8th Year

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

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Renewing Broken Bonds

by Dawn Brazell

Of the *Post and Courier* staff

Excerpted from a longer article in the 8/27/95 edition of the Charleston, SC, *Post and Courier*. See also Debbie's self-authored story of her search and reunion, at right.

They sit and gaze like newlyweds, though they've only recently met.

No common language. No common family memories. Just a blood bond.

Debbie Clary beams as tears stream down her face, her half-brother, Bernhard Tönnies, holding her hand for support. He had been searching for her at the request of his mother for years, but had run into dead ends.

They had given up on finding her until Clary, who had been adopted from Germany as a baby, managed to track her birth mother down through the help of the group Adoptees and Birth Parents in Search.

As she tells the story, she stops to look at Tönnies almost as if to check if he's real.

"He likes music. I like art. He has freckles like I do," she says.

Tönnies, who knows limited English, grins too, trying to follow along. He was surprised to see her red hair, but the eyes give away the family resemblance, he says, glancing at her and back again as their gazes lock.

"She enriches my life," he says.

Marci-Jo Mishoe, group leaders of Adoptees and Birth Parents in Search, has tears in her eyes as well. She has witnessed dozens of reunions in her work, but the joy in seeing them never lessens. The stories always involve pain, but it's the healing that makes the searches worth the effort, she says.

Of the 200 or 300 cases the group handles each year, 97 percent have ended in successful reunions. Mishoe says 3 percent have involved blood relatives who did not want to be found.

Clary and Tönnies did.

Clary's need to know about her mother came when she felt the joy of holding her own newborns, she says. She had to know what happened to her mother to make her give her up. Her eyes well up.

Knowing is wonderful.

"The wonder is gone. I feel finally I have something concrete—to know your biological family—to know they are real."

A war widow, Cleary's grandmother struggled to raise a large family by herself. When her daughter became pregnant, she was sent from her home in the former East Germany to a home for unwed mothers in West Germany. There she had Tönnies. He was 14 months old when Clary was born. Clary's mother, who could receive assistance for only one child, had the choice of putting one of her children into foster care or up for adoption.

"She didn't want me to go from foster home to foster home, so she gave me up for adoption so I could have the love of a home," she says, crying.

That Clary did. Her adoptive family has been wonderful, rejoicing with her when she decided to search for her birth mother, who four years after Clary's birth married and had three children, she says. Clary feels she has two families now. She'll go in the spring to Germany to meet her birth mother and the rest of the family.

Her only regret is the she waited until her mid-30s to begin her search.

"Of course, I started off just wanting to find my mother," she says, grinning at Tönnies, who likes being an uncle to her two kids. "Anything else is just icing on the cake."

Ende

Two Searches, Two Reunions

by Debbie Clary

It was dark and drizzly on the night of October 12, 1994. The parking lot was full. A computer-printed notice on the front door assured me that the meeting was on the 2nd floor, room 212. Upstairs, another notice stated, "Keep going, you're almost there!" I walked down the long corridor. Someone was walking behind me but otherwise the place seemed empty. I was nervous, not knowing how many people would be there. What would they look like? What ages would they be? I entered the room to find several people, some standing in small groups talking, some seated. I took a seat and was soon joined by another newcomer. We introduced ourselves and chatted a bit. She was a birth mother in search of her son, now 25 years old.

The meeting of Adoptees and Birth Parents in Search (ABIS) was lead by Marci Jo Mishoe. We began by each of us introducing ourselves and stating whether we were a birth parent or an adoptee. The majority were adoptees, but there were a surprising number of birth mothers, too. I noticed that one birth mother had a German accent!

Mishoe asked each person about their progress and made suggestions as to what they could do next. I learned that some had already been reunited, others had searched on their own before coming to ABIS, and most had been searching for 6 months or less with the help of the group.

When my turn came, I shared what little I knew about my German adoption. Hearing that I had been born in Germany, Mishoe and our group "cheerleader," Nancy Rankin, immediately directed my attention to Margit Benton, the woman with the German accent. She asked my birth name (Martina Petzold) and town of birth. We jotted down a few notes, trying to figure out spellings. Margit must have been sent by God.

