9th Year

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

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Book Excerpt

Outer Search/Inner Journey: An Orphan & Adoptee's Quest

by Peter F. Dodds

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Editor's Note: *Peter F. Dodds was relinquished to a German orphanage at the age of one, and then adopted by American parents nearly two years later. At the age of 22, he was stationed in the Federal Republic of Germany as an Army officer. In this chapter, "Mörfelden," the author embarks on the search to find his birth mother.*

Mörfelden

A clear sky and cool morning air greeted me on the walk to the Hauptbahnhof. Not a trace of humidity as compared to the oppressive heat on a May's morning walk back in Florida, Alabama or Georgia. I was invigorated by the time I reached the Hauptbahnhof.

The Information Office provided detailed rail schedules where I purchased a one-way ticket and soon boarded an eastbound train. After an hour's journey, I stepped out of the train onto a concrete loading dock adjoining a small train station. For the benefit of travellers, a sign providing the station's location hung beneath the building's upper facade. A single word was painted in black letters against a white background, and I looked at it with a mingled reverence, wonder and expectation. The sign read Mörfelden.

After a conductor's shrill whistle blast, doors closed and the electric train snaked along steel ribbons, rounded a curve and disappeared behind a grove of trees. Surveying the scene with impassioned eyes, I slowly set the suitcase down without removing my gaze from the surrounding area. Though always considering adoption a mark of inferiority, I had imprisoned the feelings during military training because frailty had no place in the life of an infantry officer. Standing alone on the empty dock, I allowed my life-long craving for my birth mother to slowly emerge. Here in Mörfelden it was safe. The call rose from the depths of my soul and spilled into my heart with every breath.

As far back as I could stretch my memory and revisit the past there wasn't a time when I hadn't known I was adopted. The dreadful realization of being torn from my mother resulted in a yearning, a primordial ache, to find the woman who had given me life. Every day while growing up, every single day as far back as I could remember, I thought about her and about re-establishing nature's bond that connects mother and child.

As a boy, I learned to live with the suffering and anger of abandonment like one who slowly disciplines himself to accept the perpetual pain of a debilitating physical injury. My uprooting had shattered the protective shield that safeguarded my psyche, and only by discovering my mother could I hope to understand the adoption experience and find inner peace. In essence, I had never accepted my role as an adopted child or the life that came with it. I had never felt I belonged, was accepted by others, or was loved for who I was. Emotional serenity was foreign to me, and I believed healing would only come through union with the woman who had given me life. I didn't know how inner healing would take place, but I was certain Ilse Sander would mend the wound and stop the pain.

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Center Point (TX) woman finds long-lost mother after forty-one years

by Sarah Hunter
Times Staff Writer

From the Kerrville Daily Times
Wednesday, July 3, 1996

CENTER POINT—A young adopted girl, dressed in a red, white and blue dress, received her naturalization papers many years ago, not knowing she would be reunited with her birth mother 41 years later.

Suzanne Lewis, of Center Point, decided to search for her German birth mother a year ago, she said.

"I wanted to meet her and find out about my family before she got too old," she said.

Her search was sparked when she saw a television program about an Arizona woman finding her birth family, she said.

"She directed me to the Missing Persons Services of the Salvation Army," she said. "I didn't expect to find her (the birth mother) so soon."

Lewis was adopted by an American couple in Germany when she was two months old.

The Salvation Army reported her biological mother, Waltraud Erna Beile, was very young when she had Lewis. Beile's mother would not let her keep Monika, as Lewis was called.

Her adoptive parents found out about Lewis through a soldier, she said.

Lewis's adoptive mother remembered the day they picked Lewis up from her birth mother's home.

"My mom said that when they went to get me, my mom (Beile) wasn't happy and that she didn't know what had happened," she said. "There were also other children there. A 10-year-old was trying to give away a 2-year-old to my parents as well as me."

The Salvation Army reports Beile's first reaction to her daughter finding her was shock. She has three other children that did not know about Lewis's existence.

