7th Year

Geborener Deutscher®

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

Volume VII, Number 2 (Issue #23) Summer 1994

The USA Meets Germany: Too Many Years Apart

by Lissa A. Forbes-Knoche

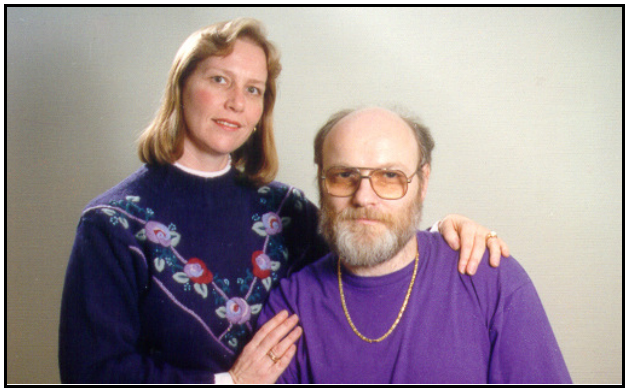
Part One of Two

There was a little girl whose life began in June 1957, in Stuttgart, Germany, when she was adopted by a loving U.S. military couple, although she was actually born on June 29, 1955 and known as Lieselotte Inge Bernhardt for her first two years.

For as long as I can remember, I have struggled with the question of "Who am I?" For most of my life, I searched for that sense of belonging. Although I often blamed my mother for the feeling of loss in my life—that void, black hole, or empty space—I now understand that she could not understand, even as much as she may have wished to or tried to. No one can truly stand in another's shoes until they have been there themselves. I now understand that both my parents did what they believed was right and raised me the best way they knew how. I know that they love me regardless of our struggles, and I love them. They truly raised me as if I were their own—no differently than their natural son, although he would say they spoiled me more. Of course! I was a girl and I came last—well-known reasons for being pampered.

Unfortunately, as the years passed I didn't feel pampered. As a very young child, I remember my mother introducing me as her "special little *deutsches Kind*" (German child). I did feel special, but I didn't understand that I was different. I didn't comprehend the word "adopted." When I was six, I had a rude awakening. My friend, with whom I was playing dress-up, got angry with me and said, "Those aren't your real parents, you were adopted." Although I didn't understand "adopted," I suddenly felt bad, that I wasn't as good as other children. I don't recall saying anything to Mom or Dad, but very deeply I carried that into adulthood.

In 1990, I began to feel even minor losses extremely deeply. I cried often. I wanted to "go home," but couldn't identify where that was and found myself incapacitated by a feeling of unworthiness or not being good enough. After many months of fertilizing the interest in searching for my past, I put together a collection of photos of me as a little girl from the age of two (earliest pictures available) until seven. Eureka! I realized for the first time as I peered at those photos that I did not know that little girl's name before she was two. I became driven to find out.



Lissa Forbes-Knoche & her brother, Wolfgang

After a short period of time, with some help and much support from several members of Search Triad, Inc. in Phoenix, AZ, and Leonie Boehmer, from Operation Identity in Albuquerque, NM, I found all the information I needed to proceed with my search. I remember that moment as if it were etched in time. I shook as Iopened the envelope, thinking, "This is it." I cried as I read my birth name for the first time, along with the name,

Continued on pg. 4, col. 1

Search Journal

by Darrin R. Schutt

For as long as I can remember, I have known that I was adopted. My youngest sister is only two and one-half months older than I, so I remember the puzzled looks on people's faces after they were told how much older she was than I and before the story of our adoption was explained to them. As I got older it seemed obvious to me that we weren't twins, and not even blood-related for that matter, because we looked nothing alike. Several of my friends at least bore some resemblance to their siblings, and I guess it was this lack of a someone who looked like me and the thought that there was someone out there who did look like me which first piqued my interest in searching for my natural family. My interest was heightened while I attended the University of Florida when several of my friends (and even girlfriends) said they saw me, or someone who looked exactly like me, out the night before. I then began to believe that I might have a twin. I decided then that I would search for my natural parents to determine if I did indeed have a twin.

My first opportunity to begin my search came after I had just graduated law school. In the spring of 1991, one of my former girlfriends, who knew of my interest in searching for my natural family, had just interviewed an adoption rights advocate in my hometown, Jacksonville, Florida. The adoption rights advocate told my friend that there was a judge who was sympathetic to adoption rights who would possibly help me in my search by opening my adoption file which had been sealed by court order (a near impossibility in Florida).

