A Newsletter for German-Born Adoptees



Geborener Deutscher®

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"This Is Also A Family"

A Second Trip to Germany Results in a Second Reunion

by Kathleen Riley

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On Mother's Day, 1992, State Journal-Register *editorial artist Kathleen Riley wrote about searching for her birth mother in Germany and the remarkable reunion that followed.* [Reprinted in the Autumn 1993 and Winter 1994 issues of *GD*.]

In October of that same year, Riley, who grew up with her adoptive family in central Iowa, made a second trip overseas to visit her newly found relatives.

That autumn in Bamberg, Germany, in an event that was equal parts fate and luck, she was briefly reunited with her birth father.

Her relationships with all family members, both natural and adoptive, continue to be positive and rewarding. On this Father's Day, Riley, 27, tells of meeting her birth father for the very first time.

SPRINGFIELD, IL (6/20/93)—Our train left the suburban Cologne station and sped quietly through the Rhine River valley, winding along the base of steep, vineyard-covered cliffs.

Ursula, my birth mother, with whom I was reunited almost two years ago, sat across from me in our little compartment—oblivious to the world-renowned scenery whizzing past our window. Had I grown up with her here in Germany, perhaps the Rhine would be old news to me, too.

Bonn. Then Koblenz.

We were on our way to Bamberg, a small city in northern Bavaria where Ursula, then a translator for a publishing company, had met my birth father 26 years before. Joachim (pronounced yo-AH-kim) Bauer, a young mathematics student, had offered to marry her when they learned of the pregnancy.

She said no.

They had not been in contact since 1966, when Ursula informed him that she had placed me, their newborn daughter, for adoption in America.

Ursula and I were making the trip so I could see the town where my life began, the place where she had once fallen in love.

Earlier in the year, Ursula had come across my father's name in a Bamberg phone directory. "This could be him," she told me, "but don't count on it. It's been so many years. And Bauer is a very common name."

Mainz. Then Frankfurt.

My mind was racing as fast as our train. Would my father still be living in Bamberg? If so, would he want to see me? Ursula and her family had always been my main focus; I hadn't given much thought to the idea of finding my birth father. The curiosity about Joachim was there, naturally, but I already had plenty to deal with. I figured I'd search for him someday.

But perhaps it would be sooner than later.

Wurzburg. Time to change trains.

Ursula laughed out loud. If Joachim is still living in Bamberg, she said with a smile, he will be going about his daily routine—with no inkling that a train is streaking across the countryside, bringing him the surprise of his life.

Finally, Bamberg.

I felt strange as we stepped from the train, suddenly aware that everyone I encountered was a potential relative. I studied every passer-by at the station until we blended into crowds of pedestrians on the sidewalks. Then it was overwhelming—too many faces, all coming at me at once.

I'm sure Ursula felt strange too. Here she was, in the town she left 26 years ago, face to face with the memories she had so successfully suppressed.

We walked for a while so she could re-orient herself. I tried to keep up, all the while gazing around in wonder. Straight from the pages of a fairytale, this town was the place American children envision when dreaming about Germany. Unlike other German cities that faced extensive rebuilding after the war, Bamberg was a well-preserved jewel, all its medieval charm still intact.

Ursula was ahead of me now. Suddenly she stopped and whirled around, wide-eyed. "That's it. That's the house." She was pointing to an old pink stucco that wrapped around the corner up ahead.

"That is Joachim's house. I remember it—that's where he lived with his family. I'm almost positive."

Sure enough. The nameplate on the front door read "Bauer."

Underneath, a sign gave the hours for the family's first-floor art gallery, which was closed. Ursula and I looked at each other, speechless.

I felt numb as I rang the doorbell.

No one answered. But, as we started walking away, a distinguished-looking, white-haired gentleman opened the door, heavy black pipe in hand. I wondered who he was. My grandfather? I couldn't see any resemblance. Ursula didn't appear to recognize him.

