

FINDING

Adela

Andrea von Barby Patterson's journey to find her birthmother produces bittersweet truths and wonderfully unexpected surprises

by BOH HATTER
(Courtesy of ISS-USA)

Andrea von Barby Patterson has had a wonderful life.

The Boulder, Colorado mother of two looks back fondly on a childhood spent in the unspoiled beauty of the Rocky Mountains countryside. She's had loving parents, a promising modeling career, the opportunity to travel, and a happy marriage.

Despite her good fortune, there was something missing - something that tugged at her for many years.

Andrea always knew that she and her brother had been adopted in Germany. Like many adopted children, Andrea wanted to know more. "As a child, I was fascinated by how families looked alike," she says. "I always wondered if there was someone out there who looked like me." This curiosity remained strong, but Andrea kept it to herself out of respect for her parents.

Andrea's Birthmother, Adela, shown here in her 20s



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All of that changed last February when Family International Frankfurt (FIF) -- the German counterpart to U.S.-based International Social Services, USA (ISS-USA) -- contacted her brother in an attempt to reconnect him with his German birth mother. “It triggered something,” Andrea said. “There was something restless in me to know more about my natural parents and the circumstances which forced them to give me away.”

So, with the help of ISS-USA, FIF and the full support of her parents, Andrea began a search not knowing what, if anything, she would learn.

ROLLER COASTER OF EMOTION

“Cases like Andrea's can be difficult,” says Salome Sullivan, the ISS-USA caseworker who assisted Andrea. “You never know what you will find.” ISS-USA works on more than 100 tracing cases annually, each one equally poignant. “Andrea is an incredible person with a big heart. From the beginning, I was hoping we could help her reconnect. As I expected, there was a roller coaster of emotions.”

To Andrea, who had already waited a lifetime to know her birth mother, progress was painfully slow. As time passed, she felt rushes of panic and wondered, 'Am I too late?'

Then, on a rainy summer afternoon, news arrived through FIF. Her birth mother, Adela, had died in 1994. She was just 61 years old when she succumbed to complications from diabetes. “When I heard that my birth mother had passed away, it was like having the air kicked out of me,” Andrea recalls.

Eventually sadness gave way to discovery. FIF was able to obtain Andrea's original adoption case file. Among the forms and notations was a letter that Adela had written. From it, Andrea began to piece together the details of a mother she had so often tried to envision.

Many of the details were totally unexpected. Andrea was surprised to learn that Adela was Spanish, not German. She was born in Sabadell Spain, with

an adventurous spirit and a strong yearning to see the world. Andrea learned that “Adela was a brilliant, worldly woman who taught herself three languages as she worked her way through England, Switzerland, Austria, France and ultimately Germany - as a nanny.”

THE DARK-HAIRED BABY

While living in Frankfurt, Adela gave birth to Andrea, whom she named Alexia. She kept her



Baby photo of Alexia, now Andrea, taken at Kinderhaus

baby for seven days before placing her in Kinderhaus, a children's home outside of Frankfurt in Königstein.

Sigrid Frank opened Kinderhaus in 1959 to care for children of unwed mothers. It was not a government-run home, and Adela paid 50 Marks a month so that Alexia could receive the special care Kinderhaus was known to give.

Trained as a children's nurse, Frank opened Kinderhaus within her own home as a labor of love.



Andrea, with her parents and brother

It was a place where she, her children and a few other nurses provided meticulous care. They also kept meticulous notes on each child -- notes that were made available to Andrea.

"I was described as a 'sensible little child with dark hair and eyes' and that I was 'friendly, active, talked a lot and played intensively with toys.' I loved reading the notes."

Alexia stayed at Kinderhaus six months before Adela returned to sign the papers for her adoption.

As each new detail emerged, Andrea wanted to know more. She ached to understand more about this fascinating woman and the pressures that forced her to turn to adoption.

THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL

This angst was replaced with unexpected joy, as Andrea learned that she had a half-sister named Anne-Marie living in Germany. "I remember the first time I spoke to Anne," Andrea recalls. "I told her, 'I am so sorry. This is too big and overwhelming.' As we talked, I remember how much her voice sounded like an angel's...soft and sweet with a German accent."

Anne-Marie is 13 months older than Andrea and has no memory of the little sister who was in her home

for just a week. "Adela had never told Anne-Marie about me," Andrea says. "When I told her my name had been Alexia, she knew instantly that I was her sister."

Hearing from Andrea was a dream come true for Anne-Marie as well. "I always wanted a sister. In my younger days, I asked my mother: 'What would my name be if it wasn't Anne-Marie?' She answered: 'If I hadn't given you the name Anne-Marie, it was going to be Alexia, like a princess of the lovely Greek king's family.'"

"It is beautiful to have a sister," says Anne-Marie. "Since the first time I heard her voice it's been great. We always have something to talk about. Sometimes I think I have known her much longer than just one year. I missed growing up with her and I am glad that she had the courage to look for her roots."

"I remember that how much her voice sounded like an angel's...soft and sweet with a German accent."

Together, the sisters continue to piece together the mysteries of the past. What's clear is that Adela lived with profound sorrow - a sorrow that Anne-Marie is just beginning to understand.



Andrea is caught off guard by this photo test shot which made her appear Spanish. Only recently did she learn that her birthmother, Adela, was born in Spain.



For the past 14 years, Andrea has enjoyed life as a stay-at-home mom. She is shown here with husband, Tim, and sons Malcolm (12) and TJ (14).

For years she had so many questions of her own - why her mother refused to talk about Anne-Marie's childhood, why her mother couldn't stand to hear a baby cry and why some photos of her mother, apparently pregnant with her second child, had been torn at mid-torso.

“She emanates happiness. If I could pick just one best friend, I would pick Andrea.”

- Andrea's Mom

Andrea's relationship with Anne-Marie is a good one. They speak and correspond often. “We haven't had a face-to-face reunion yet, but she has opened her heart with love. We hope to meet next fall. Through her I realized that this process of finding my birth mother has helped to heal her life as well. Some of the questions she had about her childhood and our mother have been answered.”

AN UNEXPECTED PATH

The trek to find Adela has been difficult but beneficial for Andrea.

She has a sense of her birth mother, the type of person she was and the sadness she endured. “Adela had a strict Catholic upbringing and there was a lot

of shame,” Andrea says. “She was a kind, noble person but she always had a sadness about her.” “Putting me up for adoption just ripped her heart out. She didn't have the money to care for two babies. There was no way for her to keep me, but she made sure I was put into good hands. I believe she would have lived much longer if she hadn't had this sadness. My single biggest regret is that I was too late. I wanted to meet her and say



Anne-Marie, shown with her two daughters lives in Germany.

“My single biggest regret is that I was too late. I wanted to meet her and say thanks...tell her that I was OK and that I have had a beautiful life.”



Andrea corresponded with Joseph, Adela's half-cousin (front row, far right) and Primitiva, Adela's half sister (front row, white dress), shown with other members of Andrea's extended Spanish family.

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“This case was especially rewarding as, although Andrea started the search and hoped to find important pieces about her identity, it also allowed Anne-Marie to find a sister and better understand her mother,” says FIF’s Sabine Benisch.

“We got extremely lucky, I think,” Andrea says. “At times, it felt very scary but also with each piece of new information, there was such exhilaration.

There's a mix of sadness and happiness, but I feel better that I did it. Now when I look in the mirror, I see a new and improved version of myself.”

“Never in a million years would I have thought that I'd know the things or have the relationships I have today. I know my birth parents are watching now and are so happy that I am able to share our story.”

EDITOR'S NOTES: ISS-USA has also recently traced information about Andrea's birth father. Although he passed away in 2003, Andrea has begun to correspond with two half-sisters and a half-brother in the Netherlands.

ISS-USA and FIF work within an international network of offices and social work organizations to provide tracing services. More information on the services they provide are available at their websites: www.iss-usa.org and www.fif-ev.de.