"She wasn't

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Outer Search/Inner Journey

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The search was more than a simple journey to discover my mother. It was also a voyage of inner faith. I felt if I could find out who my mother was, then I would find out who I was. By discovering my birth mother, I would accept my role in life, become capable of receiving and giving love, and gain a sense of belonging.

Why did she give me away? Where do I come from? Where do I belong? Is there anyone who looks like me? Who am I? Am I worthy of being loved and can I love in return? These questions constantly haunted me.

Picking up my suitcase, I moved toward the aged building that served as the town's railroad station. The faint odor of disinfectant greeted me when I opened the door, reminding me of a hospital. An old man sitting behind a yellowing glass ticket counter was the only person inside. I quickly exited the other side of the building and entered the town where my mother had lived 23 years earlier.

The railroad station sat near one end of town. Mörfelden looked about 10 blocks long, with three-story buildings the tallest in town. A corner street sign indicated I was walking along the main street, Hauptstrasse, a two-lane road where an occasional car passed by. I walked inside a hotel two blocks from the train station and found a stout woman with graying hair busily dusting furniture in the foyer. She stopped when she heard the door close behind me and clasped the feather duster in both hands. In German, I asked for a room for one night, and the heavy-set woman threw a steely glance my way. Without a word, she shoved the feather duster on a table and marched to a tiny office. She thrust a registration form printed in German at me. I completed it as best I could. She examined the completed paperwork as I stood nearly at the position of attention.

"Eine Nacht?" she asked.

"Jawohl," I answered, my body straight as an arrow.

She ordered me to follow her to a single room on the second floor. I trailed behind as she showed me the community bath and handed me the room key before marching back downstairs.

With her footsteps echoing through the hallway, I closed the door and set my suitcase on the bed. I unzipped the suitcase cover and sifted through its contents, removing a yellowed piece of paper that had been translated from German to English. Carefully unfolding the document, I once more read the words that provided the only link to my past, "... Miss Ilse Sander... a clerk born at Kunzendorf on 31 December 1920... residing at 64 Frankfurter Strasse, Mörfelden... give up claim to be notified... irrevocability of these declarations..." Committing the street address to memory, I refolded the yellowed piece of paper and carefully tucked it into my back jean pocket. After locking the door to my room, I left the hotel.

Outside, the sun burned directly overhead and the warm air caused drops of perspiration to trickle down my chest and press against my long-sleeved sweatshirt. For an instant, I thought about returning to the room to change into a pair of shorts and t-shirt, but that would take time. I was in a hurry, so I continued along the Hauptstrasse and soon came to a bakery with its door swung invitingly open. Inside, I asked for directions to Frankfurter Strasse. A rotund baker with a gentle face and wide grin greeted me. He didn't speak English, but drew a map showing his shop and a route to the street where my mother had lived when she signed the Consent of Release form. Ten minutes after leaving the bakery I stood in front of a two-story house along Frankfurter Strasse. The numbers 64 were posted on its side.

I didn't spend time looking through the windows to catch a glimpse of someone inside. Instead, I hurried past the waist-high iron gate and walked up to the front door. Would anyone be home? I hadn't prepared a speech and didn't know what I'd say if my mother answered. Could this be the moment I had dreamed about?

My breathing became forced and blood throbbed in my temples with every racing heartbeat. I lifted a sweaty palm and without hesitation pushed the buzzer. The doorbell chimed. Footsteps thumped toward the door. Someone was unlocking the bolt. With eyes stretched wide, I watched the door slowly swing open. A female figure appeared in the doorway, a nice-looking woman in her mid-thirties. Instantly, "not my mother" flashed in my brain.

"Yes," she said in German. "What can I do for you?"

"Does Ilse Sander live here?" I stammered back.

She shook her head from side to side and answered no.

"Ilse Sander lived in this house in 1956, and I was hoping to find her."

She repeated that she didn't know Frau Sander and it was clear the name meant nothing to the woman standing in the doorway. Certain I had gained all that I could, I gave a dampened thank-you and left, closing the iron gate behind me.