She asked if we could look through the gallery, and he agreed. As I carefully examined the abstract pencil drawings on the walls, Ursula began asking a million questions: "There was a Wilhelm Bauer family that was so kind to me when I lived in Bamberg 26 years ago," she said. "I think they lived in this house." "Yes, yes, he was my brother; he's passed away," the man responded.

"Didn't Wilhelm have a son named Joachim?" "Why, yes, he did. Joachim lives here in Bamberg with his wife and young son."

And so it went until Ursula had gleaned practically every tidbit of information possible, including my father's address.

This man in front of me was my great uncle. Unknowingly, he had just given his niece a missing piece of her life's puzzle.

We followed his directions to my father's 17th-century row house on a narrow, cobblestone hilltop drive. We couldn't bring ourselves to knock. After loitering around without seeing anybody, we left in search of a hotel and place to eat.

Things were happening so quickly. I couldn't think of what to do next.

Ursula suggested I write a letter.

Later that evening, in a dark restaurant with beamed ceilings, I composed my second "Hello-I'm-the-daughter-you've-never-known" letter in front of a plate of sauerbraten, a heavy mug of local beer and an impatient waiter. I explained I was in Bamberg for a short time, gave the name of my hotel and included a small photo. The restaurant was closing up, so I moved outside to a hard wooden bench—finishing the letter under the four spires of the Bamberg Cathedral and the blue glow of moonlight.

Back up the hill we tiptoed. I tucked the envelope under my father's front door, watching it slip into the dark, unknown space inside. Just beyond my fingers' reach—irretrievable. There was no turning back.

That night I lay awake, unable to hide from a constant parade of thoughts and images: Joachim discovering the letter and 10,000 different scenarios that followed. What would the next day bring? After breakfast, with dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, I trudged after Ursu-

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Children of the "Lebensborn" Confront Their Past

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by Andrea Gerlin

OSLO, Norway — When he was less than a year old, Paul Hansen was taken by his mother to a Nazi-run orphanage in German-occupied Norway, where a generation of Aryan children were being groomed to rule the world.

Hansen and hundreds of other Norwegian youngsters fathered by German soldiers got their start in life here in the Godthaab Home on the outskirts of Oslo. Nurses in white starched uniforms kept strict discipline and spoke to the children only in German. The children's physical growth and "racial fitness" were summarized in annual progress reports.

"This was my home," Hansen, 59, remembered, strolling the grounds of the 19th-century building last week. "I came here with my mother and she abandoned me here after she was pushed out by her family."

This orphanage was the central office of the Norwegian branch of the notorious *Lebensborn*, or "fountain of life," plan for a master race created by German SS commander Heinrich Himmler. Blond, blue-eyed Norwegian babies became part of the Nazi scheme, fathered by German soldiers in liaisons with Norwegian women and sometimes taken away to be raised in orphanages here or, in Germany.

But after World War II, the "master race" children became pariahs. Their mothers were viewed as collaborators and shunned. The children were also ostracized, sent to homes for the mentally retarded, put up for adoption, or returned to relatives who hated them for what they represented.

Today, Hansen and hundreds of now-graying *Lebensborn* children are forcing Norway to face a bitter legacy of occupation, collaboration and child abuse. They are speaking out about their childhoods and some of them—like Hansen have sued the Norwegian government, blaming it for complicity in their postwar mistreatment.

For Hansen, years of neglect began in 1946, when he was sent from Godthaab to a home for the mentally retarded, without an evaluation or diagnosis. There he slept in a bed soaked with others' urine.

He says he completed only two years of formal education and never knew any of his relatives, who ignored him because of the shame of his paternity. He was taunted on the floor of the factory where he had his first job, and at age 18 he tried to kill himself by putting his wrists in a grinding machine. The man he believed to be his father died in 1953, and when he tracked his mother to the town where she lived in Germany in 1965, she rejected him.

"We were a shame, a mark or a black spot on Norwegian society," Hansen said. "There were many things I was denied because of this. I've really missed out on a warm nuclear family."

