A Newsletter for German-Born Adoptees



# Geborener Deutscher®

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# Sibling Revelry Unites Family

## *Woman at last finds her two half-sisters & a half-brother*

by Staishy Bostick Siem
*Dallas Morning News* Staff Writer

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*The Dallas Morning News*

**GRAND PRAIRIE, TX** (7/24/02) — Brenda Doster Smith had always known that she was adopted and had always known, somehow, that she had biological siblings somewhere.

More than a decade ago, the Mansfield resident decided to find them.

"When you are adopted, you instinctively know there is a part of you missing," she said.

Her search began in Germany, where Ms. Smith was born and her American military parents adopted her.

Through a network of people, Ms. Smith was put in contact with a German social worker who agreed to help her find her siblings.

The social worker, Maria Hierlinger-Gudat, analyzed German, American, Social Security and military records. In 1999, she found that Ms. Smith had two half-sisters, both living in the United States.

That same year, Ms. Smith suffered a disabling back injury at work while lifting a box. The injury, she said, has caused nerve damage and chronic pain.

It was her search for her biological sisters that kept her going, she said.

"God took my back, but he gave me my sisters," she said.

With names in hand, she contacted a company that specializes in finding people. She gave the company about half her $70-a-week workers' compensation check, and they sent her a list of 10 people.

She decided to write to the one with the German-sounding last name: Carmen Gruning of Illinois.

"I got a phone call five days later," Ms. Smith said. The voice on the other end said, "This is your sister."

Ms. Gruning put Ms. Smith in contact with Ms. Smith's other half-sister, Angie DeMartino of Indiana. The two were raised in the United States by their maternal grandmother. They also told Ms. Smith about a half-brother.

Ms. Smith began searching for her younger brother, and a few months ago she finally found him: Daniel O'Neill, a resident of Belton, MO.

They met for the first time last weekend at Ms. Smith's Mansfield home.

"This is like finding a needle in a haystack the size of New York," Ms. Smith said. "That's how weird it is.

"I watch reunions on TV," she said. "It's just not a typical reunion story; it's a miracle."

Mr. O'Neill had never been told that he was adopted, and he was confused when he received a letter in June from Ms. Hierlinger-Gudat.

"I got the letter and I just really didn't know what to think," he said.

The letter asked him to confirm his August 1961 birthday in Germany. It told him he had sisters in the United States looking for him.

Mr. O'Neill did know that he was born in Germany while his adoptive parents were stationed there—his father was in the U.S. Army. He

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# Search Journal

**Part Two**

*by William L. Gage*

The first part of my "Search Journal" appeared in the first issue of *Geborener Deutscher* (4/14/88) about a year after my story of search and reunion had reached a point which, while not the "end," seemed like an ending nonetheless.

The first "chapter" began with a description of my personal background and ended as I concluded my first serious attempt to find my birth mother which, while earnest, was not very successful. I had gone back to Germany in early October 1986, planning to stay for four weeks. I extended my stay by one more week, hoping to better my chances of success. By the end of it, however, and despite the extension, I still had only been able to follow my mother's "paper trail" through June 3, 1967, when she moved to a town called Werl from a town called Hemer.

Although I returned home without finding my birth mother, I did obtain a promise of assistance from the head of the Frankfurter *Adoptionsvermittlung*, Frau Stoffer, whom I had visited at the end of my trip.

About a month later, I received a long letter from Frau Stoffer which, among other things, informed me of the existence of two older siblings, named Frank and Eleonore, who were born in 1951 and 1954, respectively.

During most of 1987, Frau Stoffer, through correspondence with various *Einwohnermeldeämter*, tried to locate my birth mother, without success. In late October, she wrote to tell me that her inquiries had reached an impasse. I then wrote to the German Red Cross and sought its assistance in my search. This would eventually prove to be the last step in my search for my birth mother, as it was the German Red Cross that was able to ascertain that she was deceased, as well as where and when she had died.

For my part, I spent 1987 corresponding with both my brother, Frank, and his adoptive parents. I had written to the *Adoptionsvermittlung* in Hannover, the city where he had been born and adopted, and they, in turn, had written to him, requesting his permission to give me his name and address, which he gave. I also tried unsuccessfully to locate my sister, Eleonore. In 1987, I also made my first contact with Leonie Boehmer, whose name I received as a referral from the International Soundex Reunion Registry in response to a request for its assistance.