Beforehand, I knew the slim possibility that my mother would still live at 64 Frankfurter Strasse. Still, I felt disappointed. On the return trip to the Hauptstrasse my body and confidence grew limp as adrenaline and intensity ebbed. Nothing had materialized from the only clue I had to my mother's whereabouts. Heaven only knew where she was.

Somewhere in Mörfelden there had to be proof she once lived here. I had to uncover that information and hope it would somehow lead me to her. Where would records of Mörfelden's citizens be stored? It was Saturday afternoon, so the town hall would be closed. Whatother organizations would keep documentsof people who live, or had lived, in Mörfelden? Energy surged as a thought came. The police, of course.

I returned to the bakery. After a muddled conversation, the baker drew a second map. Thistime it contained directions to the town's police station.

Minutes later I entered Mörfelden's police station with renewed hope of obtaining the next clue. I must have been an unusual looking man to the three uniformed police officers and female secretary who sat behind a partition, separating them from the entryway lobby. They saw a young man hesitantly approach, who had a dark tan, and a quarter inch of hair. I wore faded jeans, scuffed penny loafers and an Auburn University sweat shirt. Certainly not the look and dress of a German. Their assumption proved correct when I spoke.

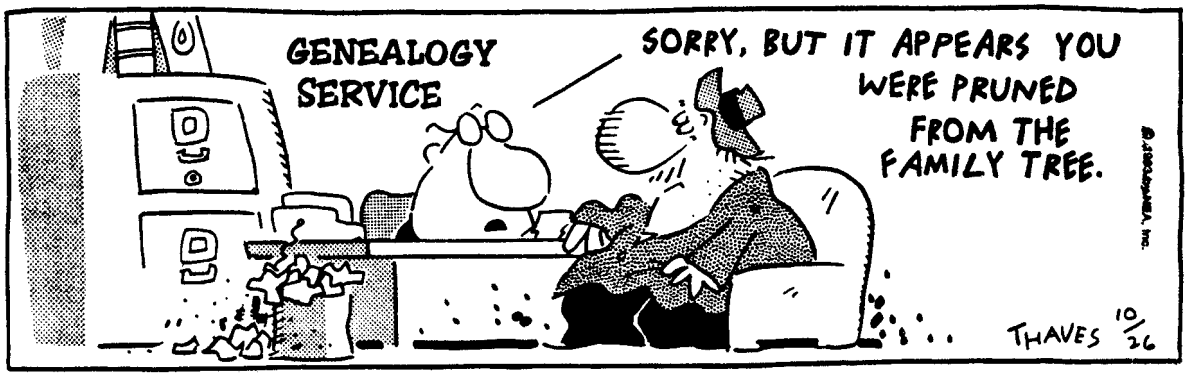
Though I tried my best to speak German, their looks changed from amused curiosity to icy stares as my rough sentences betrayed my Germanic roots. They thought I was a foreigner—an American. One of the policemen marched to the entryway door, opened it and motioned for me to leave. Remembering the prior evening's late night activities, I knew better than to press my case and skirted out the door, feeling a combination of humiliation barbed with anger.

They thought I was some stupid American and didn't even try to help. Disgusted with my lack of German-language proficiency, I nearly ran back to the Hauptstrasse to begin developing Plan C.

Along the main thoroughfare, now becoming quite familiar, I thought hard for options and pushed away the bitterness over the police station incident. I racked my brain for possibilities and refused to become discouraged by the setbacks. I was determined to come up with

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Briefe (Letters From Readers)

September 23, 1996

Dear William,

Hi. I am writing to you to ask you to stop mailing me these newsletters. I guess I owe you an explanation.

I had gone through Leonie Boehmer to help me find my birth mom. Leonie was very helpful and seems to be a wonderful person. She had located my birth mom's address for me and I wrote to her. A year later, I still had not received a reply, so I wrote to her again. This time, I got a "Dear Jane" letter in response, saying in effect, "Hi. Glad you're okay, but I want nothing to do with you."

