9th Year

Geborener Deutscher®

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

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Mother and son reunited after 34 years

by Gerry Lambert

Editor of the RCMA HOY*

Anything is possible.

Just ask Gertrud B.**, the north region staff development specialist. She might have thought otherwise before, but not anymore.

Gertrud was reunited with her son, Guido**, 34 years after his birth, at which time she had given him up for adoption. The momentous reunification took place in the Zürich, Switzerland, airport on March 1. Gertrud's son flew in from Italy.

"It was something I had hoped for for years and years," Gertrud said, "but I didn't think it was possible."

Gertrud said that according to social convention the reunification "wasn't supposed to happen." In fact, this social norm related to giving a child up for adoption is so strong that Gertrud never spoke about it with her brothers, sister or parents.

Guido was raised believing his fate was not to know his biological mother.

Given this social force working against them, it took thousands of miles of separation of Gertrud from the rest of her family eight years ago for the desire to begin the search to grow stronger than the social convention of not searching.

Gertrud was in the Peace Corps in Zaire, Africa, in 1988. She was apart from her other two children and that's when the strong desire took root. She discovered that "not knowing [her son's situation] was worse than the worst thing I could find out about him."

So the quest began. Thanks to the support groups on the Internet (computers connecting worldwide), she realized finding her son could be possible if pursued persistently.

She was not alone in her feelings. The others in the support group let Gertrud know that it was alright to want to locate and reunite with her son. They also gave her ideas and technical assistance to help in her search.



Gertrud B. and her son, Guido

Indeed, anything is possible, even when you think something "is not supposed to happen."

Editor's Note: *Because the birth and adoption of her son occurred in Switzerland, Gertrud B. was put in touch with Leonie Boehmer through her Internet connections. Leonie, in turn, put Gertrud in touch with Martin Vogelsanger, the principal contact person for IGADO ("Interessengemeinschaft Adoptierter"), a search support group in Switzerland, who provided guidance and support. According to reports from Gertrud, her brother, who still lives in Switzerland, helped her to seek mediation. In the process it was discovered that Gertrud's older sister's son, who was also placed for adoption, had been adopted by the same family and that the two boys grew up as brothers.*

*— **WLG***

*Redlands Christian Migrant Association/Helping Our Youth. From: March 1996 (Issue #36).

** The names have been changed per request.

It's a Small World
One Adoptee's Story
BY CATHERINE WATKINS

Whether you are young or old, when you find out that you are adopted, many questions are raised. Do I look like my birth parents? Are my birth parents alive? What is my birth family's medical history? What were the circumstances that resulted in my being put up for adoption? Do I want a relationship with my birth parents, and do they want one with me? Am I capable of handling the emotions in my quest for the truth?

Every individual has their own story to live, but being an adoptee gives the *opportunity* to decide (our own personal choice) if we wish to pursue any or all of the questions raised. Once the birth parents have made the decision to relinquish their parental and legal responsibilities to us, we are now in the position and have the power to pursue these answers.

The old sayings, "curiosity killed the cat," and "you're opening up a can of worms," can and may be true when you are dealing with not just your emotions but those of everyone involved. The search itself is an emotional roller-coaster.

I am a 43-year-old woman, wife, and mother of two small children. I was born in Wels, Austria, on December 25, 1952 to Rosa Bikkelbauer, who gave me my name Sonja. She was unwed and young, and I was put in the state orphanage in Linz, Austria, for adoption.

My parents who adopted me were in the American Army, stationed in Salzburg. They first adopted a boy (who was the child of an American G.I. father and Austrian mother), who is six months older than I. They went back to the orphanage to adopt another boy, and saw me.

I was six months old when the adoption took place. My mother said she saw the young girl (my mother, Rosa) sign the adoption papers at the courthouse in the next room. An interpreter was present, since Rosa spoke no English. It was known that my birth father was Austrian. My adopted father was an officer in the Army, so of course this adoption went through the American military. I have my original Austrian passport as my mother, brother an I took the troop transport to Ellis Island in New York before I had my first birthday. From New York we travelled by train to Southern California, which has been my home for 41 years.

When I was approximately three or four years old, the Immigration and Naturalization Service showed up on our doorstep to take me away. Apparently, I was in the country illegally, since no Green Card was on file at Ellis Island. My mother thought I wasn't given one because I wasn't a year old yet. This is when my parents *(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)*

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discovered that California was one of the few states which requires adoption in California in cases of adoptions from foreign countries. This is why we were also adopted in California and I have a court-ordered delayed certificate of birth. (They never could obtain my original birth certificate even after numerous calls and letters.) This is how I became Catherine Murphy, a naturalized American citizen.