I simply wrote the judge and explained that I was a recent law school graduate who desired to have his adoption file unsealed so I could locate any siblings and possibly a twin. I asked him only if he could advise me on the correct procedure. After a few months, without any further effort on my part, the judge ordered the Florida Division of Vital Statistics to produce my original birth certificate, which showed that I had no twin, but which identified my mother as Friederike Christine Wagner who was born in Grünberg, Germany, in 1937. Although my parents had informed me that the agency told them I was half Italian and half German, I had no idea that my birth mother was actually a German citizen.

At first, the fact of my mother being a German did not seem all that problematic. I thought how fortunate I was to have taken two semesters of German in college. Additionally, a German Consulate General is located here in Atlanta, as well as a Goethe Institute,

Continued on pg. 2, col. 1

Geborener Deutscher is published quarterly by William L. Gage, who is solely responsible for its content. Readers are encouraged to submit articles, letters and/or photographs, for publication herein. Material submitted for publication should be sent to **William L. Gage, 805 Alvarado Drive N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87108 USA**. All material submitted for publication becomes the property of *Geborener Deutscher* and cannot be returned except by written request. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Subscriptions are FREE: to individuals upon written request; and to search-and-support groups, either upon written request or other notice of their existence.

Copyright © 1994 William L. Gage ISSN 1052-3189 ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

which maintains several German atlases and maps. I immediately contacted the Consulate and brushed up on my German. The Consulate not only presented me with a copy of *Geborener Deutscher*®, but also informed me that there were fifteen towns named Grünberg, four of which were in the former East Germany. If she had been born in the former East Germany, I was told, tracing her from her birthplace to her current residence would be almost impossible because the chain of her registration would be "broken," making her almost impossible to find. My first step, therefore, was to find out in which Grünberg she had been born.

After dusting off my college German book, I wrote letters to the *Standesämter* for all fifteen Grünbergs, asking if they could tell me if they had a record of my mother. I received responsesfrom about ten *Standesämter*, all of which were negative. I then began to write the *Paßbehörden* to see if they had any passport information on a Friederike Christine Wagner. Their information likewise turned up negative. Realizing that she may have emigrated to the United States, I also wrote the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to ask them to check on any available visa or naturalization information on her. The INS had nothing, and it seemed that I had reached a dead end at every turn.

In the course of my search, Bill Gage suggested that I talk to Leonie Boehmer for advice and/or help. She informed me that I was doing the right thing by writing the *Standesämter* and also suggested that I write to various social services, including the *Deutsches Rotes Kreuz*. I did this in early 1992, but heard nothing more as time passed. I also wrote to a professor of mine from law school who was German and who specialized in family law. He informed me that there were only two Grünbergs of consequence—one in Hesse (to which I had written directly and indirectly at least a dozen times) and one in Silesia, which is now a part of Poland and is called Zielona Gora.

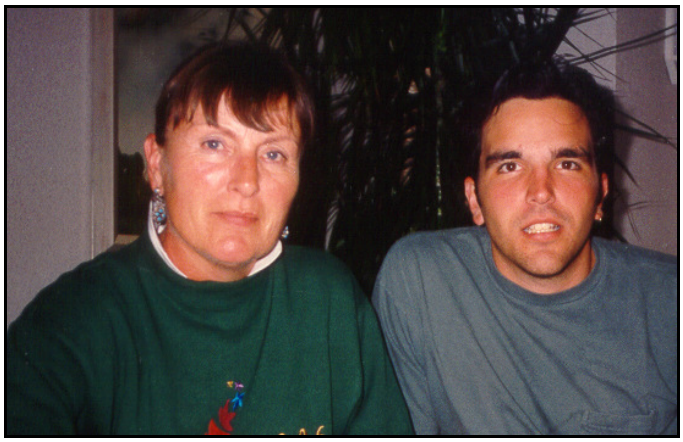
With the advice of Clifford Young, an adoptee in a situation similar to mine whom I met through Bill Gage, I found an information request form for Poland. Unfortunately, as I later found out, all of the German records were destroyed by the Poles after World War II.

My search slowed down later in 1992 and as 1993 approached, I began to run out of ideas and avenues. It was approaching two years from the point at which I first wrote the judge asking that my file be opened. I once again called Leonie Boehmer, who offered to help. We were just getting ready to send out more requests when my roommate called me at work late one Friday to tell me that I received a letter from Germany. I asked him to open it and inside was a picture of a woman and a letter that began, "Your search was successful! You have found me!"

