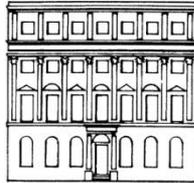


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SOLIDARITY WITH CHILDREN? TOWARDS A HISTORY OF ADOPTION

BENEDIKT STUCHTEY

‘Solidarity’ is not a term that we necessarily expect to encounter in the context of adoption. Children, especially orphans, appear to us as the quintessential objects of care. Protecting orphans, along with widows, was the primary responsibility of Christian communities. Yet we do find the term solidarity in the context of adoption, not only at present, but also in earlier periods.¹

That is why the title of this article contains a question mark. The question of whose interests are best served by adoption has always been directly connected with this issue: those of the child, those of the parents giving up the child, those of the adoptive parents, or those of the state and other organizations? It was the GDR’s solidarity with Communist Vietnam that led it to bring war-damaged children to East Germany, while the welfare of the children seemed to be almost a secondary consideration. But it could equally be the solidarity of a church community pursuing the practical pastoral care and welfare which it saw as the pillars of civil society. Not all the tensions that arise out of this topic can be explored here, but a number of examples presented in this article will allow us to discuss the fragility of solidarity and welfare, and to examine how profoundly entangled they were with the ideological shifts of the twentieth century. It will be asked what significance adoption and its history have for our understanding of childhood, social welfare, the family, identity, the state and private life, love and care.

It started with adoption. The Bartsch parents had to wait for seven years before they could adopt him, because of ‘doubts about descent’, which meant that the father was a worker and poor and already had a family, and the mother had been with-

Trans. Angela Davies (GHIL).

¹ For a general overview with recent literature see Benedikt Stuchtey, ‘Adoption’, in Friedrich Jaeger (ed.), *Enzyklopädie der Neuzeit*, 15 vols. (Stuttgart, 2005–12), xv. 675–8.

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out a husband for years and later got sick, a poor woman. A toxic brew concocted from Nazi theories of descent still haunted the Welfare and Youth Services. That the child had already been in a home for a year should have been cause for concern, and led them to the conclusion that what was needed was a quick adoption, clarity, security. But the judge himself brought this Nazi biologism up when he told the mother that after all, the boy was not 'her own flesh and blood', and the father still hadn't got rid of it when he said that they would have treated their own child differently because nobody told him in time that heredity makes no difference, everything depends on the environment, that the child's future depends on that alone and nothing else. For seven years they had wavered with the adoption, kept the child in a state of uncertainty, had thought that adoption was a disgrace for the child, whereas it could only have made him happy and, God knows, was something honourable for the parents.²

This passage by Ulrike Meinhof was published in the journal *Konkret*. In it, she points to many of the key themes of the topic of adoption: its legal and social history aspects; the tensions between genes and social environment; and, finally, the public interest that it arouses in connection with criminal behaviour. In the winter of 1967, the District Court in Wuppertal, in a court case described by the media as the trial of the century, convicted the 21-year-old apprentice Jürgen Bartsch as a sex offender and quadruple child murderer. The newspaper commentators were mainly interested in his social background, which, they said, predestined him to going off the rails some day. The boy had been born illegitimate, and his mother had given him up to an orphanage at the age of four weeks. The adoption, which the Bartsch family, butchers by trade, had pursued, took a disproportionately long time because the Youth Services warned the adoptive parents about the child's allegedly bad genetic inheritance. Although it was said that the family a child lived with was more important than its birth family, psychological reports presented to the court later pointed out how great was the general risk to a child

² Ulrike Meinhof, 'Jürgen Bartsch und die Gesellschaft', *Konkret*, 1 (1968), 10; cf. Kerstin Brückweh, *Mordlust: Serienmorde, Gewalt und Emotionen im 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt am Main, 2006), 225.

when placed in a different family. It was also emphasized that the child's biological father had gone on to have another eleven children, all of whom were healthy and none of whom had come into conflict with the law.

