. They were shocked, naturally, and a bit cautious. But as I continued to explain, I could see them breathing easier. It was scary for them, I'm sure. I wish it didn't have to be that way. But I had to be sure they knew in their hearts that I wasn't going to be changed by this; I would always be their child.

I thought I would never make it to Germany as my plane left O'Hare that late spring afternoon. The thunderhead clouds loomed all around us, yet we took off anyway. As if I weren't nervous enough, our plane tossed and dropped and shook to the point that someone in the middle section gasped audibly. I reached for the hand of the gentleman next to me.

Eight hours later, I was still a nervous wreck. My palms were drenched. my heart ached from pounding for such an extended period. We finally touched down at 6 a.m. in Düsseldorf.

I recognized Ursula, Albert and Tina standing behind some glass doors beyond the baggage claim area. There they were, in person. We waved at each other.

I dragged my luggage through the doors, took one look into my mother's eyes, and we embraced for what seemed to be a long time. I don't remember what was said, if anything at all. An overwhelming sense of relief came over me as I hugged and kissed her.

She was real.

I greeted her husband Albert, wondering the whole time what he could possibly be thinking. He seemed so gracious and genuine. Tina held a small bouquet of flowers for me; she and I seemed to be drawn to one another immediately. I think we both had always wished for a sister.

My meeting later with my new brother Carlo was more difficult—he wasn't comfortable with English, and my German was nonexistent. We couldn't do much but smile and laugh. I empathized with his reluctance to join in the festivities surrounding my arrival; to suddenly learn of a sister that you never knew existed would be jarring. I respected his hesitation about forging an immediate bond with me.

That whole day I was in a dream state. Ursula seemed to be fluttering around me constantly, showing me old family pictures and heirlooms, fixing me little meals. We compared more things we had in common, laughing about our shared anxieties over math and spiders. A neighbor lady brought me three yellow roses and cradled my face in her hands as her eyes filled with tears. Although I couldn't understand a word she said, I think I knew everything she meant.

Those two weeks with my new family in Germany will be etched in my mind forever. We spent afternoons sipping coffee in little cafés next to the Cologne cathedral. We drove to Ursula's hometown of Trier, toured Roman ruins and visited her friends from childhood. We sampled pastries at tiny shops in Luxembourg. We rode bicycles past rows of tall trees to castles in neighboring towns.

One night, after looking at family photo albums with Carlo and Tina, I went to bed and sobbed into my pillow. I couldn't stop thinking about what would have been—what could have been.

I mourned for all those lost years just long enough to realize what a selfish thing that was to do. I was lucky just to be in Germany; lucky to have wonderful adoptive parents back home. Lucky to have two loving families when so many people don't have a soul.

So, on this Mother's Day, I reflect on everything that's happened to me since I began my search two years ago. I thank God for the two women on this earth who call me their daughter:

The one who gave me life and had the courage to relinquish me to the arms of a stranger.

And the other who taught me how to live that life, having the courage to let me find the stranger inside myself.

My sister Tina came to Springfield [IL] at Christmastime. She met my adoptive family and my Friends in Iowa; she saw the places where I played as a child. Although my contact with Ursula isn't quite as frequent now, I think we both know we're constantly in each other's thoughts.

I plan to return to Germany in the fall.

This is a story that has no end. ***Ende***

Reprinted from the May 10, 1992 ("Mother's Day") edition of the Springfield, IL, State Journal-Register*, with permission. The first part of this story appeared in the Autumn 1993 edition of* GD *(Vol. VI, No. 3 / Issue #20).*

Briefe (Letters From Readers)

June 20, 1993

Dear Mr. Gage:

I would like you to know that I have found my birth mother. She is living in Elizabethtown, Kentucky.

We recently moved to Schertz, Texas, and during our move, Leonie located my birth mother, Ingeborg Semmel. When I went to our new mailbox, I was surprised to find a letter from Leonie giving my mother's address.

I sat down that night and wrote a letter, which she answered immediately—by calling me on the telephone. Ingeborg's first question was, "How did you find me?" Then she asked me where my twin brother, Reed, was. I always knew that I was not an only child, but I did not know that I was a twin. We had a nice conversation, and I promised that I would come to see her as soon as possible.