This has been very painful for me. And although I received this letter over six months ago, I am still not over it. I had also asked about brothers and sisters and my biological father, but she said she couldn't help me.

I do not understand her wishes and wonder why she didn't just get an abortion. How could someone give birth to someone, hoping never to see them ever again? I do not understand and probably never will.

I just don't want to be reminded of this low point in my life anymore, so I would appreciate it if you did not send me these newsletters anymore. Any connection I have or ever had with Germany is long gone.

I guess I should feel lucky that I had very loving and caring adopted parents who did give a hoot about me. Unfortunately, my adoptive mother died last March after many years battling Alzheimer's. She had not known me for many years. I thought it might be a good thing to reconnect with my birth mother. *C'est la vie.*

You are welcome to print this letter if you want. Maybe people can be prepared for the downside of their searching.

— Jessie Whitney
Trinidad, CO

Given the circumstances you describe, I can well understand your request, but I would have honored it in any event, even without an explanation (although I am glad you provided one).

I am sorry that your search did not have the outcome you hoped for. For myself, I can report that mine didn't, either. Both my birth parents were already dead by the time I started searching for them; and while I did locate and meet two of my half-siblings in Germany, these relationships have not been everything I might have wished for. It's the chance we take when we search. On the whole, however, I believe even a negative end to the search can be beneficial. Bringing closure to that part of our lives —regardless of the relative outcome—allows us more readily to get on with the job of living the rest of our lives without the nagging questions that prompted the search in the first place; nor the regret we might feel had we never searched at all.

Thank you for writing. You have my best wishes for future happiness. ***— WLG***

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another idea. Using every bit of creativity, imagination and intelligence I possessed, I tried again to piece a picture together. My mother was born in a town called Kunzendorf, a town I had never heard of. When did she move to Mörfelden? One of the few facts I had was that my mother lived here when she was thirty-five. What year she moved here and when she left, if she left, were missing parts of the puzzle. Did she move to Mörfelden as a child? If not, what would make her come to this little town that didn't seem to offer much opportunity? Maybe she moved here only to give birth.

The possibilities seemed endless. I had drifted back to the train station and wandered inside. Unconsciously, I had retraced my steps as if I had forgotten something and had returned to retrieve the lost article.

Only the ticketmaster, rummaging through a cabinet behind the counter, was inside the station. Sparse furnishings decorated the interior. A pair of chipped wooden benches sat back to back in the center of the room. Pushed against a far wall stood a large oak table under a wide open rectangular window. The stale smell of disinfectant lingered, despite ceilings that must have been 14 feet high. I moved forward; the only sounds were my shoes knocking against the linoleum floor and echoing with a hollow resonance as I headed toward the table.

A telephone sat on top of the table, and beside it lay the object I didn't realize I had overlooked—a half-inch thick telephone book. I opened the frayed book and thumbed through the pages until I found the section listing last names beginning with the letter S. I examined the pages over and over, but there was no Ilse Sander. That meant she didn't live in Mörfelden any longer, or if she did, and my heart sunk with the idea, she had changed her last name. That would add another barrier to a quest already filled with significant obstacles. To make matters even worse, no one with the last name of Sander was listed in the book.

I racked my brains and paced the empty room until I finally came up with one last possibility. For the second time that day I walked out of the train station and headed back to the bakery to get directions to the biggest church in town. The mild-mannered baker picked up a piece of paper and pencil when he saw me enter his shop. "Church?" I asked while folding my hands together and gazing at the ceiling as if engaged in prayer. He drew a third map and handed it to me. Away I went. The baker had the disposition of a saint.

The church where he directed me wasn't far. Everything was within easy walking distance in this town where no more than 10,000 people lived. The church stood off on a side street, surrounded by beautiful grounds of flower gardens intermixed with shrubs, and evergreen trees that provided a refreshing coolness. An attached house adjoined the backside of the church. I picked up my gait and headed toward the house, thinking it had to be the rectory.