After the meeting, we talked. She told me about her search and reunion with her son, Michael. It made me cry with a "new" kind of joy. I became excited when I began to imagine that I could soon live that same scenario. Then I became scared. I was assured that the search would continue at a pace that was comfortable for me. I had learned that some searches were resolved after just a few short weeks or months. Of course, I wanted to find my birth mother; I guess my fear came from not knowing how or if I would be

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accepted by her. For some reason, feeling scared felt good. On the drive home I replayed everything I had heard over and over in my mind. My eyes teared up. I turned off the radio. Too much to think about. I realized my life was headed for a real change.

I awoke early the next morning. I phoned my Mom and Dad and told them about the meeting. They came right over with copies of all my adoption papers. (They had previously given me copies which I "put in a safe place" only to later realize I had hidden them from myself!) For the first time in my life I asked about my adoption. Lovingly, they shared with me what little they knew. But now I wanted to know more. I wanted to know everything. I wanted to know my birth mother and birth father. I wanted to know if I had natural brothers and sisters. Had my mother tried to forget me?

Later that day I called Margit and gave her the information from my adoption contract. The records did not reveal my mother's place of birth or birthdate, only her name, Jutta Petzold. I told Margit that I had never found my town of birth (Kirchheim Unter Teck) on a map. Fifteen minutes later she called back. She located the town on her map just south of Stuttgart. I found it on mine. I felt like I was starting to connect.

The Search

And so our search began. With Margit as my friend and guide and Leonie Boehmer as hers, we sent our first letter. And then our wait began.

I decided that it was a good time for me to begin learning the German language. I started listening to audio tapes and found a textbook at the library. I had also been keeping a journal about my search experience and feelings. Having these activities to keep busy helped me bear the waiting for the information that would hopefully lead me to my birth mother.

Sandy's Search

At the time of my adoption, my parents adopted another child from Germany, as well. They renamed her Sandy. At the time of our adoptions, Sandy had been 17 months old and I was 6 weeks. She had always wanted to find her birth mother. At the suggestion of our parents, Margit and I decided to send a letter requesting a current address. We also decided, since Sandy's records contained all the information needed to secure her German mother's address, that we would wait a while before we told her, so she wouldn't suffer the emotional stress of "The Wait." This was in late October 1994.

Time came and went with no response to Sandy's letter. In mid-December, I finally told Sandy that we had begun her search. Excited, she took a chance and called directory assistance in Pforzheim, her mother's town of birth. Bingo! She got a phone number and found out her mother still used her maiden name! Speaking no German, Sandy chose not to call.

Exactly one month later, Sandy received the address she had been waiting for. She collected a few pictures to send and along with a first-contact letter (translated into German by Margit). Sandy's search had been short, but my wait continued.

Our next search meeting was three days away. I invited my Mom and Dad. They gladly accepted my invitation. They were warmly received. They have always been very loving parents and were now very supportive as Sandy and I sought to find our biological roots.



(l-r) **Margit Benton, Bernd Tönnies & Debbie Clary**

The meetings continued to be therapeutic for me. Other adoptees and birth mothers were in the same boat as I. We were all hoping, and waiting.

On February 2, 1995 I got a phone call from Sandy. She was very excited! She had received a letter from her mother, with pictures. The letter was written in German and she just couldn't wait to find out what it said. We arranged to meet with Margit later that evening.

Eager to learn what the letter said, Sandy arrived with our Mom and Dad. We began looking at all the pictures she had received. Margit began to translate the letter as we all stood, excitedly waiting to hear the message. As she spoke we all began to gently weep as we learned that Sandy's mother was forced into relinquishing her. We were also happy to find out she very much wanted to know Sandy again and said she "only wished so many years had not gone by before finding one another." For Sandy it was a happy ending to her search and a new beginning with her German mother, three half-sisters and a half-brother.