I was in disbelief. I immediately left the office and drove home like a madman. When I got home, I couldn't believe it! She explained that the *Deutsches Rotes Kreuz* had written to her with a copy of my letter. She was stunned that I had been looking for her, but extremely excited and grateful. She had been told by the agency handling my adoption in Florida that she would and could never hear from or see me after my birth. Her letter reached me before I received a response from the *Deutsches Rotes Kreuz* telling me they had found her. The best thing was that I received the letter on April 23rd, the day before her birthday. Since it was too late Friday afternoon to call her, I decided to speak to her for the first time on her birthday.

I gave her a call early Saturday morning after outlining a few questions: I was so nervous that I was afraid I would run out of things to say. The call went through and she was the first one to pick up the phone.

They were getting ready for a small dinner party: her husband, youngest sister and brother-in-law were all there. We talked for almost forty minutes during which most of the time was spent answering the basic questions. I learned that my father was an American army officer she met in Berlin. She and her sister would travel to Berlin to sell VWs from my grandfather's dealership in Hemstedt. When she became pregnant with me, my father had either been relocated or discharged and the army would do nothing to help her find him.



Darrin Schutt and his birth mother, Friederike

My grandfather, whom she described as incredibly strict and commanding, ordered her to visit my great-grandmother, who had moved to the United States after being fed up with both World Wars, and told her not to come back with a baby. And so, she left for St. Augustine, Florida, where my great-grandmother spent her winters.

After getting over the "jitters" and getting some basic answers, we agreed that we would meet as soon as possible. She told me that I was invited to come see her in Goslar, Germany, where she now lives, as soon as I had the opportunity. As luck would have it, I had plenty of vacation time left as it was still early in the year and my roommate was desperate to use a frequent-flier ticket to Europe. After another letter and a phone call, I made plans to fly to Frankfurt on my birthday, May 21st.

After a nine-hour flight where we ate and drank ourselves sick (a flight attendant friend moved us up to business class), I began a three-hour train ride from Frankfurt to Goslar. I didn't realize how rusty my German was until I sat in seats even after being told they were occupied. I managed to stay awake on the small trains where I sat all alone and, amazingly, after almost thirteen hours after leaving Atlanta, found myself at the Goslar *Bahnhof*. I heard my name as I stepped off the train and looked to see my mother for the first time. She said she immediately recognized me by the way I came off the train because I looked like an American, and I was amazed by her presence and stature (although I shouldn't be, since I'm 6'2").

We went home and I was honestly too tired to be nervous. I was not too tired, however, to stay up with her and her husband eating, drinking and looking at pictures. We stayed up for hours drinking German beer and wine from around the world that they had collected from their world travels. We looked at old pictures of when my mother was twenty-two, and I sat in shock as I saw photos of someone who looked like me! I told them that if anything would prove that we were related, these pictures were it. I had brought a few photos of myself for them to see, but they were mostly of me when I was very young and the resemblance was not so apparent.

Her husband, Henning, is simply too good to be true; I could not have asked for the situation to be any better. He is genuinely and sincerely nice and made me feel entirely at home. He met her ten years after I was born and knew about me from the start. He told me over and over how he was so happy I found her because it made her so happy.

I learned more about my family history and how I had two uncles and another aunt who didn't even know I existed. My aunt, who was at the house when I called my mother for the first time, now lives in the United States. I then also learned that I have two American cousins, her daughters. I have since become a big brother of sorts to the oldest, who just graduated from Virginia Tech. I also met Henning's daughter and her two boys while in Goslar, who have since come to the United States to visit me. My roommate soon joined me in Goslar after giving me a day alone with my birth mother, and we later had to move on since this was his first visit to Europe.

Since my first visit, they have come to the United States to visit and meet my parents. All went well, as I think I was the most nervous. They had breakfast together without me and got to know one another, and my parents have now invited my mother and Henning to come to the States to spend time at the beach.

The whole experience is still taking time to sink in, but the circumstances could not be any more accommodating. We keep in contact by fax almost every

Continued on pg. 4, col. 1

Remembering

by Jeff LaCure, MSW, LICSW

Copyright 1993 Jeff LaCure. All Rights Reserved; Reprinted by Permission

Part Two of Two

The teen years, oh I remember them well. Like so many other adults, to be a teenager again would be just like going to the dentist—uncomfortable and awkward, but serving a purpose. Like every other teen, I was "searching" for who I was, an identity, a niche where I belonged. However, unlike most of my peers, I was adopted, and because of that, part of who I was and who I would become was not yet understood or even accepted.