The next "chapter" was written in early March of 1988, not long after I learned that my birth

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WILLIAM LEIS GAGE

mother was deceased, and just before I was scheduled to return to Germany for another extended, albeit significantly shorter, stay, during which I planned to meet my brother, Frank, and his adoptive family (including my then-10-year-old nephew, Oliver, the son of a second, younger sister, named Patricia, of whose existence I had learned from Frank's adoptive parents owing to the fact that they had also adopted her, as well); and to find out how my mother had died and, if possible, visit her grave.

The final "chapter" of that first "Search Journal," dated March 29, 1988, described in detail how I achieved those latter two goals.

At the end of my trip to Germany in March, 1988, I also visited Frau Stoffer at the Frankfurter *Jugendamt*, at which time I was given access to my adoption file. I was allowed to sit alone in a room with the file opened before me. It didn't tell me much that I didn't already know. The one significant piece of information I learned from reviewing my file, however, was the name of my putative birth father. A social worker had asked my mother to identify him, and had dutifully noted her response (as well as the fact that he had denied the allegation).

Leonie then stepped in and located both my birth father—who, it turned out, had likewise died many years earlier—and two other children of his by a later marriage—my paternal half-brothers. She was also able to locate my older sister, Eleonore, who, we discovered, was married and had not even known she was adopted.

Of my five half-siblings, I have met only two in person. As described, I first met Frank on my trip to Germany in 1988. In late 1991, Leonie and I traveled to Germany together, and I visited Frank again during that trip, as well. Leonie is from Hannover, and since Frank lives in Hannover, it was quite convenient, as we were staying with one of Leonie's sisters (who, coincidentally, lives within walking distance of the cemetery where my mother is buried).

It was on this 1991 trip that I first met my sister, Eleonore. Leonie and I stopped by as we were driving from Hannover to Berlin and spent a few hours with her and her husband, visiting them in their home and eating out together in a nearby restaurant.

Frank last communicated with me on his own initiative via e-mail shortly after the 9/11 terrorist attacks; and we have regularly exchanged Christmas cards. I am essentially estranged from Eleonore, and I have never communicated with nor met my younger sister, Patricia. Frank's adoptive parents have both since died, and my nephew, Oliver, is now a grown man, but I do not know of his whereabouts or status. I have only once spoken with one of my paternal half-brothers, for about an hour, on the telephone, but have since completely lost track of them.

After Leonie found her, my first contact with Eleonore was by letter, on April 21, 1990. It took another four months to receive an answer from her. She said she preferred to communicate by telephone, and so I spoke with her a few times during the following summer and fall. Unfortunately, our conversations tended only to degenerate into arguments, and so we stopped talking.

In the course of our conversations, Eleonore nonetheless invited me to visit her over Christmas that year, and even offered to pay for the airfare. I was quite surprised at her apparent generosity, and, despite our obvious differences, initially accepted the invitation. Later, when I told her of my plans—which included visits with my German friends, as well as my visit with her and her husband over Christmas—she made it clear that the offer to pay my airfare was contingent upon my spending all my time only with her. I then decided not to accept the invitation after all, and wrote her in early December to tell her why.

Thereafter followed a long silence between us. I didn't write, and she didn't call. In the meantime, in 1993, I decided to move from New York to New Mexico. Leonie had always said that she would help me get settled if I wanted to move to Albuquerque and, for a variety of reasons, I decided to take her up on the offer. I was fortunate to find both a job and a car (something I had not needed in New York City) within two weeks of my arrival. About a year later, I moved into my own apartment. Life went on.

Then, one day in April, 1995, out of the blue, I found a message from Eleonore on my answering machine. She reiterated her invitation to visit, offering again to pay for the airfare, again with the stipulation that I spend the entirety of my time in Germany with her. After much thought and consideration—and perhaps against my better judgment—I decided to accept the invitation, and scheduled the trip for early October of that year. In the meantime, in August, I lost my job, but decided not to cancel the trip.

I flew to Germany via Minneapolis. The layover in Minneapolis was lengthy, so I decided I had time to visit "The Mall of America." There was a shuttle bus between the airport and the mall, and lockers where one could stow one's carry-on bags in the mall. I had thought to take in a movie, but did not. I spent the hours walking around the mall, and I remember spending a great deal of my time trying to find the locker where I had put my bags!