A few steps in front of the building, a medium-built man rounded a corner of the church and shouted my way. A black, broad-brimmed fedora partially obscured his clean shaven face. His solid black clothes were topped at the neck with a Roman collar. The image gave a me feeling of trust and calm as I watched the uniform draw closer. As always, the attire of a priest or nun gave me the same warm sensation. Time didn't diminish the emotional attachment I had developed for those selfless and kind religious people who had run the orphanage.

"The building is locked," he said in German. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"I wish to speak with the parish priest," I said, frustrated again by my poor grasp of German.

He continued walking and stopped directly in front of me. "I am the priest assigned to this parish. Are you British or American?"

"American," I answered.

"Very good," he said, switching from German to English. He explained he had visited both Great Britain and the United States.

"I'm always pleased to have an opportunity to maintain my proficiency with foreign languages. English is such a splendid language, don't you think?" With far-away eyes he reminisced about some bygone pleasant experience. But he caught himself and came back to the present. "Now, how may I be of assistance?"

I was grateful to speak English and told my story, saying I had traveled to Mörfelden to find my mother. I ended by sharing the day's earlier events at 64 Frankfurter Strasse and at the police station.

"Ah yes," he answered thoughtfully, while slowly rubbing his chin and looking at his black shoes. "The police have had many problems with American soldiers, but it is still too bad they didn't assist you." The priest ***CONT. ON PG. 4, COL. 1***

ADULT ADOPTEES NEEDED FOR RESEARCH PROJECT

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Outer Search/Inner Journey

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stopped rubbing his chin, crossed his arms over his chest and looked at me. "Have you examined a telephone book to see if your mother is listed?"

"Yes. I've tried that too, but without success. There wasn't a Sander in the book. I'm afraid she might have changed her last name." I stopped there, unwilling to admit the terrible possibility she might be dead.

The priest's eyes narrowed behind silver-rimmed glasses, and wrinkles creased his forehead beneath the brim of his black hat. I sensed he didn't entirely trust the foreigner's story, and it seemed he tried to decide if my story was genuine or forged. I wondered how anyone could make up a story like mine.

After I finished, he turned his head to one side and resumed rubbing his chin. Then the priest turned his gaze toward me and offered help after a few moments' pause. "We have records stored in the church, and if your mother was a parishioner, she'll be listed in our historical files. Unfortunately, I'm leaving town in a few hours and won't return until tomorrow evening. But if you come back on Monday morning I'll examine the files to see if your mother was a member of the parish. We might have information that could be helpful."

I desperately wanted to ask if he could look before leaving for his trip. Instead, I thanked him and tried to present an air of gratitude while masking the disappointment at having to wait. The church archives might contain a valuable clue, and I didn't want to damage any chances of gaining access to those records. Still, Monday seemed a long way off. I felt as if I was standing outside in a freezing rain with my face pressed close against a window, craving the warm comfort of the room inside. I didn't want to wait anymore. With the future showing more uncertainty than promise, I shook the priest's hand and told him I'd come back on Monday morning.

On the return route to the main street an empty bus stop offered a welcome bench and I slumped onto the wooden planks. Leaning forward, bringing both elbows to rest on top of my knees, I dejectedly lowered my head into the palms of my hands. Closing my eyes, I cut off the outside world and let my imagination run free.

Spiralling within the depths of fantasy, I find myself the only person sitting in a darkened theater. A projector starts and fills the room with a whirling click..click..click.. and casts shadowy figures with its flickering light. The clicking noise fades to a soothing hum. Numbers alternately fill the screen in a countdown, 5-4-3-2-1, and a blurry picture encased in large black borders appears. The film's dark edges recede and give way to a black-and-white motionpicture of Mörfelden—the train station, hotel, bakery, then to Frankfurter Strasse. The scenes are from 1956.

No sounds interrupt the silent theater as the picture zooms in on a woman in her mid-30s. She's carefully walking on a sidewalk along Frankfurter Strasse, face obscured, height and weight indistinct. The woman directs her entire attention to a baby cradled in her arms. Arriving at a cross street, she stops and looks down to the bundle at her breast. Pulling back the head garments, she smiles softly and caresses the baby's fine hair.