The court, by contrast, stressed the strict but caring upbringing the boy had had in the home of his adoptive family. That untrained social workers had made only a few routine visits to the Bartsch family, whose civic probity was taken as proof of their suitability to bring up a child as adoptive parents, was not flagged up as a problem. Yet as a child, Bartsch had lived like Kaspar Hauser because his adoptive parents, following instructions from the Youth Services, had forbidden him to have contact with anyone of his own age so that he did not discover his adopted status. This sums up my first point: the connection between adoption and the discourse of criminality, and the function of adoption in creating security and preventing criminality.

My second point touches on the child's welfare and rights in the context of the social environment and professionalization of adoption. The twentieth-century debate about adoption largely focused on the influence of the social environment on the one hand, and the child's biological and genetic predisposition on the other. This is not specific to the history of adoption in Europe and America, but can also be found in non-Western societies.³ Adoption is a mirror of, perhaps also a model for, the variety of family patterns that give more weight to social identity than to genetic make up.

The history of adoption is also one of increasing professionalization and institutionalization. It is a history located right on the intersection between private and public life, and symbolically stands for how much in life cannot be planned, but can, to some extent, be corrected. Children's, teenage, and adult literature bears witness to this,⁴ as do many sources from state and church archives. The fact that the state, church, and state-accredited intermediary organizations have a

³ See e.g. Erdmute Alber, Jeannett Martin, and Catrien Notermans (eds.), *Child Fostering in West Africa: New Perspectives on Theories and Practices* (Leiden, 2013).

⁴ Heinrich von Kleist, *Der Findling* (1811); Adalbert Stifter, *Katzensilber* (1853); Thomas Mann, *Der Erwählte* (1951); Gabriele Wohmann, *Paulinchen war allein zu Haus* (1989); Astrid Lindgren, *Rasmus and the Vagabond* (1960); Kirsten Boie, *Paule ist ein Glücksgriff* (1985); Jamie L. Curtis and Laura Cornell, *Erzähl noch mal, wie wir eine Familie wurden* (2000).

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monopoly on initiating adoptions makes the interface with private life more permeable.

Third, the adoptive family, that is, a family with two parents created for the adopted child, could in future develop into a model reflecting the trend for biologically related families living together no longer to be seen as the norm. This is a positive opportunity for adoption. As more and more children grow up with divorced parents, or as step-children in family-like relationships not based on ties of kinship, the model of the adoptive family that copes with biological difference is particularly interesting and points to the future. Adoption as the key to social parenthood can work against the overvaluation of 'natural' origins, which is also part of the programme of reproductive medicine. But it can equally find a foothold in the field of racial and ethnic stereotypes, especially in the case of intercountry adoption.

A history of adoption, therefore, can, in microcosm, contribute to a history of social change in the light of international relations. Like other social, political, and cultural phenomena, it reflects the conditions and limitations of American, European, and non-European societies. Although the history of adoption is an almost unknown chapter of European-US relations, it has played a major part in the social and cultural history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Taking individual US, British, and German case studies as examples, the research project presented in this article will focus on the USA and Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It will cast light on legal, social, and cultural history dimensions, and examine the tension between genetic predisposition and socialization, heredity and life history. It will raise questions about the extent to which adoption reflects aspects of the history of colonialism and imperialism. And it will deal with various levels, including the family between the private and the public sphere; and links between European and non-European family history. In order to approach this history, the three points made above (adoption and the discourse of criminality; the welfare of the child; and social parenthood) will be discussed in the context of the historical development of adoption in Europe and the USA. Thereafter, aspects of colonial history and adoption will be examined, and in conclusion, a number of open questions will be presented.

Europe and the USA

The legal incorporation of adoption as an institution around 1900 was based primarily on the interests of the childless who, for example, wanted to gain an heir by adopting an adult.⁵ When minors were adopted, the relief to the public purse that this represented was welcomed. The adoption of infants or young children under 3 years of age did not happen in practice on a large scale before the end of the First World War. After this it became the rule for war orphans, and thus an expression of interest in continuity, a classical aspect of child welfare. During the Weimar Republic there was no uniform vision governing adoption policy, let alone a chance of implementing it. But at least the Reich Youth Welfare Act of 1922 had placed the right of children to an 'education for physical, intellectual, and social proficiency' on the statute books.⁶ Under National Socialism, by contrast, a centralized adoption policy was the result of the regime's monolithic racial ideology, as expressed, for example, in the infamous forced adoptions that took place in Nazi-occupied Norway, the destruction of all private and church-run adoption offices, and the centralization imposed by the *Lebensborn* breeding programme.