After I hung up the phone with Ingeborg, I called Leonie. I wanted to fill her in on what had happened and to see if she could begin the search for my twin brother. She said she would send a letter off to Germany right away.

The next call was to a travel agent. All the flights were booked out of San Antonio for the next weekend, which was Memorial Day, so I had to wait until the weekend after that.

I had never seen a picture of Ingeborg before, so I was a little worried that I would not recognize her at the airport, but as I scanned the faces of the people waiting at the gate in Louisville, my eyes fell on this woman, and I knew she was the one I had come to see. Leonie had told me that instinct would tell me who she was, and she was right.

I met my half-brother, Kenny, his two darling little girls, Emily and Eliza, and Ingeborg's husband, Odis Norris, at the airport. We all went to their house. Kenny's wife, Nancy, and her mother came over to say hello and talk for a while.

On Saturday, I met my half-sister, Claudia, her husband, Preston, and their beautiful little girl, Diana. Kenny came over with his two daughters and we all had a good time. Everyone really made me feel welcome, and I really came to like my new brother and sister quickly.

On Sunday morning, Kenny came over again. We were sitting in the room talking together with Ingeborg and Odis. I was sitting on the couch talking with Ingeborg, twirling a flower in my fingers and moving my right leg at the same time. Odis noticed that Kenny was doing the exact same thing, the only difference being that he had a pen in his hand. It was a nice surprise for me to see someone else that has the same mannerisms that I do.

Odis and Ingeborg took me back to the airport that afternoon. They told me that whenever I wanted to come back and visit, the door would always be open.

I will keep you posted on my progress, as I continue my search for the rest of my family.

— Tracy Bean, Schertz, TX

[*See also,* GD *#18, Letters — **Ed.***]

The International Scene

Simon's Come Back!

In England, adopted children now have the right to trace their real parents. But when mother and child meet, it isn't always easy, as this remarkable story proves.

As told to Elizabeth Winkler
by Jennifer Benton & Simon Hunt

JENNIFER'S STORY

I married at 17, after a desperately unhappy childhood. But the marriage was a disaster. At 19 and pregnant, I went back home. I'd been sexually abused by my stepfather since the age of 14—though my mother never knew—and when I finally said no to his advances he threw me and my baby out.

Two weeks later I had a nervous breakdown. I was admitted to a mental hospital and Simon, who was seven months old, was put into care.

His foster-parents-to-be convinced me they could offer him a loving home. I didn't want to give him up. I loved him deeply, but I felt helpless and agreed.

I didn't realise that decision would cause me pain for the rest of my life. When Simon was taken away I had nothing to live for and I retreated into a world of madness. For nine years I was in a psychiatric hospital, so heavily sedated that I have few memories of that time. But I always kept my one precious photo of Simon, his cuddly toy and his teething ring.

In my 30s I left hospital and, slowly, a new me began to rise from the ashes. I went to college and trained as a counsellor so I could help others who'd suffered as I had. More than ever I longed for Simon. I'd look at my little nephew, who was about the same age, and my heart ached. I kept asking myself why no one had helped me to keep Simon.

The only thing which kept me going was the hope that he was happy. I'd sit for hours looking at his photo, weaving dreams of his perfect life.

I had a secret fantasy that one day there would be a knock on the door and there he'd be. Once I looked up his old address but it was all boarded up. Anyway, I had no right to disturb his life—by law, the decision to make contact had to be left to him.

Then one day my sister came round with some startling news. The evening before my mum had seen an ad in the local paper asking for news of my whereabouts. When she rang the number she spoke to Simon and heard that he'd been looking for me for the last 18 months. I shouted: "Simon's come back," then burst into tears.

I couldn't believe that something this good was happening to me. It had ben 24 years since I'd given him up.

He came round with his adoptive mother a few days later. When he came into my front room, we looked at each other then he threw his arms around me. He started crying when he saw the teething ring and the baby photo—they showed him that he'd never left my life.

His adoptive mother did all the talking, but Simon and I just sat together on the settee, not saying much. I quietly held his hand. It was incredible; the closeness was there right from the start. The next six months were like a honeymoon. It was like living out a lifelong dream.