When I travel, I usually rent a car, but this time I didn't, because I was going to be staying the whole time with Eleonore and her husband, Ehrhard. Ehrhard picked me up at the airport and drove me to their home in a nearby suburb.

Theirs is a small house, like most in Germany, and, as I recall, it was rather unkempt and smelled oddly. I can remember stacks of newspapers and magazines in the upstairs hallway, and, I believe, a large, caged bird (the source of the odor, no doubt). I think it was a parrot, but my recollections are a bit hazy now.

I don't well remember many details of how we spent all of our time together. I do have a specific recollection of driving in to Hamburg with Eleonore and having lunch with her in the cafeteria of a large department store, and of walking around taking snapshots, but not much else. The only other thing I clearly recall is how I came to the decision to cut my visit short.

The three of us had gone out to a nearby *Local* (bar) late in the evening, on or about the third day of my planned two-week stay. As we were walking back to the house, Eleonore and I got

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**Buckles** *by David Gilbert*

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# Briefe

(LETTERS FROM READERS)

December 21, 2002

Dear Mr. Gage:

Leonie Boehmer suggested I write to you about her success in locating my birth mother.

My parents adopted me and my brother in Germany. I am 47 years old and my mother, who passed away on February 14, 2002, never told us that we were adopted. I found this out two months after later, from a woman who lives ten houses away from my mother.

In April, Mrs. Rash approached me while I was walking my dogs and extended her condolences about my mother's passing. Apparently, she had read the obituary.

During our conversation, she said, "I thought you and your brother were adopted. That's what your mother said."

She said my mother told her that she couldn't have children, so she adopted us. This obviously irritated me, and she excused herself saying perhaps she was mistaken.

However, I didn't totally disbelieve her due to certain circumstances in my upbringing. I didn't have a real birth certificate! All I had was a translation document stating my name, date of birth and place of birth, with no mention of a mother or father.

So, I started to inquire with close friends of my mother's. I figured if a "bingo woman" knew, then some of her long-time friends must know something.

I asked a woman who lives in Kentucky. She e-mailed me back stating, "I can't believe your mother never told you."

I went into shock. It seems that my mother had had a hysterectomy in Germany before she met my dad. She was afraid he might not want to marry her because she couldn't have children. Obviously, they decided to adopt. I was adopted first, then my brother a year later.

I followed up with an aunt whom I hadn't talked to since I was perhaps eight or nine. She used to send Christmas us cards. She, too, confirmed this.

Then I called another long-time friend who had come to my mother's funeral. She had known my mother since 1958, but was hesitant to say anything until I asked whether my brother was actually my brother.

Eventually, she confirmed that he was my biological brother. She told me how my mom saw me in a crib and thought I was the most beautiful baby. When she found out I had a brother, they decided we shouldn't be separated, and so my parents decided to adopt both of us.

In August I came across an adoption service and asked them how can I obtain my original birth certificate from overseas. I was given Leonie Boehmer's name as a specialist who does research for German adoptees.

Leonie walked me through the steps of what to do and I sent her what information I had: a translation of my birth certificate. She also told me to contact INS to obtain the documents that were filed by my parents when I was naturalized at age eight. It was then that I actually saw an application that my father filled out, and it clearly states where I was adopted and when. But that was it.

Again, Leonie did the extensive research. She took what information I could obtain for her and managed to obtain my birth certificate with my original name and birth mother's name on it. My given name was Hannelore. I now also know what time I was born. Things I never knew.

Leonie continued her research and found out my birth mother had married an American military man while still in Germany. She just sent me an e-mail on Wednesday telling me she lives in Tennessee, and giving me her address. She said she wasn't able to get a telephone number. (I live in California and my brother is in Oklahoma.) On Wednesday night, I called directory assistance, just in case, and they provided me with her telephone number.

The next day, Thursday, I decided I was going to call. I went to my car at noon, during my I lunch break, to make a call from my cell phone. I called and a woman with a German accent answered. I only identified myself as Bonnie and she asked, "Who are you? I don't know you," and hung up.

Well, I figured it wasn't such a good idea to call from my cell phone, so I went home to call from the house.

I called again and was real nervous. I started out saying, "I hope this is a good time for you," and she again asked, "Who are you? What do you want from me? Be honest with me what do you want?"

