

AN ADOPTEE'S STORY SPANNING 60 YEARS

Helga shares with TaKenUK her experience of being adopted and her journey to find her real family. (06/04/2014)

I was in a NCH children home in Bristol aged about 19 months from 1955 to 1963 leaving when I was just over 9 years. My elder sister was with me.

I had a younger half brother who was fostered out in Seven Oaks Kent. I searched and searched for him over the years but got nowhere. ITV Surprise Surprise found him in April or May last year but although they wrote three times he wasn't interested. I was so upset but not surprised.

I saw him once or twice when he was a baby. We were told he had died. He hadn't – he was adopted in 1957.

Our Mother didn't want to live with my father and because she was German, and so shortly after the war, he had custody. He didn't give a damn about us and occasionally visited us although the home would not allow him to take us out overnight. He wouldn't have wanted to anyway. He often had to have his arm twisted to write to us and to visit us. I have my records and it's all there.

My mother and her 2nd husband, C, who we called 'daddy' and accepted as such, were supposed to have adopted us in April 1962. Tragically she died 21st December 1961 of cancer.

A woman who used to take children out from the home (local people from the village took kids out and were known as 'Aunties'). She used to take my sister out. This was 'P'. She asked about adopting her. She was told only married people can adopt (in those days). Hey presto she turns up with her new fiancé R and asks about my sister. She is told she has to have me too as we are siblings and they don't like to separate.

The first few months were great but by the time of the adoption I really didn't want it as I was not happy there. It was like living in a goldfish bowl and everything I did or said seemed to be closely scrutinised and criticised. I asked them to send me back to the home. It was clear I didn't want to be adopted – my sister remembers me folding my arms in the court and refusing to answer "do you want to be adopted?" Nothing was done of course and it went ahead. Two older children were a nuisance those days and difficult to place.

Adoptive mother P would insist I 'took after' her in some ways and 'took after' R, (her husband) in others. We couldn't possibly have taken after either of them as we were not blood related. That didn't seem to bother her – that this bothered us. The adoption was all about P and not about us, the children.

Our stepfather C, who we had called Daddy, suddenly turned into an 'uncle' and we rarely saw him. The only photos I recall being given of him included his new wife and their son, no doubt to remind us that we were no longer an important part of his life.

If either of us wanted to talk about our mother we had the lecture about the Germans killing the Jews so we learned not to ask about her. My sister remembers P (the adoptive mother) saying words to the effect of: "you will have to forget about that, I'm your mummy now".

If I asked about my father I was told how horrible he was. I found him when I was 18 and met him when I was 19. They were right (for once) – he did turn out to be a self-obsessed self-important social climber. I have nothing to do with him at all.

I met some members of my father's family – very few liked him at all which spoke volumes. I am not in touch with them as they didn't show much interest when I met them, although they were kind and polite.

I spent about 30 years looking for my mother's side of the family. I gave up after I was told all records were destroyed after the war. I managed to get her birth certificate in the 1990's – it's Polish! I had been bullied at school (that I was a Nazi and Hitler's daughter) and also due to the adoptive mother with her constant lectures about the Jews being killed by the Germans I lost all sense of who I was. Instead she wanted me to become a mini-her. My sister eventually did as she learned to comply whereas I wouldn't.

My sister would frequently 'grass me up' (for instance 'stealing a biscuit from the biscuit tin') which would result in me receiving a lecture lasting over an hour or longer, and my sister looking good. The fact that I would 'steal' a biscuit for her as well was not brought into the equation!

Adoptive father had three children from his first marriage (he was divorced) and when they came to stay it was clear they were favoured as they were treated completely differently.

They were nice older kids but we have lost touch, which is a shame. I liked them. They appeared to like us too. They lived with their mother so I suppose went their own way.

I have lived for 60 years (I was 60 this year) in a vacuum of never knowing who I was and believing that I never had any family members who really cared.

On 4th February this year (2014) I received, out of the blue, an email from a German cousin I never knew existed! She didn't know I existed either. Her family were only aware of my mother having one daughter, my sister. My cousin B found me after typing my mother's name into Google and came across some of my many, many searches for my brother. Fortunately, the email address I used in that particular search was still live (most are not – I searched for years for Michael and had moved several times so email changed).

The German cousin is the daughter of my mother's brother Axel. I had concentrated my search on him for years. He died not long ago so I am so sad to have missed him.

On March 13th (next week) I am meeting another cousin, and my uncle, who was married to my aunt – the younger half-sister of my mother. She came over to the UK by Kindertransport in May 1939 aged five, when Jewish children were rescued and sent here. My grandmother had left her German husband and married a Jewish guy. Hence the Aunt, my grandmother's youngest daughter being part Jewish.

My grandmother and her Jewish husband came over after my aunt, helped by Ida Cook who is well known for assisting Jewish families to escape the Nazis. My grandmother's Jewish husband appeared on one of the very first "This is Your Life" programmes in the 1950's where Ida Cook was honoured.

My uncle and aunt had three children, two daughters and a son. My aunt died a couple of years ago so I am sad to have just missed her as well as Axel.

I have nothing to do with my sister. She has four children and I have never been included in her life or her family's. I think I remind her of that awful adoption. She was fortunate in that she met her to-be husband while they were young at school, so she always had somebody that liked and loved her.

I ran away from 'home' when I was 16 and brought back by the police. By then we were living in the Midlands and I had gone to Bristol in the vain hope that I would find my father,

who would, in my imagination, love me. That never happened of course. I was taken to the children's home we had previously lived in, to be lectured that I was 'ungrateful' etc etc. Nobody thought to ask me why I ran away. Probably because they didn't really care...