I was fortunate, in that I had a happy childhood, parents who loved, wanted and needed me. I always felt that I belonged. I loved my parents dearly and miss them more than words can ever express since their deaths in 1987. It's easy to have children, but parenting is the hard part. It is who raises you, instills in you right from wrong, beliefs, values and morals. I am so very proud to call them my parents and that they touched my life in so many ways, teaching me compassion, caring and open-mindedness, to be able to cope and understand.

We were told at a very young age we were adopted. (I can't remember not knowing.) When I was in the fifth grade, a neighbor sitting next to me on the bus coming home from school said I might not want to be her friend. She sobbed and then blurted out, "I'm adopted!" She just found out. I said, "So what? So are we." She said her birth parents didn't want her. This was the first time I can recall what I've known all my life. I proceeded to tell her what my parents told me. She is special, in that her parents who adopted her, she wasn't a mistake, they wanted a little girl. As for her birth parents, they loved her enough to give her up because of their circumstances. At least she wasn't aborted, perhaps they were unwed, with no money, young, etc. The bottom line is the birth parents wanted a better life for their child. Who are we to judge?

Also, in the sixth grade, my parents needed some papers when they were out of town. Our nanny/housekeeper had me get them. I saw at this time the actual adoption file on me. Of course, I read it and I learned I had a name my birth mother had given me: Sonja. I was devastated, since I thought I knew everything else. When Mother came home, she knew I was upset, and I told her I had found my file and she never told me I had a name before Catherine. This is when I learned omitting certain facts can be just as hurtful as lying. We made amends and I got over it.

My parents' business was a non-profit organization bringing European teachers to the USA on their vacations to live with Americans as guests in their homes (to meet their friends and neighbors and be shown their communities). One doesn't learn about a country or its people on a tour. Both my parents has doctorate degrees in education, which is why they chose to live this kind of life, which involved lots of travel to Europe.

This brings me to a time in the 1970s when I went to Europe on an interviewing trip for them. I decided to stay in Europe for a month between appointments in the different countries. A month prior to my trip, my mother knew I was interested with something. I told her I would have time this trip to possibly look up my birth parents. We sat down for a good hour discussing it. I did not approach her because I didn't want to hurt her feelings. I loved them both dearly. The bottom line here was emotions. What she said was, whatever I decided both Mom and Dad would be behind me 100%. She reminded me it was after the war, papers got lost, etc. She was worried about my well-being. What if I found my mother and she was married and hadn't told her family? What if she didn't want to see me? If I contacted her, I am bringing up emotions long lost and buried. Is it worth it? A very good question. After weighing this conversation, I decided it wasn't my time to pursue this endeavor.

I met my husband one week after my father died and six and one-half weeks after my mother died. We were blessed with two beautiful children. When I got pregnant, the hospital wanted six pages of my birth mother's family medical history. I couldn't answer any of the questions. My husband is also adopted and knows relatively little about his birth father.

Prior to having children, we both knew we wanted to relocate. We both had had enough of the people, smog, freeways, etc., in California. My husband was laid off after ten-plus years with the company. It was an opportune time to make a move. Before doing so, I thought it would be best to find some answers to my questions before we left California. My California adoption records have been misplaced and, according to my case worker, I would be 15 years old, not 43! Typo?

I called numerous places in Southern California who locate birth parents for adoptees. They all do USA but not Europe. Three of the five I phoned referred me to Leonie Boehmer in New Mexico, who specializes in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. I phoned her and sent her the paperwork I had. A very small fee and she obtained a copy of my original birth certificate and my mother's name, address and telephone number. My mind was going 100 miles a minute. My pulse was racing to match my heart. Do I call her, write her? I posed all of my many "what if" questions to Leonie. She is like the Rock of Gibraltar. She took all the time I needed on the phone. We used her address and my name and she sent me all the correspondence with translations. That way, if I didn't want my birth parents to know where I was, confidentiality is kept intact. Leonie suggested I write first, respond with a telephone call after a few letters.

I waited 47 minutes after our conversation and dial my mother. She answered! She spoke broken English and I broken German, both nervous, excited, navigating in unchartered waters. She wanted to know if I was happy, and does she have grandchildren. Also, when are we all coming to visit? She asked me to send pictures, and to write.