A Light at the End of the Tunnel

The next step in my search was a letter sent to the Standesamt requesting a "Record of Descent." I continued to wait and prayed that the Lord would give me patience and take away my anxiety. As Margit continued to keep in touch with Leonie Boehmer, I was reassured that the amount of time we had waited was nothing to be alarmed about.

March 1995 was a very long "down" month for me. I lost my desire to continue my German language study. I felt like crying a lot. I snapped at my husband and children and was short with other people I encountered each day. Margit gave me her shoulder to cry on. She was always there for me, ready to listen, or with gentle words of encouragement. She was and continues to be a wonderful friend.

On April 12, the day of our monthly search meeting, Margit received my Descendent document and on it was the information we had hoped it would contain. My mother, Jutta Petzold, had been born in Frankenberg/Sachsen (in the former East Germany). We also learned her birthdate.

A Mother's Day to Remember

Our next meeting was on May 10th. I had already penned my first letter to my mother. I took it with me to ask Margit to translate it. I wanted it to be ready when I finally received her address. I took a seat next to Margit and, as she read over the letter, she gently shook her head. Perplexed by her manner, I asked if she thought there was something I should change. She did not reply.

It was just a few days before Mother's Day and Margit said she wanted to address the group. She read a lovely sentiment to all the birth mothers and adoptees in search of their mothers. It was a very touching tribute, especially coming from a birth mother who had recently lost her own son. Margit ended her tribute by surprising me with a rose... and my mother's address! I was ecstatic. I cried and I clutched the paper with the address and I hugged Margit. Now I understood her reaction when she had read the letter I wanted her to translate. She had just received the letter with the address that afternoon. She had a surprise for me, that day, that I will never forget!

The next morning I had a personalized

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Briefe (Letters From Readers)

June 29, 1995

Dear Leonie,

Let me start by apologizing for taking so long to write. There has been so much going on in my life at present, that the time has been just flying by. I would once again like to thank you for all your help in locating my birth mother and siblings. By the way, I did find my sister who also lives in Ohio.

I guess I should let you know what has been happening since we last corresponded. After being scrutinized by Erna's attorney, I was finally given the okay to visit Erna in the nursing home where she was residing in Columbus, OH. I went to see her for a short visit in April and at the same time we met with my younger sister Doris, who incidentally, only found out about my existence several days prior to my arrival in Columbus. It seems that my birth mother had done a thorough job of keeping all of our existences from her. Needless to say there was much to talk about including the whereabouts of her other brother.

My visit with Erna was relaxed but unfortunately not very informative. Her mental abilities made conversation about my past very difficult. She was able to tell me a little bit about her early years and how difficult it was for her and also how her sister who was born in Leipzig became caught behind the Iron Curtain when the wall was put up in 1961.

So, I spent several hours with her and then had dinner with my sister and her husband before returning to Denver. Little did I know that a week later I would be back in Ohio to bury Erna. She apparently had fallen out of bed while attempting to get in her wheelchair and broken her hip. Because of the extreme pain she was suffering and the likelihood that she would not survive, it was decided she should go through with the operation, knowing full well that her chances of recovery were poor at best considering her age. She took the gamble but lost. At least there was little suffering and all the anger she had built up in her over the years over her hard and difficult life were finally carried away. I would have really loved getting to know her better and, of course, learning as much as possible about those early years in my life.

I have been in touch with Renate (sister) in Aschaffenburg and she informed me that she can remember visiting Lowell and me when we were in the orphanage. Needless to say, I will be looking forward to our eventual meeting. I have talked with Doris, my younger sister, and Lowell and will be letting Renate know about my making arrangements for a reunion of all of us for the first time in Maryland, where Lowell lives, in the end of June of next year. This is absolutely overwhelming and yet it is such a thrill to see your real brother and sisters for the first time in over forty years, not to mention all the offspring and relatives that have accumulated over the years. Will surely let you know more as time gets closer to this big moment. Once again thanks for all you did for us.

— Christopher James

A "First Contact" letter ...

