

Questions and Answers: An Update on Search and Reunion through Holt

By Laura Crawford Hofer, LCSW, ACSW

Director, Post Adoption Services

Although this article addresses searches by and for Korean adoptees, we have information about searches by and for adoptees from other countries as well. We encourage you to contact us at pas@holtinternational.org for this information.

“Do you have the name of my birth mother in your files?” asked Lauren*. This 20-something Korean adoptee’s child file indicated that she had been relinquished by her birth mother, and Lauren wanted more information.

We pulled Lauren’s file from Holt’s off-site vault and discovered that we did not have her birth mother’s name. As Director of Holt’s Post Adoption Services, I explained to Lauren that in almost all adoptions from Korea Holt does not have the names of the birth parents in our files. While disappointed with the news, Lauren had her immediate question answered and was not interested in pursuing anything further at this time.

For those who call us as Lauren did, the Post Adoption Services program at Holt provides many different and needed services, such as copies of adoption-related documents or referrals to groups, literature, websites, and professionals. But the service that always generates the most interest and comment is searching for birth relatives.

Like Lauren, many adoptees have initial questions about search: Do you have my birth parents’ names in your files? Can you find my birth parent? How long do searches take?

While the answers to these questions are as individual as the people requesting the information, Holt’s Post Adoption Services is here to help adoptees in their next step toward finding information about themselves.

Jack* had believed that he had been abandoned in a police box. He had imagined a police box as a small box with blankets for the collection of babies. In fact, what is referred to as a “police box” is a police substation, a neighborhood office of only one or two rooms. The information in our files confirmed that Jack, as he thought, had been abandoned in a police box, and that he was initially cared for in an orphanage and then relinquished by the orphanage director to Holt-Korea.

In spite of his belief that a search would probably be fruitless, Jack wanted to search for his birth family. Karla Miller, Social Services Coordinator for Post Adoption Services, recommended to him that he take an intermediate step prior

to requesting a full search. "If he wished," she explained, "we would contact Holt-Korea to ask if they had enough information in their files to pursue a search." We recommend this step to all Korean adoptees because we have learned that we cannot predict whether or not a search will be possible from the information in our files.

One of the reasons for this is that Holt International Children's Services and Holt Children's Services of Korea (Holt-Korea) are two separate organizations. We are often confused because we were once one agency, share the same founder, and continue to have very similar names and to work closely together. The significance of this fact is that files in each organization are sometimes different.

In Jack's case, as in others, when staff at Holt-Korea contacted the orphanage for information about Jack, they learned that, although the prior orphanage director had reported to Holt that Jack had been abandoned at the local police box, family members had relinquished Jack at the orphanage. Unfortunately, orphanage staff had not taken complete identifying information at the time of relinquishment and did not have an identification card number. Now, as a result, because Jack's birth family's name was very common, it was impossible for Holt-Korea staff to find them.

Most searches by Korean adoptees end like Jack's – without finding birth parents. From 2000 to 2004 two hundred and twenty-four (224) Korean adoptees requested a full search or the intermediate step of an assessment of their files in Korea for the probability of a successful search. In most cases there was no identifying information in the files for birth parents. In some cases, like Jack's, although a birth parent's name was known, an identification card number had not been recorded. In a few cases the orphanage had closed and its records lost; in a few cases a search was attempted but did not bear fruit; and in a few more cases the birth mother had been unmarried at the time that she relinquished her child.

If the latter is the case, in most, but not all, instances staff at Holt-Korea will not contact unmarried birth parents due to the risk of exposing them to shame. Unlike the situation in the United States, unmarried birth parents in Korea continue to face severe ostracism, including losing the opportunity to marry, if their past becomes known. In cases where they have married but have not told their spouse, a call to their home might put them at risk of losing that relationship. Because of these risks, Holt-Korea usually waits for unmarried birth parents to initiate contact.

For the 224 Korean adoptees who requested an assessment of their file in Korea or a full search, 90% of cases were closed without any contact with birth parents. But adoptees in this situation have another option. If, after being unsuccessful with a search through Holt-Korea, adoptees still want to search on their own,

Holt does offer advice on how to do an independent search. Please contact the Post Adoption Services office if you would like more information on this option.