There were also centralizing tendencies in the GDR, for example, in the adoption of Vietnamese children and as a method of separating the families of those who were critical of the regime. The Federal Republic, finally, arrived at a point from which American society had long since set out: understanding the adoptive family as embodying the highest degree of reliability, that is, the opposite of the unreliability imputed to the modern patchwork family. In 1916 John Dewey had published a book on this topic, *Democracy and Education*.⁷ In it, he put forward the idea that all forms of dualism—nature and spirit, body and soul—as well as social classes could be overcome in the integrity of a family upbringing. German research on hospitalism and deprivation by Meinhard von Pfaundler, Hildegard Hetzer, and

⁵ For the USA see Ellen Herman, *Kinship by Design: A History of Adoption in the Modern United States* (Chicago, 2008), 22 ff.

⁶ Christoph Neukirchen, *Die rechtshistorische Entwicklung der Adoption* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 107–11.

⁷ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York, 1916).

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René Spitz was built on the conviction that the physical, mental, and social development of children was best secured within the reference system of the family. And the Freiburg behavioural biologist Bernhard Hassenstein underlined that in human terms, adoptive parenthood had the same value as biological parenthood.⁸

There are major cornerstones in US history for studying the legislative development of adoption, as adoptive parenthood began its legal existence in Massachusetts in 1851.⁹ It was emphasized that the aim was to protect the interests of the child, and that prospective adoptive parents would have to submit to stringent examination. The state of Minnesota, which had passed a law for 'home study' in 1917, became a pioneer again in 1948 when the first interracial adoptions took place there. These became more frequent after wars. Japanese orphans were adopted after the nuclear bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Korean children were adopted after 1953. Operation Babylift, which flew more than 3,300 children of American servicemen from Vietnam to the USA, was especially controversial. A dense network of representatives of many interests, including the Child Welfare League of America, the Adoptees' Liberty Movement Association, adoption agencies, and many more had long been established. At present, about 5 million adopted Americans live in the USA; between 2 and 4 per cent of all families have adopted; and 2.5 per cent of all children under 18 are adopted.¹⁰

Comparing the American with the German case, adoptions in the Federal Republic between 1950 and 2005 followed a wave-like motion. Recent figures have stabilized at about the same level as when they were first measured: in 1950, 4,279 people were adopted; in 2005 the figure was 4,065. The figure rose steadily until 1976, reaching a peak in 1978 when, in response to a reform, 11,224 people were adopted. Since then, the curve has sunk steadily again, only temporarily rising to 8,500 in the period immediately after Ger-

⁸ Bernhard Hassenstein, *Freiburger Vorlesungen zur Biologie des Menschen* (Heidelberg, 1979).

⁹ Julie Berebitsky, *Like Our Very Own: Adoption and the Changing Culture of Motherhood, 1851-1950* (Lawrence, Kan., 2000), 20-3.

¹⁰ Cf. Judith S. Modell, *A Sealed and Secret Kinship: The Culture of Policies and Practices in American Adoption* (New York, 2002), 124 ff.

many's reunification.¹¹ An important factor has been that social acceptance of single mothers increased constantly throughout this period, making adoption to some extent unnecessary. And at the same time, intercountry adoption, which has outnumbered domestic adoption since the 1960s, threw up cultural and legal problems. In 1968, 83 per 100,00 inhabitants of the USA were adopted; in Britain the figure was 45; in Norway 21; in Belgium 20; in Italy 10; in Israel 9; in France 8; and in the Netherlands 7. According to an official demographic investigation, thirty-five years later, that is, in 2003, the majority of adopted children in France came from Vietnam (51), Madagascar (87), Ethiopia (115), and Haiti (119). This means that after the USA, France has accepted the largest number of non-European children for adoption. But as a percentage of its population, France lags behind Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, where 10 to 12 per 1,000 adopted children come from non-European countries.¹²

Unlike in Scandinavia, France's colonial past plays a large part in the significance of intercountry adoption. This also applies to the Netherlands where, with a population of 14.5 million, the majority of adopted children come from Indonesia; in 1980, for example, there were 669.¹³ In Italy, the close connection of the topic with abortion, infanticide, and child abandonment is noteworthy. Italian historiography emphasizes the dominant position of the Catholic church, and its control of orphanages and institutions that fight poverty. As early as the nineteenth century, hospitals had *ruote* where babies could be left anonymously. In Milan, at times, as many as seven babies were left every night, 75 per cent of them illegitimate. It is known that many of the boys from the orphanages were employed in agriculture. Whether they were adopted, however, is not known.