I remember 7th grade with a great deal of fondness and joy. I was very good at what was very important to me. I had a lot of good friends—close friends, with one specific best friend. I was popular, even had girlfriends, as much as a 7th grader has girlfriends. I did well academically and excelled at sports. I remember the three big "S's" that were important to me at the time—sports, school and social life. All of the big three were in place and working well. I don't remember a time during 7th grade that "adoption issues" consciously entered the picture. Oh, yeah, looking back, they were there. I still didn't do loss very well and rejection, even in small doses, had a familiar, painful edge. Little did I know, that in less than one year, that "edge" would become as sharp as a stiletto; as powerful and important a year as I can remember.

The year began with the completion of 7th grade. Seventh grade was a wonderfully successful year and I cherish the memories today. However, soon after the end of the school year, my father retired after 20 dedicated and well-respected years in the army. Just like the previous moves, I was excited about the change and, in a strange way, looked forward to moving. Looking back, I realize now that moving was something I was used to and I did it well.

After difficult goodbyes with friends, my family and I left Colorado Springs, Colorado. We didn't know it yet, but leaving this time would be very different and its impact is still with us today. I still remember the last song I heard as our fully loaded, brown, Ford station wagon left Colorado. "I'm Easy," by the Commodores. There was nothing easy about where that brown, Ford wagon eventually stopped for good. The car stopped, dropped us off and my family embarked on a vividly fragile year, emotionally.

I started 8th grade while living in a Howard Johnson's. It was fun at first—restaurant food, pinball machines and a swimming pool. However, the four of us living together in one room soon got old and very stressful. Finally, in October of that year, the house was ready; we all slept together the first night on the living room floor. None of us knowing what to expect, after all, Sudbury seemed like a nice town.

For the second time in my life, I felt like I didn't belong. The first time I don't remember, but I'm sure I didn't feel like I belonged in the orphanage. I was always so used to "fitting in" right away when we moved before, but this time was different. Before 8th grade, everyone seemed so eager to greet the "new kid." After all, living in the military, they had all been the "new kid" before, too. However, Sudbury was very different. These kids had all grown up together, went to school together—their roots were in Sudbury. My roots were all over the country, and some still remained in Germany.

Unlike my experiences before, these students didn't rush to greet me. I felt like an outsider and in ways was treated as such. What a difference a year made. I went from feeling like I could do no wrong—a success story being created—to feeling like I didn't belong. For the first time, my grades dropped and I disliked going to school and missed the bus frequently. My family and I were all suffering, we just didn't know it. I kept waiting for the success to begin again, for the popularity to come back. Why didn't I belong? I longed desperately for Colorado, and my family did, too. There would be no going back, however. The change had occurred and it was either beat it or succumb to it.

I can still remember how gray the sky looked in October in 8th grade. New England was beautiful, physically, but I didn't belong. I can remember sitting on the couch in the morning, waiting for the bus, crying, hoping it would never come. I remember wondering why so much pain? Where did all the success go? What happened to the 7th grader who had it all?

I did make it through the 8th grade, and eventually had some success and even developed some friendships. However, the damage had been done. I now was left with a delicate form of emotional scarring. Instead of pondering how good I was going to feel, how right everything would be, I became wary of when the next time would come when I felt like I didn't belong. I had never worked so hard to "break through" anything in my life as I did in 8th grade when I finally cracked the legacy of Sudbury and became part of the culture which for months I had hated.

I eventually became quite successful in high school, but was always on guard to how quickly that could all leave. Eighth grade was still a very fresh and powerful memory. For the first time, I remember feeling alone even when surrounded by a crowd. I can remember during high school that, when dating relationships ended, I felt lousy. I couldn't listen to the radio, and frequently, I would date someone else too soon, so that I wouldn't have to feel alone. In some ways, looking back, I compromised some important beliefs so that I wouldn't have to feel alone. I didn't like feeling alone. Loneliness handcuffed me with its grip of vulnerability. Although outwardly confident, I frequently followed instead of being the leader that I felt was inside. If you follow, and don't rock the boat, people accept you. I didn't want to feel lonely.

At the time, I thought the loneliness was because of the difficulty I and my family had when we moved to Massachusetts. Much of it was; however, instead of being the cause of the loneliness, looking back, it was painfully clear that 8th grade was the catalyst, the key that unlocked a loneliness that was already there.