To foster its goal of a master race, the SS developed a vast administrative structure for the *Lebensborn* in Norway, employing more than 300 people at three orphanages and six maternity homes. They became busy places: 400,000 German soldiers occupied Norway, and their wartime assignations with civilians, including everything from prostitution to marriage, produced 12,000 children. Norwegian doctors were told to refer women impregnated by soldiers to German authorities and many did.

Though little-known or studied even in Norway until recently, *Lebensborn* was an important instrument of Hitler's racial policy. Just as Nazism sought to eliminate those it deemed "defective"—Jews, Gypsies, gays, blacks and the disabled—it sought to increase the population of robust, blond-haired, blue-eyed Aryans. Here in Norway, Nazi leaders found their prized genetic stock and encouraged its proliferation by cultivating and nurturing children who fit their ideal profile.

As the end of the German occupation neared in 1945, another battle began for the *Lebensborn* children. The resistance movement gained strength and the hunt for Nazi collaborators expanded, and Lebensbom children and their mothers became obvious targets. A prominent Norwegian psychiatrist consulted by a government committee characterized the children as prone to mental retardation, while others feared they would become a potential "fifth column" in society.

Their mothers were fired from jobs, rounded up in camps, and attacked by angry mobs that shaved the women's heads. A government survey of 276 municipalities in Norway in 1945 found that in nearly two-thirds of towns, there was hostility toward women who dated Germans during the occupation; in more than a third, there was hostility toward the war children.

"It was an extra stigma to have a German father," said Kare Olsen, an archivist and historian at the National Archives in Oslo who has written a book about the *Lebensborn*. "That was the enemy."

Olsen, who has done more than 500 searches of archival files for *Lebensborn* children since adoption records were opened in 1986, estimates that one-third of them grew up with single mothers, one-third in stepfamilies, and one-third in adoptive families. A few hundred were sent to Germany, while others were shuttled from one institution to another.

Tove Laila Strand was one of the early *Lebensborn* children, born in 1941 and assigned Number 501. She lived at home with her mother for two years, but when her German father was killed at the Russian front in 1943, *Lebensborn* officials sent the girl to live with her paternal grandparents in Eberwald, Germany. She remembers a happy childhood there, with grandparents who read and sang to her in the evenings.

The Red Cross returned her to Norway in 1948 after the Allies pressured the country to take responsibility for *Lebensborn* children sent to Germany during the war. Strand's mother, who had previously been judged unfit to care for her, had remarried and did not want her back but had no choice. For a hellish eight years until she ran away, she says, her stepfather sexually abused her and both her parents beat her.

"My grandparents loved me and wanted to keep me," Strand said. "Then came the Norwegian authorities to place me with my mother. They had never checked, they never controlled the situation with my mother."

For Gerd-Inger Karlsen, the question of paternity was a secret for much of her life. Her grandparents sent her mother away from the family home on an island in north Norway and raised Karlsen as if she were their daughter. No one in her family told her that her mother was not her sister or mentioned that her father was a German soldier, even after her mother returned eight years later.

"My family didn't want to speak about it," Karlsen said. "They built a wall. It was a shame kept in the family."

Their denial continued for 40 years until Karlsen's grandfather—who she had been led to believe was her father—admitted the truth to her teenage son. When she confronted her mother about her German father, her mother claimed that he had been killed in the war.

Two years later, Karlsen used German phone books to track him to a town near Hanover. She received a warm welcome when she visited him and his family. Her mother, now 75, still refuses to discuss her origins.

After fractured upbringings and lifetimes as social outcasts, many of the *Lebensborn* children are reexamining their painful experiences. Norway's prime minister apologized to them in a speech last year, but it wasn't enough for some, who are demanding greater recognition and compensation from the government.

A lawsuit filed by seven of the children in 1999 will put the Norwegian government on trial later this year, the first in a string of legal actions. It accuses the government of violating the European Convention on Human Rights, said Randi Hagen Spydevold, an Oslo lawyer who represents 170 people in *Lebensborn* cases.