I learned that she had had a rough life, being one of eleven children. So many aunts and uncles! After all these years, she wants to know us all. I was lucky insofar as this all came about within a few short months. Knowing we were moving out of state and my husband's benefits for flying with the company would soon expire, I flew to Linz with my two children on November 23 and stayed until December 1, 1994.

I couldn't leave sooner because, on November 22, 1994, I had a court date to settle my worker's compensation case. Alan had to finish up some work on our home, which was then in escrow.

Off I go to meet my birth mother with my children. It was a long flight with a two- and three-year-old by yourself. I wouldn't recommend a trip with small children. But it was worth it, and I'd do it again. I was to fly to Salzburg, but they sent me to Linz and no one got the message to my mother. We waited for her to pick me up. She arrived with my aunt, her husband and their grown children who spoke English. The door to her apartment was decorated with a sign and fresh flowers. The sign said, "My Happiest Day!" I had told her that I had been to Europe many times before and didn't wish to sightsee, but to get to know her. We went to a pension (restaurant), I thought to celebrate her birthday. It was a party for me, where I met all her sisters and brothers and their families.

The love I felt in that room was overwhelming. She told me she left a message to contact my father prior to my going home. Lo and behold, an extra added bonus. My father appeared with his girlfriend and their two children (my half-sisters, three and five years old). I spent a half day with him and came home. Alan took two days to find us a place to live in North Carolina. I packed up 40 years in the same home to move 2,600 miles, leaving California on December 15, 1994 and arriving in North Carolina on December 20, 1994. I couldn't tell my mother my husband was laid off, and we were moving to Greensboro, NC, without knowing our new address at the time and I had no income for four years awaiting a worker's compensation case to be resolved. Plus, my husband had no guaranteed job.

The family which welcomed me with open arms also had its problems, which are a whole different story. We have lost 40-plus years of getting to know each other, but have a lifetime ahead of us all to play catch-up. I know my parents would get along well with both my birth parents if they were still alive. I feel whole again. I don't want anything from my birth parents, but respect as I received this and lots more. I have a second family. I am proud of my birth mother and father. They both made their separate lives and are happy and living comfortably. This is what any child would want for their families. Some questions were answered and others I am still awaiting the truth.

My birth father paid to have the family fly to Austria to stay with him for two months. I told him I didn't have the money after moving cross-country. I stayed one and one-half months, cutting the trip short for personal reasons, but learned my birth father is very well-liked and respected by his peers.

I am the lucky one, and pleased to have found my birth family. I am the oldest of six girls on my father's side. (I understand I also have a brother.) I still haven't met three of my sisters or my half-brother. The good news is Gisela, who has never been to the USA, her husband (whom I haven't met, but spoken with on the telephone) and two sons are planning a one-month visit with us here in North Carolina. I am looking forward to their visit. All family members know they are welcome in our home and the feelings are reciprocal and mutual.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4, COLUMN 3)

Briefe (Letters From Readers)

May 21, 1996

Dear Mr. Gage,

On April 20, 1996, I received a fat envelope in the mail. I looked at it and set it aside. Since I didn't recognize the return address, I actually thought it to be junk mail. Later in the day, I finally opened it and cried my way through three issues of *Geborener Deutscher*®.

The next morning in church, still crying, a visitor stood and introduced herself. In a heavy German accent, she said her name was Inge. My heart pounded as my active imagination worked overtime. My birth mother's name was Inge. I just knew I received the newsletters to prepare me for news of my birth parents. I even put the issues under my pillow as I was sure, as in one of the articles, I would hear from Margit Benton for Mother's Day.

I first contacted Margit in March 1996. I sent her what little information I had and she replied to be patient. I was anxious, but followed her advice. As much as I wanted to, I didn't phone her daily for any news. I had waited this long, I could wait a little longer.

In fact, compared to others, I haven't been searching very long. I didn't grow up knowing I was adopted. There had always been a feeling of not quite belonging, but I didn't find out why until I was 23 years old. I knew I had beenborn in Augsburg and I became a naturalized citizen in 1960, but never did I imagine I had been adopted.

When my mother told me I was adopted, in 1977, I found it very difficult to accept. I spent many years trying to forget it. In 1993, I finally faced it and began my search.

I started by writing my mom and dad, asking for any and all information they had. Most of what they sent was of little help. However, one form did have several names. Most of it I didn't understand. I could figure out *Eltern: Bernhard Kurt Bergt und Inge Bergt, geb. Bennewitz*. My parents' names at last and, near the end, was another name: *Angelika Dagmar*, with my name, "Lynn-Marie," after.