I then proceeded to talk with a shaking voice, telling her my birth name and how I was adopted in Germany, etc.

She just said, " Oh, my God," over and over again.

I was so nervous. She was crying with excitement and was so happy. She sounded wonderful, with a nice German accent. A real sweetheart. She said that she had been thinking about us and knew that I was 47 and my brother was 48. We must have talked for 45 minutes.

I then called my brother in Oklahoma, telling his wife about this. My sister-in-law took down our birth mother's telephone number, and I also gave my birth mother my brother's telephone number. I told her that if she were to call, she should call around 6:00 p.m.

My brother was about to telephone her when he came home from work when she called and spoke to him. Marta (my birth mother) spoke to everyone in his family. She spoke to his entire family. Marta talked to him for 45 minutes. Marta said she would call me on Christmas and talk to me around 6:00 p.m.

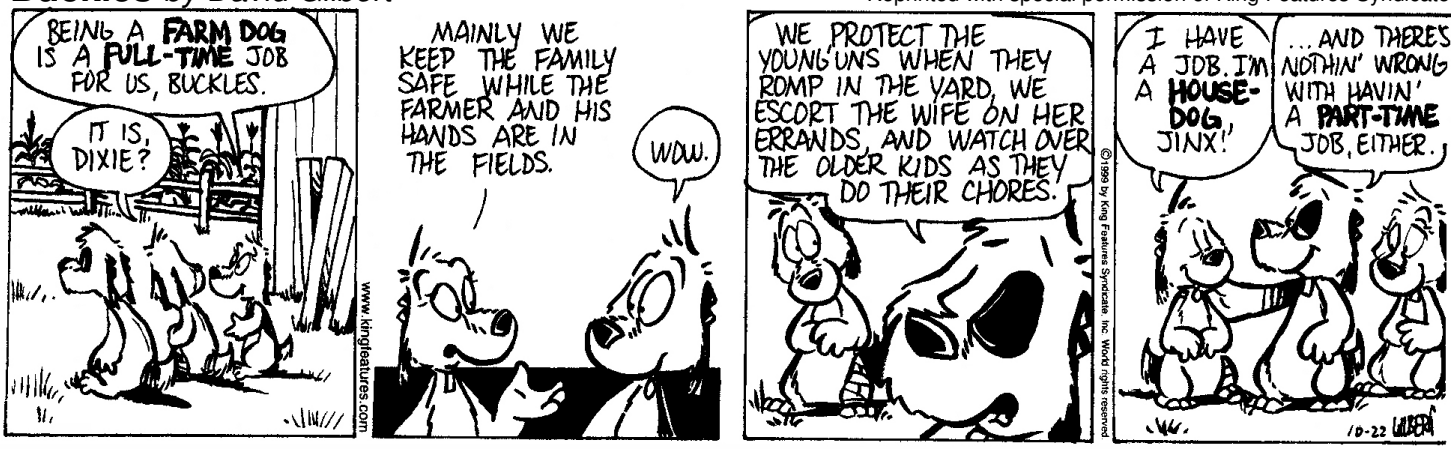
Well, I went to the store on Thursday bought a nice Christmas card and mailed it to Marta along with some photos.

I am so excited. I feel like I have been blessed in so many ways. I feel that if it weren't for Leonie Boehmer and her research, this never would have taken place. I am so grateful to Leonie. It only took five months for Leonie to find my birth mother. I have spoke to people at the adoption meetings I go to who said it has taken them 5 years sometimes to find their birth parent.

I wanted to share this with you, because this is my Christmas present. — ***Bonnie Dodson***
***Marina, CA***

**Buckles** *by David Gilbert*

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## Sibling Revelry *Cont'd Fr. Pg. 1*

had seen his naturalization papers but was told that they were a requirement for all foreign-born babies so he never had questions.

Mr. O'Neill's aunt confirmed the letter's contents on Father's Day, shedding light on the closely guarded family secret. His adoptive parents are deceased.

"My father—he was so proud of me," he said. "I know that's why my mother took it to her grave. I was in her eyes their son and it didn't matter.

"I was within three files of finding this file," Mr. O'Neill said, pointing to a faded red file that has held his adoption records.