The picture frame freezes and I long to address the image:

Oh dear mother, why did you abandon me? Was I too much for you, more than you were able to care for? Was I an inconvenience and you rejected me to continue life without the hardships of raising an unwanted son? Was my conception an accident, a gross mistake, and you got rid of me to get rid of a constant reminder of some unpleasant experience? Was your rebuff an attempt to forget? Or, could your decision to put me in an orphanage have been a selfless act because you believed an institution for forsaken children would offer more opportunity than you could provide?

Still mentally sitting in the empty theater, looking at the picture, my thoughts continue:

Did you know the haunting pain and loneliness our separation would cause? Did you know that grief, spurred from not knowing you, would mercilessly follow me, no matter where I went or how much time passed?

The screen remains frozen, with the woman gently smiling at the baby clutched in her arms.

The reason for your decision isn't important, because if you feel guilt, I'll forgive and be grateful if your motive was unselfish and for my benefit. It doesn't matter why you put me in the orphanage. I will find you no matter what it takes, because you are my mother.

Outside the theater a car horn blows, and the picture disintegrates. I'm back sitting on the bus stop bench, staring at the ground beneath my feet. The horn blows a second time. Raising my head out of my palms, I looked up to see a taxi, with the driver shrugging his shoulders and raising his hands asking if I want a ride. I shook my head no, and he drove away.

What can I do? I didn't know what to do. Remain in Mörfelden until Monday and visit the priest? Stay around waiting for the town hall to open, hoping they'd have records providing additional information? Maybe the church and town hall archives wouldn't even mention Ilse Sander. Either way, a timeless abyss separated me from Monday. I didn't want to keep on waiting... waiting... waiting... *Ende*

Outer Search Inner Journey

by Peter F. Dodds

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Center Point

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asked her opinion (about giving Lewis up for adoption); she wanted to keep me," Lewis said.

Lewis said she tried to translate her mother's first letter herself, using only a German-to-English dictionary.

"I understood enough to get the gist," she said. "I was so excited that I could hardly contain myself. I cried. I cried every time I read it to someone else."

Lewis and her mother have been corresponding with the help of translators Charlotte Czarnikow and Reginald Harling.

"Her mother worries about her when she doesn't receive letters," Czarnikow said. "She never forgot her. It is a sad story and a happy story."

Lewis and her mother want to meet, but financial burdens and unemployment are keeping them apart, she said.

"I want to go for Christmas," she said. "I always liked the holidays in Germany."

Not only did she find her birth mother but alsoher grandfather, aunts and uncles, she said.

Her adoptive family is supportive of her search, Lewis said.

"There couldn't be any two finer people to call Mom and Dad," she said.

Lewis's cousin in Arkansas, who is also adopted, has started looking for her birth family also, she said.

Lewis's advice to young mothers after her experience is to consider adoption.

"Think twice," she said. "There are so many mothers who can't have children. Adoption is special because they (parents) pick you out."

For more information on locating family members, contact the Missing Persons Service of the Salvation Army at 1424 N.E. Expressway in Atlanta, GA 30329. *Ende*

Reunion in Nuremberg

Jim Burns of Wallingford, co-owner with wife Rachel of Our Home Cleaning Service, recently returned from Nuremberg, Germany, where he was reunited with his birth mother for the first time. The visit culminated a 21-year search. Adopted by an American army officer, Jim grew up in Germany, Georgia and Kansas. The father of five, Jim said that his birth mother was so excited to add a bunch of grandchildren to her life, that she is planning to visit them in the States this year. Jim brought along his son Steven, 2, for the reunion. They stayed in his mother's one-bedroom apartment. While in Germany, Jim discovered he had four half-siblings and was able to meet the youngest. He had to hire an interpreter, because his mother spoke no English. His goal is to learn to speak German fluently before his mother and her husband arrive. Jim's mother never revealed the identity of his birth father, but said that she was upset that he remained in an orphanage for a year and a half. — Excerpted from "Briefly Noted..." *The Swarthmorean*, October 11, 1996