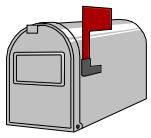
Spydevold cited a speech broadcast by the exiled government from London to Norway over BBC Radio during the occupation, which warned Norwegian women that they would be punished if they had relationships with German soldiers.

"Every society has its abusers," Spydevold said. "But this was systematic and the government didn't do anything about it. It got legitimized because the government sent these messages to the man in the street."

Merenthe Rein, a spokeswoman for Norway's Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, said the government considers the *Lebensborn* claims too old.

"It is clear many children of the war did suffer, and some failure by civil servants is likely, but it cannot be established that there was an official policy on this," Rein said. "As of now, we feel we need to know more about what actually happened before we can deal with these things."

The ministry has funded preliminary research and has set aside $700,000 in grants over the next three years for more studies. Examinations of how the *Lebensborn* children and their mothers were treated in the postwar period will begin this summer at universities in Oslo and Bergen.

Briefe

(Letters From Readers)

(Received via e-mail)

04/02/2001

Mr. Gage,

I bought a copy of *German Life* in December and found your advertisement. I hurriedly signed on to my computer to discover your inspiring web site.

I, too, am a German adoptee. I was born in Aschaffenburg in June, 1953, and was adopted by Americans in July, 1953. After reading all of your newsletters, I feel very fortunate to have been in an orphanage for only 6 weeks. I do not have quite the sense of loss as do many of your other readers. I lived with my new family in Wiesbaden until early 1955, when my father (an Air Force M/Sgt) was reassigned stateside.

I returned to my birth place in March, 1999. By the grace of God, my search was simple. I had never intended to look for my birth mother/-family. Then, my mother died and my father began to encourage me to look for my "roots."

I thought and prayed and cried over my decision for over a year. Then one morning, on my way to work, I felt the peace that I needed to go ahead with the search.

With the help of my good friend Gertrud (who's from Germany), we wrote a letter to the Jugendamt in Aschaffenburg. I sent certified copies of my birth certificate and adoption papers along. I had always known my birth mother's name and address, as they were on my original birth certificate. Within one month, I received a return letter with some surprising information. My birth mother had been dead for over 3 years, but I have 2 brothers and 2 sisters. I'm the next to the youngest out of 5 children! My four siblings were all raised together—and none of them were aware of my existence, so we were all surprised.

I will keep this short, but I want to say to all those searching that it is frightening to risk rejection by your birth family, but it *is* worth the risk. I have found a kind and understanding group of people who have been willing to accept me into their lives. None of the 5 of us is perfect—we are all affected by our mother's decisions. But, they are so openhearted and more generous with their love than I could ever have imagined.

I stay in touch and I'm even learning to speak German so I can communicate more easily. One of my sisters speaks English and I have a brother-in-law who speaks English. But, I could be happy to just be in their presence, whether or not we could communicate verbally.

Like Linda Villarreal in Floresville, I too believe God's timing was perfect in my search [*See GD #35, Summer 1997—**Ed.***]. It was not in His plan that I know my birth mother, and so I rejoice in the gift He has given me—not only one big brother (that I've always wanted), but two. And, an older sister as well as a younger one. What a blessing they are.

Thanks, and God bless you for this wonderful outlet for all of us—the searching and the found.

— Pamela Long
San Antonio, TX
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April 29, 2001

Dear Mr. Gage:

I have enclosed payment for a subscription renewal. More importantly, I would like to thank you wholeheartedly for the work you have done with your newsletter.

I remember how alone I felt when I first learned of my adoption. Your newsletter not only gave me practical advice, but also made me realize I was not on a deserted island, but in a place that includes many helpful and understanding people. Knowing that I was one of thousands has comforted me greatly.

I have just completed my third letter to my birth mother in Germany, and I am waiting for a response. Previous to this we have had 2 short telephone conversations. Unfortunately I get a sense of reluctance on her part to meet me. I hope I am wrong.