But as we got to know each other better, our expectations of each other began to crumble. I found he'd grown up angry and rebellious, tormented by the fact that I'd rejected him. I felt so guilty.

Simon started drinking and being self-destructive, just like me at his age. I felt he blamed me for abandoning him, but when I tried to bring this out in the open, we had a blazing row and he walked out. The "honeymoon" was over. As the months went by without a word, I was in despair that I'd lost him again. Then, six months later, he rang again and said that he wanted to see me—and again I cried with happiness. Since then, we've been a lot more accepting of each other and more honest. It's not perfect, we still have a lot to learn, but we're both sure we want to make it work.

He's settled down now and his girlfriend, Loraine, is expecting their first child. Just two years ago I had no one—and now, at the age of 44, I've got an instant family.

I still can't get over the strength of Simon's love for me. We were only together when he was a baby, yet he's grown up with all this feeling inside him. I've had more love for him in the last two years than from anyone else in the whole of my life.

SIMON'S STORY

My adopted parents believed that they couldn't have kids. But shortly after they adopted me my half-brother was born, followed by my half-sister. May parents said they loved us all equally and I'm sure they did, but kids who've been adopted often find that difficult to accept.

At first I didn't want to think too much about my real mum. People hinted that she was schizophrenic and lived in a slum. By my early teens, I'd been expelled from school, put in a children's home and had a police record. I was violent and self-destructive. I'd get it into my head that my real mum didn't want me and that's how I'd torment myself.

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My Mother's Day Miracle

continued from page 1

told me about an Independent Search Consultant named Leonie Boehmer.

I wrote to her and, thereafter, Leonie and I kept in regular contact. I felt very confident that this would really go somewhere.

I had new questions now: What do I say to someone I don't even know? But I'm afraid too: What if she's never found? What if she's dead? What if she rejects me—again?

Finally, my prayers were answered! On May 18, 1993, Leonie received a letter from my birth mother. I was totally exhilarated. On May 19th—Mother's Day!—I spoke to my mother.

This was a dream come true for me. I honestly never thought it would happen. Mom and I had a wonderful talk. I sent a whole bunch of pictures and, yesterday, at six o'clock in the morning, Mom called to thank me for the pictures.

I also spoke to my sister, who had just had a baby. I have a whole new family about which I want to learn all I can.

Miracles *can* happen. Just keep the faith!

— Gabriela Fennel Fulcher
Manassas, VA

Dutch Woman Finds Mich. Roots

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"We wrote piles of letters," Hank said.

They found limited information about her father but military officials detoured most of their efforts because a privacy act prohibited releasing any information about her father.

The turning point for Ramona came after she watched a documentary about a British group called War Babes, a group that lobbied the U.S. government to allow access to military records.

A member of the group had won a court case that set a precedent for people like herself trying to get access to files containing relevant information about their fathers.

With new courage, Ramona went back to her birthplace and found a file with the 1946 address of her father.

A few months and a few contacts later, Ramona found the date of her father's birth but she also found something she hadn't been looking for: the date of his death.

"It was quite a shock," Ramona said.

Still, she requested a copy of his death certificate and noticed it was signed by Darrell K. Thomas.

So Ramona and Hank thought they should try to get in touch with Darrell Thomas, who might be able to tell her something about her father.

They had a friend in Holland who had access to a computerized, international telephone directory and they found the phone number of Darrell Thomas in Ypsilanti.

"We thought that this could be our man," Hank said.

Ramona said she was too nervous to call herself, so Hank called.

It took a couple of phone calls until they reached Darrell Thomas, who said he was apprehensive when Hank told him about Ramona's long search to find her father.

But after a while, Darrell Thomas changed his mind.

"Something over the phone made me feel that Hank was telling the truth," said Darrell Thomas, the oldest son of Robert Thomas. "There was an honesty in his voice and his heart."

But Darrell also asked Ramona to write a letter and send pictures.

And then he got excited and started telling his brothers and sisters.

Ramona's four-page letter arrived not long after, with many supporting documents she obtained over the years.

"The letter kept saying, `We don't want anything, we don't want to hurt you,' " said Debbie Stallworth, one of Ramona's sisters. "It was a very comforting letter and (made) you feel very close to both of them."

Thomas wrote back to Ramona and told her about their father and the rest of the family.