13 April 1995

Dear Henryk,

The one thing I wanted when I was a child, more than anything in the world, was a big brother. Somehow, something in me must have known I had one. I did not know about you and Mother Anna until I was 16 years old—after my adoptive mother (who was a wonderful woman) had died. I found out through my high school records by accident and confronted my father, who was a very unhappy and troubled man. He used to hint at all kinds of things about my background to make *me* unhappy, telling me stories, but I don't know that any of them are true. I tried to remember things myself without much success—I don't know how old I was when I was given away. I knew deep down I had a brother (although I somehow thought you were younger!), I don't know who my father was, although I knew he was different from yours. I had only kind feelings about my real mother, although I couldn't remember specifics I did seem to have a sense of her existence somehow—when I found out from the school something in me had known all along. I somehow knew that she had cared about me, that she had her own sorrows and that she was trying to do the right thing for me.

I was very close to my adoptive mother, and also felt that maybe the past should be left alone—I made some attempts to find out about our own mother in my early 20s—I got as far as knowing her name, Anna Maria Pfeiffe, but tried to track through places my adoptive father had been stationed—Bonn and Kiel. I was in Berlin about four years ago and tried through there—but I was shy about it and stopped looking. The person I still dreamed about finding, however, was you, and four weeks before I heard from Leonie that she was looking for me, I said to a friend "I have a funny feeling my brother is going to show up soon."



(l-r) **Henry, Anna Konhäuser & Heide**

I have a lot of questions, and am in process of writing/translating a longer letter to Mother Anna which I hope to send in the next couple of days. I also will try to call her—there is a techie here at the theater who speaks German and I still have a few words. I am a little nervous about it—I have been without any family at all (my father died when I was 19) for a very long time and it is strange to me, but wonderful.

I work in the theater—working with playwrights and directors in a kind of associate producer position—I also work with theater writers sort of like an editor works with a book writer. I was a singer and an actress for awhile, and have written and directed a little myself, but became involved with this theater in my 20s—the man who ran it then, Joseph Papp, became almost a surrogate father and the theater became my family. I never married and don't have any family myself. My adoptive father was a troubled man, and living with him caused a lot of damage to me. Luckily my adoptive mother was wonderful and her great love saved me from worse things, but she was sick for a long time and her death was a terrible blow for me. I left home by the time I was 17—I think perhaps Mother Anna and I have had similar hard times alone in the world—although I'm sure post-war Germany was even harder.

I am curious, of course, about who my real father was, about my mother's story—I very much want her to know I understand completely—I have been there myself—once I found out about her I was never upset or angry about her—I felt only compassion and sorrow for her because I knew she did what she had to and felt was best. I really, really wanted to know you.

I can see that certain things may run in the family—I love music, I play the guitar and the piano, I work with producing Shakespeare, I adore horses—I always have. I love being on farms and taking care of animals, I used to paint and draw—*almost* as well as Martinique.

I am a bit overwhelmed, but excited. I am thinking I can come to Germany sometime over the summer to see all of you—perhaps to meet you and then go see our mother together would be good? Let me know what your life is like.

I wish I had pictures—I never take any—I don't have pictures for years of anyone, myself, my friends, etc.. but I will start taking some and send them to you. I have an interesting life, I know some interesting people, I am very involved in my work more than anything. I am going to try to learn German as much as possible again (I seem to remember only things like "Ich bin müde"—was I a whiny kid, I wonder?? Also a song about ducks ("alle meine Enten, schwimmen auf der See...") My memories of Germany as a child are not good—I don't know why that is?

Please tell me anything and everything.

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Two Searches, Two Reunions

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Mother's Day card made. I had the sentiment printed in German and signed it with my birth name, "Martina." I took it, along with the photos I had chosen, to Margit. We knew it would be too late to arrive in time for Mother's Day, but wanted to get it in the mail ASAP!

Friday, May 12, Margit mailed the letter and told me not to count the days.