Twenty-three adoptees of the 224 were successful in their search for their birth parents. In many of these cases one or both birth parents had relinquished the adoptee directly to Holt-Korea. In addition, in many cases the birth parent had been married at the time of relinquishment, and Holt-Korea has no reluctance to search for birth parents who are married at the time of relinquishment. They do not face the social stigma that unmarried birth parents do. In the other cases, although the birth parents were unmarried, the birth parents' relationship was well known to their families, they had cared for their child for a while, or a life-threatening medical condition or a serious medical decision loomed.

In those cases where adoptees can search, the process took an average of three months to complete in 2004. The shortest search took one week while the longest at 321 days at the end of the year is still on going.

When birth parents search for children whom they relinquished, they are much more likely than adoptees to be successful in their searches. From 2000 through 2004 we received 120 requests through Holt-Korea to search for adoptees on behalf of their birth parents, just about half as many requests as we received from adoptees during the same time span. We have currently completed all but 11 of those searches and in the completed searches have found all but 16 of the adoptees, a more than 85 percent success rate in finding adoptees. Because search technology has improved, our average rate of success in finding adoptees over the span of the last four years is lower than our rate of success in the last year. During 2004 we have found the adoptee in 93% of the completed searches. On average, searches during 2004 have taken just a little over three months. Our shortest search was done in 19 days and our longest took 254 days, about eight and a half months.

Though sometimes we are able to find an adoptee due to a recent contact with Holt or through an Internet search, we often can find adoptees only because of the generosity of their adoptive parents. Women who have married and changed their names are very difficult to find. We also, like our Korean counterparts, have particular difficulty with common last names, even though fewer than 3 million people hold the most common American last name, Smith, not even close to the nearly 10 million Kims in Korea. To make such searches easier, we welcome adoptees to update their records often with changes of last names, addresses, and other information.

Adoptees are usually floored when I contact them and let them know a birth parent would like to be in contact with them. In most cases they and their adoptive parents had believed that they had been lost or abandoned. There had

been no information in their child material that prepared them for the possibility of birth parents searching for them.

Understandably, their first question is often, “How do you know that the person who is seeking me is my birth parent?” In about half of this group a birth relative had signed a relinquishment document at the orphanage, a counseling center, or a reception center, a key piece of information that often Holt Korea, Holt, and the adoptive family never received. The relinquishment document provides incontrovertible proof of the connection between the adoptee and the birth family. In other cases the adoptee’s name and birth date had been registered with the Korean government and birth parents are able to provide a legal document, called a *Ho Juk*, with this information, another piece of certain proof. In some cases there are only key similarities in the story that the birth parent tells about the child and the information in the child’s records, such as the date the child was lost. In cases like this one where the accuracy of the match may be uncertain, we let the adoptee know that DNA testing is acceptable in Korea

Searching by both Korean adoptees and their birth parents will become easier for adoptees who were born in 1990 or later. In May 1990 Korea changed its laws so that agencies could not place children from orphanages or other institutions. As a result, more of the children placed for intercountry adoption after this date have been relinquished directly to the Korean agencies practicing intercountry adoption. While some adoptees will, of course, continue to be left in a safe place without any information, many have received some information about their birth parents and may not be quite so shocked to be contacted if their birth parent searches for them. In addition, most will know that, if they are interested in searching, they can do so.

Since the Post Adoption Services program began in April 1998, we have matched 165 Korean, Vietnamese, Filipino, and U.S. born adoptees with their birth families. Compared with the 35,000 adoptees that Holt has placed with adoptive families in the United States, 165 is a very small number, less than 1 percent of the total. But this percentage is growing steadily, and Holt’s Post Adoption Services is willing to give adoptees all the help they want. We recognize that each search is an individual journey, and we wish adoptees success as they search for pieces of their pasts.

*Names and profiles of Lauren and Jack are composites from hundreds of adoptees requesting search.