¹¹ Norbert F. Schneider, Doris Rosenkranz, and Ruth Limmer, 'Nichtkonventionelle Lebensformen', in Ulrich Mueller, Bernhard Nauck, and Andreas Diekmann (eds.), *Handbuch der Demographie* (Berlin, 2000), 980-1024, esp. 1014 ff.

¹² See Françoise-Romaine Ouellette, 'Les usages contemporains de l'adoption', in Agnès Fine (ed.), *Adoptions: Ethnologie des parentés choisies* (Paris, 1998), 153-76.

¹³ Signe Howell, *The Kinning of Foreigners: Transnational Adoption in a Global Perspective* (New York, 2007), 159-75; Peter Selman, 'Intercountry Adoption in the New Millennium: "The Quiet Migration" Revisited', *Population Research and Policy Review*, 21 (2002), 205-25, at 211.

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In conclusion, what these different cases in the USA and Europe make clear is that a comparative and transnational history of adoption is needed. Much has been written so far in national contexts but little effort has been made to elaborate international contexts, let alone imperial ones.

Colonial History

Anyone who wants to combine a European and US perspective on adoption confronts different family traditions, legislation, welfare provision, and religious contexts. That children can become part of an increasingly global network makes adoption no less complicated as space and time are compressed. Welfare policy looked like turning into family policy in order to exert control over people and their movements in manageable spaces, from private lives to the communal life of the nation or empire. At a time when traditional 'natural' orders were conclusively breaking down, as in the case of serious crises, wars, or when confronted by death, a separate world of social engineering unfolded, subjecting social life to interventionist ideas. What is interesting is that these global tendencies were equally effective at local level, requiring specific local appropriation.

This context, therefore, possesses a dimension involving colonial history and migration history. In the case of the British empire, it can be dated back to 1618, when the first ship, carrying more than 100 children, left England to colonize Virginia. Charles Loring Brace, mid-nineteenth-century American philanthropist and social reformer, had in mind the plight of the children and young people of New York, plunged into poverty and criminality, when he published his book, *The Best Method of Disposing of our Pauper and Vagrant Children*, in 1859. In the same year, the number of homeless children in New York was estimated as 34,000.¹⁴ Brace did not think much of orphanages, believing that they would make the poor too dependent on the charity of others. His plan, by contrast, was to set up the Children's Aid Society. From its foundation in the early 1860s to 1929, this society put more than 150,000 orphans from US conurbations on orphan

¹⁴ Charles Loring Brace, *The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them* (New York, 1872).

trains to the country, in most cases to Michigan, Kansas, Iowa, or Missouri, where they were placed with foster families. The difference clearly was that fostering was less legally binding than adoption.¹⁵

Kingsley Fairbridge, son of a British colonial administrator in South Africa, had a similar aim when he founded the Society for the Furtherance of Child Emigration to the Colonies in the Oxford Colonial Club in 1909. Like Brace, Fairbridge was a Calvinist and like Brace in New York, Fairbridge observed the fate of impoverished, homeless, and delinquent orphans in London's slums. And as Brace saw the open spaces of the American West as the place to realize his mission of civilizing American children, Fairbridge had a similar frontier in mind in the British Empire: in Australia, New Zealand, Rhodesia, and Canada. He confided to his diary how well children could be treated in adoptive families, regardless of where in the world. In England, he said, their lives would be wasted, 'while the Empire cried out for more'.¹⁶ In January 1913, the first thirteen boys from London, aged between 7 and 12, arrived in Fremantle in Western Australia. With the aid of the Child Migrants Scheme, six Farm Schools were soon built, and during the Second World War they also housed Dutch children from Indonesia and Singapore, fleeing from the advancing Japanese troops. The following words are carved on the foundation stone of one of these schools: 'To the Glory of God and the Children of the Empire.'¹⁷ Thus Fairbridge was a true empire builder who believed that the Empire would benefit from British children being sent all over the world, whether they settled in families or orphanages.