I had hoped that by this time I would have had a reunion story for your newsletter. I look forward to the day that I am able to submit my article, including photographs of my reunion. At this time, I have no idea how my story will unfold. Regardless of the outcome, it is a story that needs to be told. I will begin the rough draft shortly.

— Jim Sweeney
Waltham, MA

May 9, 2001

Dear Mr. Gage:

I know that the primary focus of the *Geborener Deutscher* newsletter is on the American adoptees searching for their German origins, but I think that you may be interested in the enclosed clipping from a recent issue of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* [*Reprinted in this issue on pg. 2 —* **Ed.**].

The article got my interest because I happen to be of German-Norwegian ancestry. Thankfully, I was born years after the end of Hitler's war and my own family has been in the United States for more than a hundred years.

— Wilbur Hansen Kalb
Warminster, PA

After 35 Years, Search Is Over

by Gloria Campisi

***Daily News* Staff Writer**

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PHILADELPHIA, PA (1/10/86)—Growing up in a little fishing village near Bremerhaven, West Germany, Anita Rosenfeld always thought her father, an American soldier, was "a cowboy."

Now she's learned differently. He's a truck driver, for the city of Abilene, Texas.

Rosenfeld, 37, now of Bala Cynwyd, born in 1949 of a post-World War II romance, was reunited Wednesday in Abilene with her father, Travis Clark, 60. She had not seen him since she was an infant and he, an Army corporal, returned to the States from Germany.

"I always thought he was a cowboy, or hoped he was a cowboy. He's not, that's been the only disappointment," Rosenfeld said, laughing, last night. But her voice betrayed the range of emotions of a lifetime of loss.

"He was always in the back of my mind," said Rosenfeld, who moved to the Germantown section of Philadelphia in 1958, after her mother, Maria Gesiotto, married another American serviceman. Gesiotto and Clark corresponded for a few years after their daughter's birth but eventually lost touch. Gesiotto died eight years ago.

"I guess when I had children, I started to think about it more seriously," said Rosenfeld, the wife of a physician, mother of two sons and a unit clerk at Hahnemann University Hospital. "Then I thought, I have a good life, just leave things alone." She suspected her father had married, she said, "and I didn't want to come and disrupt their lives either."

Rosenfeld said she made efforts "off and on for a few years" to find Clark, who she knew was from Abilene, she said. "But I always chickened out.

"A few years ago, I tried calling information in Abilene, but my father wasn't listed. "I tried the Veterans Administration, they weren't able to help me."

Several weeks ago, a girlfriend mentioned that she had heard about the Social Security Administration aiding in the reunion of a parent and child, Rosenfeld said. "Social Security has a new program, called parent-locators. I think it's actually set up for dependent children.

"They helped me anyway. They tracked him down really quickly."

Social Security personnel told Rosenfeld they would have to contact Clark first to see if he would be willing to be put in touch with her.

Clark said he learned late last Friday, on his 60th birthday, that his daughter had been trying to find him. Early Monday, he called Harrisburg and was put through to Rosenfeld.

"Nothing's been the same since," she said.

"I think children that are in my situation, or are adopted, regardless of how good their new parents are, you still want to know your natural parents," she said.

Despite the call, Rosenfeld admits she still had trepidations. "Even when we were getting ready to land I thought, God, I hope he likes me."

A smoker, she feared her father would disapprove. "I hid my cigarettes in my pocketbook and put a stick of gum in my mouth," she said. "The first thing he did was pull out a pack of Pall Malls.

"I don't remember what we said," when they were reunited at Abilene Municipal Airport, she said. "We were just kind of crying and laughing at the same time.

"I really didn't know what to expect. In my mind, the only picture that I had of him, he was a young man, real good looking. He's still cute."

She also learned she had two step-brothers, a step-sister and a grandmother, all of whom greeted her "royally," as did Clark's wife.

"I recognized her just the minute she stepped off the plane," her father said. "She looked like her mother. I love my daughter very, very much. I never stopped loving her."