Tuesday May 30th, I received my first letter from my mother! She'd received my letter just two days after Mother's Day. She said it was "the most beautiful Mother's Day gift of her life!" She sent many pictures. One was an original wedding photo (she married 4 years after I was born). She also sent a new studio portrait of herself, photos of my half-sister, Elke, and my three half-brothers, Bernd, Stefan and Thomas, and my mother's husband, Eckhard.

In that letter I happily learned the answers to many of my questions. She told me she had been forced into relinquishing me because she already had a 14-month-old son (Bernd) and was unmarried. She felt that adoption was the better choice over foster care because "I would have the love of a home and family." Her hope for me became my reality and she was happy to learn that I had a wonderful life with my American family. She told me that in 1987, she asked Bernd to look for me! He had moved to West Germany and searched for me during 1988. (Mother had returned to her home in East Germany seven months after my birth.) And so our written correspondence began. We continue to learn more about each other with each new letter.

A Surprise

A few short weeks later I received another surprise, a letter from Bernd! He sent photos, copies of inquiries from his search and two letters—one in crude English (which I cherish) and one in German. He told me he couldn't find out more information about me. My adoption contract stated that only I could have access to the information it contained. He didn't know where to turn. He found out only that I had been adopted by a family who lived outside of Germany.

It was wonderful to know that my mother and brother had tried to find me!

The Voice of an Angel

Early Saturday morning, July 1st, my phone rang. I was shocked out of sleep when I heard, "Hello, Debbie, this is Bernd." I couldn't even think in English, much less in German. But we did arrange another call for the next day, with Margit to translate.

The next evening, right on time, the phone rang (and my heart raced)! Bernd chatted excitedly and I listened, trying to understand what he was saying. Margit translated for us although I spent most of the time feeling emotionally overwhelmed and "sprachlos." We ended our conversation with Bernd telling us that my mother also was going to call.

When the phone rang just a few short minutes later, I picked it up and for the first time in my memory I heard the voice of my mother! All I could do was listen and cry. Mother said "...not to cry. Now that we have found each other we will never lose touch again." Margit continued to listen and translate as my mother spoke. And I just listened to her beautiful voice.

Two Reunions

During July, Bernd arranged a two-week visit to my home just outside of Charleston, SC. It was to be his first time in the United States. We counted down the days on the calendar.

Sandy also had plans for a trip. She would be spending ten days enjoying a reunion with her mother and siblings in Germany. Our family gathered at the airport to wish her farewell. As the announcer made the boarding call, Sandy and I embraced, sharing tears. Sharing an emotional bond that only adoptees can understand.

Later that same evening, Bernd's plane finally arrived, 1½ hours late. I began to get nervous. Would I recognize him? I wondered how tall he would be. It's hard to tell from pictures.

At last he emerged from the jetway. As soon as I spotted him I rushed over and embraced him. He was tired from the trip and surprised. He had not expected such a reception. I introduced Bernd to my Mom and Dad, my husband, Wayne, my children Jill and Scott, my (younger) sister, her husband and their new baby. Finally I introduced him to Margit—much to his relief—someone who spoke German!

After hugs and photos, Bernd, Margit and I gathered at a restaurant to get acquainted. I found myself wanting to touch him as though I couldn't believe he was real and he's *my* family!

The next two weeks were wonderful. My family accepted Bernd into their hearts and homes as though he had always been a part of our lives. Of course, now he always will be.

As we all continue to correspond, we are moving closer to the time when I will again be in the country of my birth. I am planning to travel to Germany next year, when I will once again, after almost 37 years, feel the warmth of my mother's embrace. **Ende**

Briefe

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We have three shows and a festival of new work happening right now for the next month so my time is crazy, but I will try to write again. Please tell Mother Anna I am working up my courage to call her—it seems easier to write to you somehow—why do I feel so shy?!!!

Hoping to hear from you again soon. I have a different name I am known by (I changed it when I was an actress)—I am called Morgan Jenness. If you want to reach me by phone... although I am rarely there, there is a machine (where I just got Mother Anna's lovely message—her English sounds very good for someone who can't speak it!)

'Til very soon, love from your little sister,

— Heide/Morgan