While I was in high school, my brother continued his difficult adjustment to Sudbury, and the school recommended he get some counseling. After he had gone for a few sessions, his counselor requested a family meeting, which we all attended. During the meeting, the counselor revealed that he thought some of what might be happening for my brother could be adoption-related. I remember jumping in and stating, "That's ridiculous. How can something that we don't remember have an impact on us? We have great parents. Adoption doesn't bother us." Looking back, my reaction probably confirmed his hypothesis.

Just like so many other adoptees, both my brother and I denied furiously that adoption and being adopted could have any impact on who we were or how we felt. We loved our parents. They were our parents. How could people whom we never saw again have an impact on us? I can remember as a teenager feeling like adoption was not a big deal and I was going to tell the world and any counselors that. Looking back, little did I know then, I was beginning the journey. I was about to enter my future by taking a visit into the past. Like so many other teen adoptees, I didn't realize then that you can have great parents, love them and *still be sad about being given up!* They are not mutually exclusive, one or the other. It's not either you love your parents and disown adoption or acknowledge adoption has shaped who you are and disown your parents. It is possible to do both; in fact, it's necessary!

I graduated from high school and prepared to go to college in the fall. However, it was not that matter-of-fact. Actually, unlike many non-adopted people, high school graduation was bittersweet for me. Yes, just like the rest of my graduating class, I was very excited, and I was glad to be done. I was eager and ready to begin college and actually felt like a young adult. However, I was not ready to *leave* my parents and, looking back, they were not ready to have me leave. I was their first child, their first son, and we had developed quite a special, loving relationship. We were not ready, not yet. Graduating from high school symbolized that, yes, in fact, I was leaving. I was no longer their kid. I was becoming their adult son. It was a loss that we all had difficulty with and today, in some soft, subtle way, we still do.

The day I was to graduate from high school was filled with tension, excitement and loss. I remember, the afternoon before I graduated, my mother and father came home from shopping and I greeted them with several questions about how they felt about having their first child graduate from high school. At the time, I didn't know that they had just come from having a big argument with my brother and were already stressed. However, I blasted my mother when she said she needed a few minutes to relax alone before they were ready to talk. She cried, my father yelled, and I started my '71, powder-blue VW bug and headed off to the graduation.

Continued on pg. 4, col. 1

Remembering *by Jeff LaCure*

continued from page 3

Years later, finally, we knew why we were all so stressed that afternoon. I was leaving.

Going away to college, I regained my hold on what I felt was important to succeed at. I was thriving and enjoyed the college experience greatly. Not to anyone's surprise, I was a psychology major, and had already made the clear decision to work professionally in the mental health field. As early as freshman year in college, I knew that I would be pursuing graduate education down the road. However, while I was on the road to self-discovery and -mastery, my brother continued down the familiar road of self-doubt.

Now he was a young teenager and experiencing many of the same feelings I had experienced years before. Only he handled them differently, or maybe they handled him differently. My brother and I had a very connected and warm relationship. We had come to rely on each other over the years. However, this time, I was away at college and he was alone at home.

Our connection continued throughout college. I still remember how difficult it was to go back to school after Thanksgiving and Christmas breaks. Not because I was homesick, nor because I didn't enjoy school, but because I missed my brother and I knew that he needed me. Adoption created my family and introduced my brother and me to each other; love, commitment and a unique connection built the foundation for a lasting sibling relationship.

While I was attending college and enjoying the experience to the fullest, an interesting and important phenomenon was happening. I was "happy," doing well academically, actively involved in the college experience, lots of friends (friends I still have today), motivated. I even met a wonderful, caring woman with soft-spoken eyes and a captivating smile; a woman who would, after college, become my wife. However, even with all the success I was experiencing, all the joy and wealth that life was offering, it wasn't enough. I wasn't satisfied. Something was missing, I could feel it. I didn't know what it was, but there was something missing and that emptiness felt like a balloon with a small hole in it. You could fill it over and over again, but eventually, the balloon needed more. So did I.

Now I was mature enough to recognize that something was wrong with the picture. After being blessed with all that I have, all that I had accomplished, and yet, still feeling like something was missing. I knew this wasn't right. I just did not know what that "something" was. Now I do!

Eventually, I knew it was time to do some serious and in-depth self-exploration to understand how it was that I could have so much going for me and yet need so much more. I finally looked at what had always been right in front of me, I just didn't recognize that it was there; nor did I want to admit it was there: my feeling about adoption and how adoption has helped shape me.