All Rosenfeld's fears vanished when her father told her at their airport meeting, "You make my life complete. Honey, you'll never get away from me again."

la on a tour of the city. She insisted I go, believing Joachim would have to work and wouldn't contact me (if at all) until later that day. I went along, but couldn't concentrate. On any other day of my life, the time-worn bridges, marketplaces, churches and monestaries of Bamberg would have been far more interesting.

Ursula suddenly had become a different person. There was a spring in her step and a smile in her tour-guide voice.

But where was her head? I might be meeting my father for the first time, remember? He'd never find me if we spent the whole day wandering around. I tried giving subtle hints, but each time she immediately discovered another place to investigate. (Much later I learned the reason for her care-free attitude: she felt, for the first time, some of her burden falling on Joachim's shoulders.) Just before noon she spied the Schlenkerla, a brewery/beer hall as old and dark as the special Rauchbier (smoked beer) that made them a local tourist attraction. This can't be passed up, she said.

My mood was souring.

As we hoisted our steins, I wondered why Ursula couldn't sense my displeasure. Instead she struck up a conversation with a mother and daughter who also happened to be from a town near Cologne. Before I knew it they were fast friends, calling for the next round.

By 3 p.m., my mind had wandered over to the hotel, where I was having an emotional reunion with the father I'd never known. But the rest of me was still sitting there in the Schlenkerla, a forced smile on my face and a fourth Rauchbier in front of me.

To my disbelief, as we finally readied to leave, Ursula asked the woman and her daughter to come along. I marched in silent protest as our impromptu group ambled back to the hotel. Was I now obligated to share this momentous day with a pair of complete strangers? What would we encounter, and how in the world would we explain it? We were about to find out.

As I opened the hotel door, two frantic receptionists barreled down the long hallway toward me, arms flailing. "There she is! There she is! A man with your photo has been here several times to see you. A Mr. Bauer." They handed me a piece of paper with a telephone number.

My intuition was right—he had been looking for me all afternoon.

Ursula spun in chaotic circles. "It's him! It's him! I knew he'd want to see you. Call him right now! Call him right now!" The two women just stared, mouths agape.

On autopilot, I bolted up the stairs to our room. I sat on the bed, picked up the receiver and dialed. After a few rings I heard a deep "Hallo." It was hard enough to think straight in English; I don't know how I managed with my limited German.

But I did. And it was Joachim.

He answered me in thickly accented English. "Yes. I have been to the hotel many times today to see you. Actually, I was just coming up there again."

Just like that. He was on his way to meet me in the hotel's cafe. Now.

I checked the mirror, wishing for more time to do something about the dark circles. Racing down the stairs, I found the two women were still there—finally made aware they were unwitting passengers on a very wild ride. They wanted to kiss and hug me. They even wanted to watch the reunion, coyly hidden behind newspapers in a corner of the cafe.

But I was adamant. This was my moment to meet my father for the first time. I wasn't willing to put on a show for anyone. After too many precious minutes of arguing, they agreed to leave with Ursula for a drink nearby.

Finding a table near the back of the cafe, I ordered a coffee and sat there, waiting. Shaking.

For 15 minutes, I scrutinized every man who entered. Head to toe. Having only Ursula's faded image of a teen-aged Joachim to go from, I really didn't know what I was looking for. There were several possible contenders.

But as it turned out, my eyes were transfixed on the wrong door.

Through the side entrance came a tall, angular, 40-ish man with tousled brown hair, wire-rimmed glasses and a thick moustache. He hung up his coat and headed straight for me.

No way. This was him? Really? He looked absolutely nothing like me. There wasn't a single familiar feature on his face. But this indeed was my father standing there.

I stood up—and, not knowing what to do, shook his hand.

He sat down beside me and ordered a coffee, too. Was this a positive or negative experience for him? I couldn't tell. He just seemed stunned, like me. "How did you find me?" he asked, in that wonderful Franconian-accented English.

I tried to explain the long, complicated story as he peered at me quizzically. What must he think of all this? My face and ears started burning; a wave of cold embarrassment shuddered through me. After maintaining control for so long, despite total exhausation, I finally couldn't handle it. Tears welled up in my eyes.