After that P, the adoptive mother, made a photograph album. In the front were pictures of herself growing up and labelled '*mummy* aged....'. At the back of the album were a few photos of my REAL mother with just her first name written beside the photos. P had consigned my REAL mother to the back of the album with just her name. P of course put herself prominently in the front of the album, with details as well.

After I left home I took the album with me, and changed the photos around, putting my REAL mother at the front and removing P's photos altogether.

I managed to obtain my records in an attempt to find my identity, from NCH in 1989 or 1990. I had to go through 6 months of 'counselling' whereas my sister didn't have to suffer that and was sent her files after I had had mine. The file was handed to me like I was being handed a cup of tea. I dissolved into tears and sobbed. Here was my whole life from age 20 months to nearly ten – in a grey file. It was awful. At least I have them now. Simply because she is older, despite having shown no interest in her NCH files, I was told that she should have our mother's original letters. I thought that was unfair, as it was always I that had searched for answers, and she did not. I kept the letters and sent her copies.

They really should check adoptive parents first to find out WHY they wish to adopt instead of thinking 'oh they'll take two older children off our hands' and off you go! Clearly P wanted to be a 'mummy' but had no idea what went with that. She refused point blank to take advice from concerned friends and relatives who were worried about us. They tried to help at the time but of course P always knew better than they did – even though she did not. I remember the 'battle of the jeans' – we eventually got to wear them but not without a fight.

In my many years of searching I met others who were similarly desperate to find out who they are. My experience is not that unusual.

When my stepfather visited us on the few occasions he was invited, he told me a few years back he felt there was a terrible atmosphere that you could cut with a knife, in that household. He was right. There was.

She nearly always referred to herself in the third person:

Favourite phrases:

“Oh you do make mummy sad.” This would be accompanied with raised eyebrows and a sad face lasting a whole day and sometimes into the next.

“Don’t you love mummy and daddy after all they’ve done for you? Mummy and daddy took you from a children’s home when nobody else would have wanted two older children”. My response ‘can I go back please?’ or ‘will you send me to boarding school please?’

‘Oh you are UNGRATEFUL!’

‘Oh you DO make mummy sad’ - usually accompanied by a sad face that would last all day and sometimes into the next. Clearly we were responsible for her happiness.

She could nag for England, and I bet you could put music to it as well.

I see from my NCH records that before the adoption, during the time we lived with them (fostering period) whenever the SW came to see us we had real ice cream for tea! Unheard of! And also my sister had quite by sheer coincidence had a new dress bought for her that she actually liked! SW sometimes brought a dog and P pretended that this was perfectly normal for us. I don’t remember any other dogs visiting us. It was all for show.

It was an emotionally and mentally abusive atmosphere the whole time I lived there. I ran away when I was 16. I left home legally when I was 17. Married at 18..... Divorced at 22.....

A crap life all because I had no idea who I was and the adoptive parents didn’t give a damn about how we might be feeling the whole time we were with them – and only now am I beginning to live rather than exist because I now have my mother’s side to look forward to – roots are important and should never be denied any child if they are available. It should be the child’s choice who they contact and not up to the adoptive parents or authorities. They will eventually find out what the natural relatives are like and don’t need poison being dripped in an attempt to alienate them.

I think that the reasons why people want to adopt should be thoroughly investigated. P’s main desire was to be a ‘mummy’. Clearly so because she constantly referred to herself as such every day

I remember trying to share my NCH files with her in the 1990's. She said "well that was before. Everything was alright afterwards because then I became a mother". No she didn't.only on paper. She never behaved like other mothers I saw around friends at school. Our needs and wishes were certainly not important to her. It was always about her and what she wanted or expected.

Authorities should also check the finances of the family – P claimed she could not afford to buy sanitary towels "willy nilly". We could only change our underwear when she thought it necessary. If I changed without consulting her I would get into trouble for 'making work for mummy'. Why the hell adopt two girls??? She was also very stingy with food. I can remember an occasion when we had visitors and one wanted three sugars in their tea. Adoptive father R came into the kitchen and asked P "can we afford to let them have three teaspoons of sugar?"

Yes she fed us after a fashion. Tea after school, for instance could consist of two fish fingers, half a tomato, a slice of bread and butter, a cake and a biscuit.

She clothed us – mainly in 40's and 50's styles so I was constantly bullied at school, not just because of my name but also because of my old fashioned clothes. I would return home having been sat in puddles or had stones thrown at me and spat at, she would complain saying "you are making work for mummy. Children don't bully children without reason. You must have egged them on". No I didn't. I went to great pains to find alternative exits from school.

When I was ill – obviously I was 'putting it on to get out of....' whatever she imagined I was getting out of. Once I was sent home from ballet with severe stomach pains. According to her I was putting it on 'to get out of going to ballet'. I was sick in the kitchen sink so she exclaimed 'oh love you didn't chew your carrots properly'. I couldn't bloody win!

I had no idea that being adopted meant that I was owned by these people. I had no idea that I would have no privacy. I could not undress or go to the toilet without somebody lurking and then complaining that I was using too much toilet paper or too much toothpaste. Suicidal thoughts started when I was 14 years old.

Also I was told that "mummy can't afford to buy sanitary towels willy-nilly". We were not allowed to have our own supply and had to ask for a fresh one after showing 'mummy' that the previous one had been used to her satisfaction. No wonder I pinched money from her

purse and from anywhere else that I could. I was so busy paying for my own sanitary towels and being fined for 'being rude to mummy' that I had no money of my own.

Pocket money in the children's home was more than I ever had from her.

For the goodness sake, please PLEASE investigate WHY people want to adopt, check that they are financially able to keep them and ask them how they intend to emotionally care for the children before allowing already damaged children to live with people who could damage them further.