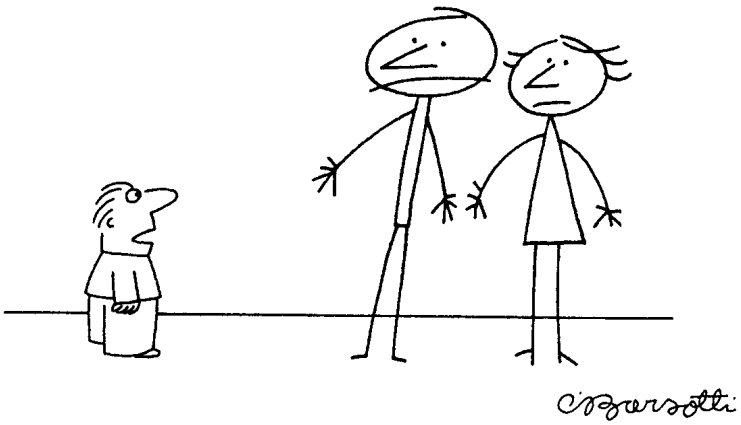
It was then that Ramona decided she needed to come to Ypsilanti to meet her family and visit the grave of her father.

Next week, Ramona is meeting the wife of the late Robert Thomas, who's coming to town from Mobile, Ala. just to meet her.

"Ramona knows we've accepted her and loved her just the same as everybody else," said Debbie McKeown, another sister. "We know Mom will do the same."

And while she's never had any brothers and sisters, Ramona now has seven: Debbie, Denise, Darrell, Derrick, Darnell, Duane and Dwight.

All of them said they're thrilled she found them. ***Ende***



"Mom, Dad—I'm adopted, aren't I ?"

Drawing by Charles Barsotti; © 1993 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

Simon's Come Back!

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At the same time, I wanted to find her. It was a friend who said: "You've been going on about tracing your mum—why don't you do it?" So for 18 months I tried to find her. When I had a lead I was happy and I'd stop drinking, but every time I had a setback it would destroy me. It was my adoptive mother's idea to put an ad in the paper—by this time we;d heard my mum had died and we were only expecting to hear from her family.

The night the ad appeared, we got a call from my real nan. I couldn't believe it. Then I heard that my mum was living here in Leicester. I was overwhelmed. I just cried.

I'll remember that first meeting for the rest of my life. I was shaking when I knocked on the door, scared and happy in one breath. Because of her history, I expected to find a spoonfed loony—but when I saw her I could have squeezed the life out of her because I was so happy she was alive. Seeing the teething ring and my photo made me cry. I knew she'd never stopped loving me and I felt wanted.

I wanted to be there for her like a son should and for everything to be normal—Mother's Day cards, Sunday lunch, etc. But the more we heard about each other's lives, the harder it was to pretend we were the perfect mother and son.

I thought finding her would make everything all right, but I felt a lot of anger inside. I was angry at the system for not letting her keep me. She ended up shouting at me and I walked out.

I stayed away for several months. I told myself I didn't need her. I wanted to make her see how bad it felt to be abandoned. I hoped she'd contact me but I wasn't going to make the first move. I wanted to be wanted.

One night I got back in touch, although I was drunk at the time to give me courage. From then on I realised I needed my mum.

We knew we were expecting too much of each other and we made changes for the better. I stopped feeling I had to pretend to be the perfect son and I started to accept her more for what she is. I thought she'd be a sick old lady who'd need looking after. But instead I found somebody who was stronger than me. I know it's illogical, but inside I'm angry and I'm thinking: "Why weren't you that strong before?" The first time I said that out in the open it was like a huge weight off my shoulders.

I'm still angry that I was taken away from her. I might not have had the designer clothes and holidays that my adoptive parents gave me, but I would have been loved for me.

My girlfriend Loraine's pregnancy gives us all a second chance because this time the baby won't be taken away. Certainly a baby couldn't ask for a better gran.

I'm so glad I found her. She's beautiful and I love her. Finding her is the best thing I've ever done. ***Ende***

The foregoing article appeared originally in the May 31, 1993 edition of the British magazine Woman *(King's Reach Tower, Stamford Street, London SE1 9LS).*