It is obvious that this subject attracted a steadily growing interest among the media and the public, whether in the USA, Britain, or Germany. Ultimately it resulted in the initiative of increasing rates of early adoption from baby homes. This brings us back to a subject touched upon at the beginning of this article, which can also be seen

¹⁵ On Brace see also Paula F. Pfeffer, 'A Historical Comparison of Catholic and Jewish Adoption Practices in Chicago, 1833-1933', in E. Wayne Carp (ed.), *Adoption in America: Historical Perspectives* (Ann Arbor, 2004), 101-23, at 102-3.

¹⁶ Quoted from Margaret Humphreys, *Oranges and Sunshine* (1st edn. 1994; London, 2011), 145.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 167.

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against the background of finding places for children with mental or physical illnesses, or those who were the result of rapes or short-term relationships, and symbolize the unwanted and unloved. These were not eagerly awaited children, as adoptive children often are today.

In his study *Uneheliche und verwaiste Verbrecher* (1930), Ferdinand Tönnies voiced his expectation that the care of their adoptive families precluded the allegedly innate delinquency of illegitimate children from being expressed.¹⁸ Walter Nährich's work, *Die Kriminalität der unehelich Geborenen* (1951), also attempted to demonstrate that, in contrast to those who were later legitimated, married, or remained illegitimate, adopted children were beacons of hope.¹⁹ Not only their legal status, but the milieu-changing conditions they experienced resulted in the expectation that they would form a smaller proportion of criminals, provided that the adoption was quick and successful. In sum, expectations of what adoption could and should achieve were quite similar in Europe and beyond. But the period under investigation makes a big difference: sources for the twentieth century are clearly richer.

Open Questions

There are several other aspects which could be considered in a history of adoption. In conclusion, they will be mentioned briefly. First, there is the issue of forced adoptions. Between 1920 and 1960 more than 100,000 children were forcibly removed from the indigenous population of Australia and placed with white foster or adoptive families. They were expected to contribute to the development of a white Australia. In Switzerland a scandal made headlines when it became known that between 1926 and 1973 the government had secretly given Roma children to adoptive applicants. They were known as 'children of the open road'. Certainly the two cases were very different. But they illustrate how easily vulnerable people could become objects of state politics.²⁰

¹⁸ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Uneheliche und verwaiste Verbrecher: Studien über Verbrechertum in Schleswig-Holstein* (Leipzig, 1930).

¹⁹ Walter Nährich, *Die Kriminalität der unehelich Geborenen* (Bonn, 1951).

²⁰ Sara Galle and Thomas Meier, *Von Menschen und Akten: Die Aktion 'Kinder der Landstrasse' der Stiftung Pro Juventute* (Zurich, 2009).

Second, it must be asked what European history can learn from non-European adoption practices. In many west African societies, for example, it was widespread practice before colonial rule for children to grow up not with their biological parents, but in a form of 'kinship fosterage' within the extended family. This was customary in northern Benin, where it strengthened social relations within a small society.²¹ It must be asked what changed here with the beginning of French rule in 1893, and to what extent French notions of family and childhood were accepted in west Africa, even after decolonization in 1960?

Another good example is that of Tiyo Soga, who was born in southern Africa in 1829 and died in 1871. He is known for translating the Bible and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* into Xhosa. Soga arrived in Glasgow as a 15 year old, and was adopted by a Presbyterian family. Baptized, he later returned to the Cape and became the first black missionary, priest, and composer of hymns there. Unlike his contemporary Henry Morton Stanley, who was adopted by a wealthy businessman in New Orleans at almost the same time and became famous when he found Livingstone in Africa, Soga's story gave rise to more controversies than positive newspaper headlines. He was accused of having become a 'black Englishman'.²²