Mr. O'Neill said he plans to spend the rest of the week with Ms. Smith before he and his family return home. He is already making plans to meet his other two sisters.

Ms. Smith said that Ms. Hierlinger-Gudat is helping the half-siblings locate their biological fathers.

Mr. O'Neill said he had often joked about being adopted with family members when he began noticing that he didn't share some of their mannerisms and physical characteristics.

For the first time in his life, he has seen his mannerisms and physical characteristics in another person.

Mr. O'Neill and Ms. Smith are spending the week comparing family traits: their feet look alike, they have similar jaw lines and profiles and both of their noses turn red when they cry.

"That's the first thing I noticed—your nose is red like mine is," Ms. Smith said to her brother.

They have been poring over family photos, discussing their lives and talking about how they found each other—a miracle by both accounts.

It's like they were never apart, they said.

Suzanne O'Neill, Mr. O'Neill's wife, said the two joke, talk and even playfully argue like a true brother and sister.

Plus, Mr. O'Neill said, he had always felt that something was missing from his life but was never able to identify it.

"When she found me that hole has been filled," he said. "I'm literally whole again."

## Search Journal *Continued From Page 2*

into a loud and rancorous argument, reminiscent of the telephone exchanges which had caused me to cease communicating with her years before, and brought about by the same "bone of contention." The experience left me doubting the desirability of remaining as their guest, and I decided to leave as soon as I could. This presented me with something of a dilemma, however, given my lack of a car; nor could I afford to rent one.

About a year after I started publishing *GD*, I got the idea to publish another, similar newsletter, in German, which I called *Das Adoptionsdreieck* ("The Adoption Triangle"). The first issue of "Das Dreieck" appeared in April, 1991, two years after the first issue of *GD*.

Leonie was very helpful in getting material for publication in both newsletters. One story she got for me was that of a German man whom she had helped to find his siblings in the United States. His name is Martin Wendnagel and his story appeared in both *GD* (#9) and "Das Dreieck" (#2). When Leonie and I had traveled together to Germany in late 1991, on the trip when I first met Eleonore in person, we visited with the Wendnagels, among many others.

Thus it was, having decided I no longer wished to stay with my sister and her husband, I telephoned the Wendnagels and asked if I could spend the rest of my time with them. I was relieved when they said yes. Eva Wendnagel drove to Hamburg and picked me up that day. I have not communicated with Eleonore since.

When I learned of my mother's death, I also learned that she was married to an Englishman at the time, which is why she was buried in the British cemetery in Hannover. With Leonie's help, I eventually found her widower, Michael Stokes.

My records indicate that I spoke with him on at least one occasion, and Leonie and I both wrote letters to him, seeking his recollections of my birth mother, and any more-recent photographs of her. I have no record that he ever responded, however.

Eventually, I learned from his wife—*i.e.*, the woman he wound up marrying after my birth mother's death—that he, too, had died before I could meet him or have any meaningful communication with him. In a letter dated October 17, 1993, she told me something about her late husband's relationship with my birth mother.

She told me about how, when my mother died, Michael was stationed in Northern Ireland, and he didn't learn of her death until he returned to Germany immediately following the accident that took her life; how close they were; and how devastated he was by her sudden death.

She sent me some pictures of my mother taken during a trip they made to England in 1974, as well as some pictures taken at her funeral. She also sent me some few personal belongings of hers which had survived Michael's grief-induced rage ("... he gave everything away, and what was left, furniture, clothes, etc., he made a bonfire and burnt it"), consisting of a cross-stitched tablecloth, and some miscellaneous items of jewelry, including her wedding ring.

She also wrote, in part: "They [had] a dog called Blackie, which Michael said was bilingual, as your mother spoke to it in German and Michael in English, and it understood each one. Michael was fluent in ... German..., and your mother could speak a fair bit of English. They live[d] together for ... about four years before they married, so they had quite a few good years together. ... Michael was a lovely man ... [and] I am sure your mother, like me, felt very special, as he was ... very generous ... with everything he had, his love especially."

Since beginning my search for her, I have learned that my birth mother came from a broken home; survived the Second World War, as well as its aftermath; had four illegitimate children between 1951 and 1964; and, finally, married a man who loved her well. If nothing else, I take comfort in knowing that she apparently found happiness at the end of her life.

We should all be so fortunate.

## Buckles *by David Gilbert*

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