Now I had a city and names and no idea what to do with the information. My aunt's exhusband is German and was planning a trip to Germany at that time. In fact, I faxed my "Abstammungsurkunde" to him via the airlines at LAX and asked him if he would assist me in my search. He did take time in Augsburg to try to find my birth certificate. What he came back with was the address where I could write and request it. When he returned, he did help me write the request. The information I received is what I eventually sent to Margit.

At that time, I joined the International Soundex Reunion Registry, who sent me Leonie Boehmer's name and address. I had stumbled along on my own long enough. In March 1996, I contacted Leonie and asked for help. Leonie promptly responded, giving me Margit name and address, which brings me to the beginning of this letter.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4, COLUMN 3)

"It's good to have you home!"

Adoptee's Story of Search and Reunion Illustrates Rewards of Never Losing Hope

by Douglas Miley

I was adopted in Germany in 1960 at the age of one by an American G.I. and a young German lady, Horace and Hilda Miley. He was 25 years old and she was 24. Horace passed away in 1974. When I was 16, Hilda told me I was adopted and said that I also had a sister in Germany. From then on, things were never the same for me. I almost felt a little betrayed by Hilda. All those years I had thought that she was my birth mother. It took a few years for me to come to terms with this. Not to mention all the questions I had. Who were my parents? What did they look like? Why was I given up and not my sister?



Douglas and Gisela

Hilda passed away in 1985, but before she died, she gave me copies of my adoption papers. About a year later, I decided I wanted to find some answers to the questions about my past. The only problem was, where to start?

I had nothing to go on but my adoption papers. All the search agencies were mostly confined to the U.S. or very expensive, so they were of no use to me. I checked with friends who were visiting Germany for a lengthy stay, but they were unable to come up with any reliable leads. By this time, about eight years had passed and I had exhausted all my options. After talking with a friend, he referred me to a German lady who was working here in Sidney, OH. She said she might be able to help. After a few months, we had a name—Gisela Dingeldein—and an address, to which I wrote. About three months later, I received a note saying this person was not my mother. What to do? Was this person my mother and she didn't want to open any old wounds, or just someone by the same name? I was ready to give up.



Douglas and Jutta

I decided to try one last time. If nothing came of it, I would give up the search. From the stack of search agencies, there was one place I hadn't called. After talking with them, they referred me to Leonie Boehmer, a retired German lady who helps German-born children find their natural parents. I wrote to her and explained my situation. She said she could help! Months later, I had the exact address of my mother in my hand.

This was scary. What would happen when I wrote? A brush-off that would bring me to a dead end? It took me a while before I finally had enough courage to write. I sent the letter on January 1, 1995. A few months later, I received a reply. I was both excited and nervous as to what it would say. In fact, I was so nervous that I didn't open the letter right away! When I did, I found it to be in German and I had to have it translated, which Leonie graciously did for me. When I received the translation, I found a very warm and loving woman who in her early 20s had gone through a great deal of pain. My father was a sergeant in the U.S. Army who, for whatever reason, chose not to stay with us. My sister, who was one year old, and my mother, who was pregnant with me, were left alone with no job and nowhere to go. So she had to take drastic measures, which were to give me up for adoption. It was a very sad story. My mother chooses not to tell me my father's name. She still carries a lot of pain for what happened all those years ago.

On the positive side, after talking with my mother on the telephone, she invited me to spend Christmas with them. I immediately said yes. So, off to Germany I went. What an exciting trip. My mother immediately recognized me when I stepped off the plane. There were lots of kisses and hugs all around. During my stay, I met a lot of my relatives. A full sister, Jutta; a half-brother, Sigfried ("Siggi"), and half-sister, Gabriella; a grandmother, sisters- and brothers-in-law, nieces and nephews—quite a large family! This was so different for me, since I was an only child in my adoptive family. Everyone made me feel very welcome.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 4, COLUMN 1)

Brain's Wiring Determines Language-Learning Ability

Excerpted from the article, "Your Child's Brain"

BY SHARON BEGLEY

"Your Child's Brain" originally appeared in NEWSWEEK, February 19, 1996

Before there are words, in the world of a newborn, there are sounds. In English they are phonemes such as sharp ba's and da's, drawn-out ee's and ll's and sibilant sss's. In Japanese they are different—barked *hi*'s, merged rr/ll's. When a child hears a phoneme over and over, neurons from his ear stimulate the formation of dedicated connections in the brain's auditory cortex. This "perceptual map," explains Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington, reflects the apparent distance—and thus the similarity—between sounds. So in English-speakers, neurons in the auditory cortex that respond to "ra" lie far from those that respond to "la." But for Japanese, where the sounds are nearly identical, neurons that respond to "ra" are practically intertwined, like L.A. freeway spaghetti, with those for "la." As a result, a Japanese-speaker will have trouble distinguishing the two sounds.