Third, we could look at the aspect of asymmetry and racial prejudice. Around 50 million people died in the Second World War. But almost 70,000 Germans, who are now at least 60 years old, owe their lives to the war—the children who nobody wanted. These are the people who, in an article published in the summer of 1995, *Spiegel* magazine called the 'children of shame', 'children of the enemy': the children born of rapes or brief liaisons between Allied soldiers and German *Frolleins*. According to figures released by the Federal Statistical Office in 1955, about 10 per cent of the children of the occupation were of African-American background.²³ If they were not simply abandoned in the hospital after birth, and did not die of starvation in the post-war period, many of these children shared the same

²¹ See the research project 'Kindspflegschaften im Kontext ethnischer Heterogenität', currently being conducted by Erdmute Alber at the University of Bayreuth.

²² Donovan Williams, *Umfundisi: A Biography of Tiyo Soga 1829-1871* (Love-dale, South Africa, 1978).

²³ *Der Spiegel*, 28 (1995), 56-65.

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fate: they were adopted. To the present day little is known about who adopted them: families, couples, or single people; and what social background, even which countries, they came from. This is one of the starting points for the present project.

Is the fact that black families hardly ever adopt white children, whereas there has been much experimentation with white families adopting black children, a continuation of ethnic colonialism by other means? Are commercial considerations and power relations still involved here? In November 1948, when the mayor of Cologne asked the Youth Service in Frankfurt what was to be done with the mixed race children, the suggestion came back that they could be sent to the USA for adoption. This was echoed in a sitting of the German Bundestag in March 1952.²⁴ Catholic missionaries in north Africa who, among other things, ran orphanages, had suggested that it might be better to return 'mixed race Negroes to the land of their fathers', as the German climate was not good for them. That the children of the occupation presented a problem for German post-war society, which was not immune to racial prejudice, was obvious almost every day. Frankfurt's orphanage, a foundation dating from the late seventeenth century, found that Germans did not like adopting the children of the occupation. Other German cities also closely observed these children, known at the time as 'welfare kids', and their mothers, of whom the *Volkszeitung* in Fulda wrote in January 1950 that they were 'rarely to be seen except in the company of a soldier'. Army magazines therefore ran advertisements such as: 'Germany's "Brown Babies" Must Be Helped! Will You?'²⁵ The prospect of introducing special visas was held out to support this adoption programme. The wives of African-American officers founded a number of self-help groups which assisted in financing and organizing the transport of children to the USA for adoption. Often the whole process took more than a year, and little was known about the prospective adoptive parents in the USA apart from their name and appearance from a passport photo.

Today, facts about adoption can be painstakingly gathered via the US Occupation Kids Services based in Frankfurt, or the *Leitfaden für*

²⁴ Deutscher Bundestag, 198. Sitzung, 12 Mar. 1952, 8504–10.

²⁵ In general see Heide Fehrenbach, *Race after Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton, 2005).

suchende US-Besatzungskinder, which has been available since 2006.²⁶ Its website contains pleas by the adopted for the US courts to grant them full clarity about their biological fathers, and for society to deal more honestly with this chapter of its history. They suggest that the general opinion that adoption is something that should be passed over in silence is still too strong, as is the view that the children of the occupation should be grateful that, at the time, they were accepted at all. But, it is repeatedly argued, everyone has the right to know as much as possible about their own identity, and everyone has the right to reject adoption as an inadequate alternative. And we also find debates about the main forces on the adoption scene: the state, legal, social, and church institutions involved; those who adopt; the biological parents; and the child. The balance of power is, at present, shifting towards the previously weaker actors. Anyone who follows their or similar stories in the USA, Australia, Britain, or Germany experiences the full emotional range of the history of adoption. The emotional aspect goes along with the social dimension and the question addressed at the beginning of this article: solidarity with children. In its long story since Moses' basket was hidden among the reeds, adoption has forfeited nothing of this.²⁷

²⁶ Margaretha Rebecca Hopfner, *Leitfaden für suchende US-Besatzungskinder* (Vienna, 2006).

²⁷ Benedikt Stuchtey, 'Seit Moses Schilfkörbchen. Die Adoptivfamilie ist etwas Privates, die Adoption selbst aber regelt der Staat. Das darf die Politik nicht missbrauchen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 14 Apr. 2013, no. 15.

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