After I took the risk and became more comfortable with the idea that, "yes, adoption has played a significant role in your life, whether or not you want it to," I began to achieve a sense of peace that I had never truly known before. I can remember my mother telling me that she could tell, even with all that I had achieved, all the success, "I really wasn't fully happy." Looking back, she was right: I guess a mother does know her son. I was happy, but I wasn't allowing myself to reach my full potential. That is, until I faced the impact that being adopted has had on my life. I was about 22 years old.

I learned how important it is to welcome the adoption experience into my life, how satisfying it really is. I learned that to deny that adoption plays an important and painful role in my life is to actually deny a very important and vulnerable part of myself. Separation and the adoption experience has played such a valuable and significant role in my life—in who I have become. I learned that I am who I am greatly because of the adoption experience. My strengths and vulnerabilities were created by the adoption experience. I learned to accept that and to embrace my feelings around being given up. I learned to walk proudly with both my anger and my sadness, as together they allow me to feel joy and love more fully.

Jeff is the director of Adoption Support & Enrichment Services, in Framingham, MA, & the author of the children's book Adopted Like Me.

The USA Meets Germany...

cont. from page 1

birth date, and address (residence at the time of my relinquishment) of my birth mother. I just read it over and over questioning reality, but understanding the significance of what I had found. I continued to cry, not even understanding completely why.

In June 1991, Leonie's work really began and I attempted to learn the lesson of patience. Leonie is a very loving woman, who by the grace of God, helps people find members of their families so that they may fill in that void, make the dark hole a bit less deep and complete the puzzle.

On August 5, 1992, I received the news I was looking for, although not exactly as I had dreamed or hoped. I learned that my birth mother had died in Germany 7 years prior (8/9/85), but that I had a brother remaining in Stuttgart, Germany named Wolfgang Bernhardt.

I was filled with mixed emotions: the loss that I would never have an opportunity to meet the woman who brought me into this world, the only person who could answer some of my questions; this coupled with the hope that there was another opportunity to at least find out some things about her through a sibling of whom I never even contemplated the existence.

I focused on the excitement of pursuing this avenue of contacting my brother. That was a strange concept filled with questions and options. Suddenly I had a second brother and in describing them had to qualify—my brother in Stuttgart and my brother in New Jersey; my birth brother and my brother through adoption. I had mixed feelings about my birth mother even having another child because I had imagined myself with her alone. I had imagined her as a single, teenaged girl without the means to raise a child. This was understandable. I found a woman who had me at the age of 33. This was not understandable. Suddenly there was a brother who had no age. Was he older and raised by our mother? That seemed realistic. Maybe she could not afford to feed another child. But I found myself feeling hurt and angry that he had her and I didn't. As I worked through the anger, I began to feel fortunate that there would be someone who could describe her, tell me stories about growing up with her, and showing me pictures of her. With that, I wrote my first letter to a brother I had never met.

What a dream world all of this was. Interesting the feelings not knowing can conjure up and many did I conjure as I waited for that first letter to be answered. I was in for quite a shock.

I will never forget that day when I received Wolfgang's first letter. I awoke in the morning to a most vivid dream. It was even in color. I received a letter from my brother in German and proceeded to meet him in a pub-like place —dimly lit restaurant and bar. The person I met looked slightly Asian—dark hair, moustache, olive skin, dressed in an Army uniform—and he spoke impeccable English. Very warm and welcoming. We talked easily and he brought a gift of a golden yellow blouse and scarf to match in black, red and yellow. I recall having told a friend about my dream and saying "maybe there is another brother!"

(To be concluded in the next issue)

Search *Journal* by Darrin R. Schutt

cont. from page 2

other week, yet I have yet to meet my new cousin with whom I spent so much time on the phone. I am trying to practice my German as much as possible (hopefully, it is improving) and can't wait until I have the opportunity to go back and visit. The wait was well worth it, and I encourage anyone who is interested in looking to do so. My mother was so happy just to know that I was alive and well, and most of all that I understood why she put me up for adoption. She told me that she always wondered whatever became of me, and I am happy that she doesn't have to guess or worry any longer.

My parents have been very supportive and, as my father says, I have a whole new world that has opened up for me. I have a new sense of nationalistic pride, and am also beginning the search for my natural father. Although I don't expect anywhere near the reception I received in Germany because he doesn't even know I exist, I want to find him so that I can learn about his, and my, family's medical history.

Good luck to those still looking! *Auf Wiedersehen!*

— Darrin R. Schutt
Atlanta, GA