Researchers find evidence of these tendencies across many languages. By 6 months of age, Kuhl reports, infants in English-speaking homes already have different auditory maps (as shown by electrical measurements that identify which neurons respond to different sounds) from those in Swedish-speaking homes. Children are functionally deaf to sounds absent from their native tongue. The map is completed by the first birthday. "By 12 months," says Kuhl, "infants have lost the ability to discriminate sounds that are not significant in their language, and their babbling has acquired the sound of their language."

Kuhl's findings help explain why learning a second language after, rather than with, the first is so difficult. "The perceptual map of the first language constrains the learning of the second," she says. In other words, the circuits are already wired for Spanish, and the remaining undedicated neurons have lost their ability to form basic new connections for, say, Greek. A child taught a second language after the age of 10 or so is unlikely ever to speak it like a native. Kuhl's work also suggests why related languages such as Spanish and French are easier to learn than unrelated ones: more of the existing circuits can do double duty.

With this basic circuitry established, a baby is primed to turn sounds into words. The more words a child hears, the faster she learns language, according to psychiatrist Janellen Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago. Infants whose mothers spoke to them a lot knew 131 more words at 20 months than did babies of more taciturn, or less involved mothers; at 24 months, the gap had widened to 295 words. (Presumably the findings would also apply to a father if he were the primary caregiver.) It didn't matter which words the mother used—monosyllables seemed to work. The sound of words, it seems, builds up neural circuitry that can then absorb more words, much as creating a computer file allows the user to fill it with prose. "There is a huge vocabulary to be acquired," says Huttenlocher, "and it can only be acquired through repeated exposure to words."

With MARY HAGER

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"It's good to have you home" *continued from page 3*

Germany is beautiful. My mother lives in a very small, old town called Hähnlein, in the south. During my visit, we travelled to Frankfurt/Main, Heidelberg, Darmstadt, and numerous other smaller towns. I sampled all the wonderful food and great German beer. Not to mention all the tasty meals my mother would cook up. We spent a lot of time together, taking long walks in the surrounding countryside. She treated me as if I'd lived my whole life with her. I felt very much at home. Communicating was a little difficult. I didn't speak German very well and my mother didn't speak English too well, either; but we both got our messages across.



Douglas and Siggi

All in all, it was a wonderful adventure and a very emotional one, as well. I am truly glad that I didn't give up my search. There are and probably always will be some painful aspects though. I feel I have missed out on so much growing up.

In 1982, my birth mother married a wonderful man whom I didn't get to meet. He died in a car crash in 1994. She said he would have been a wonderful father to me. She hurts very deeply over his loss, and I feel very sad as well.

Lastly, my mother wants me to visit as often as I can. I hope to make another trip this summer. I will always remember the words my mother said to me as I left Germany to return to the U.S.: "It's good to have you home!"

Ende

Small World *cont. from pg. 2*

My adopted family is supportive of my second family, which has helped me emotionally deal with these so-called skeletons on both families' closets.

The void inside of me has been filled and I am very pleased with the results. I feel badly of the miles between us (countries apart) as I now wish to have a reunion of the Loeschenkohl, Podrascanin and Murphy (now Watkins) families. The cost is far too great, but who knows? Things could change and dreams have been known to come true. My adopted family has been to Europe, but my birth family has never had the pleasure of seeing or being in the USA.

Family has always been important to me, and I cherish this whole process of looking, finding and now working towards a fulfilling relationship with each and every one.

If I can be of any help in answering questions or be a sounding board, please feel free to call on me.

My story is a dream come true and there isn't anything I wouldn't do for them if it is within my powers.

Ende

Briefe *continued from page 3*

On May 11, 1996, I received the most precious Mother's Day present ever. Margit phoned to tell me she had found my birth parents. I didn't have enough words to express my gratitude. Margit is truly one of God's angels.

I have written my first-contact letter and have sent it to Margit to translate for me. I have purchased a German conversation manual and tapes and will study while I am waiting for a reply.

I was very pleased to see Margit's picture in one of the newsletters [***See Volume VIII, Number 3, #28, page 2, Ed.***]. I hope you know what a wonderful service you provide. Thank you so very much for your newsletter. I hope you keep me on your mailing list.

— Lynn-Marie Landman
Westminster, CA

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