He looked at me reassuringly. And as the minutes passed, conversation flowed between us and I felt more relaxed.

He explained quietly and plainly that, although he had been aware I was born, he was only 19 at the time—young and irresponsible. He didn't dwell on what had happened and moved on, eventually losing interest with the idea of a daughter he'd never seen. He made no apologies for the way he had handled the situation; I respected his honesty and, frankly, I could understand.

The years had gradually dimmed his memory of Ursula and the pregnancy. He told me of his career as a math professor, his failed first marriage, his current wife (who knew about me), his 9-year-old son, Alexander (who did not.) He was so composed and matter-of-fact that it appeared he was experiencing some degree of denial. It must have been impossible for him to believe that this strange American woman sitting next to him, who didn't resemble him in even the most remote way, was actually his daughter.

I know he felt that way, because I did, too.

But he accepted me without question or hesitation, and seemed genuinely excited. He even wanted me to meet his family. So, after leaving word for Ursula at the hotel desk, we walked together to his house on the hill.

There I was, inside that dark unknown "beyond" that had kept me awake all night. The house was bona fide old-world German: simply decorated with white walls and dark, hulking, hand-built furniture.

Joachim called up the staircase for Alexander; the boy slid feet-first down the broad wooden handrail to the bottom of the steps. Boom—there he was. He whirled around and faced me.

Same mouth. Same blond hair. The nose was different, though. He proceeded to tear around the room, putting on a wild, kinetic performance, trying valiantly to embarrass his—well, our—father in front of the "company."

I couldn't believe this child was my half-brother. He had no idea who he was showing off for. I wondered if he would ever know.

Joachim's wife, brown-haired and pretty, came in later; she looked and smiled at me demurely. Our communication was limited—she didn't speak any English—but I found her to be a warm, comforting person. She had a knowing security about Joachim and didn't seem at all threatened with my presence in her house. Eventually she left to put Alexander to bed.

Joachim and I sat at opposite ends of the seemingly mile-long dining table, a basket of sliced bread and cheese between us. He opened a bottle of wine.

We talked and talked, about everything from German reunification to Bill Clinton to Columbus discovering America. We laughed. It was easy to see what a kind and sensitive person he was.

I really liked him.

We talked so long, in fact, that I forgot to call Ursula back at the hotel. When I finally phoned her, she was alone and unhappy. I had not realized how badly she needed to relieve her anxieties by seeing and talking to Joachim again. He took the receiver and explained that all was well and it wasn't a problem for her to come over. He left to pick her up.

I tried to imagine what their drive together was like. To my relief, they returned laughing amicably.

The three of us then sat there at the table in disbelief. After 26 years, these three paths miraculously had crossed again.

We talked until 1 in the morning, Joachim's wife joining us later with more wine and two lit candles. The conversation was impressively happy and easy, considering the circumstances; we touched on so many subjects, yet always came back to the obvious one: our reunion.

Finally, it was time to go.

Ursula and I shoe-horned ourselves into Joachim's tiny brown car as he squeezed in behind the wheel. Bouncing along on the cobbled street, we rounded a corner that Ursula immediately recognized.

"Isn't this where my apartment was?" she asked.

Joachim shook his head. "No—it was the next block over. Would you like to see it?" He turned right and stopped at the top of a steep, narrow passageway.

"Remember?" he asked. "Halfway down on the left side, top floor." The faded white townhouse must have dated to the early 1600s. Lights were on inside.

The three of us sat and looked at it silently.

Joachim then put the car back in gear and drove on down the hill. We stepped out in front of the hotel and walked up to the door. Grinning at each other, we just stood there for a few moments, letting it sink in.

What an amazing day.

The next morning Ursula and I would leave for Munich, so this was it. At least for now.

My father wrapped his arms around us and we formed a little group hug, alone there under the streetlamps. I looked up into his smiling face, trying to imprint it in my mind.

"Diese ist auch eine Familie," he said.

"This is also a family."