



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN
LISTENING SERIES

Finding My Parents

by Jakob Lewis

Jakob Lewis: Say what you just said ...

Catherine Lewis: I'm just wondering if your mom ever took these trains between Frankfurt and Wölfersheim for doctors' appointments and stuff. Probably not this one, but ...

[TRAIN ANNOUNCEMENT: "NEXT STOP, GROSS-KARBEN, EXIT ON THE RIGHT SIDE."]

Catherine Lewis: ... yeah, that's what I was wondering.

Jakob Lewis: This is my wife Catherine. We're on a train outside of Frankfurt, Germany. I can't get over just how much the countryside looks like where I grew up in rural Missouri. Rolling green and yellow fields with rows of trees for windbreaks. We're headed toward a small town known as Wölfersheim. It's where my mom and dad lived when they were in their early 20s. They both grew up in Missouri and they both live there now ...

[TRAIN ANNOUNCEMENT: "NEXT STOP, FRIEDBERG."]

Jakob Lewis: ... but in the late 80's my dad was in the U.S. Army and was stationed in a small German town called Friedberg. And it was there in 1986 where my mom got pregnant with me.

Catherine Lewis: It was probably lonely and scary.

[TRAIN ANNOUNCEMENT: "TRANSFER TO REGIONAL LINES; PLEASE EXIT, THE TRAIN ENDS HERE."]

Tonya Lewis: I didn't realize that I'd be alone so much, because he was on exercises all over Europe.

Floyd Lewis: I would say mom was probably alone 60% of the time, maybe a little bit more.

Jakob Lewis: Would you say that's right?

Tonya Lewis: Yeah, the first year it was more, he was there maybe 3 months of the twelve, but after that it was not as not as bad.

Floyd Lewis: but I would say that she was alone 60 to 70%, most of the time.

Tonya Lewis: I'm Tonya Lewis. I'm 53 years old and a second-grade teacher.

Jakob Lewis: and how are you related to me?

Tonya Lewis: I'm your mother. I love you.

Floyd Lewis: I'm Floyd Lewis. I'm almost 55 Christmas Day, and I'm your father.

Jakob Lewis: That's mom and dad. They've told me stories about Germany my entire life. Like how I got my name. It's Jakob. J-a-k-o-b. That's the German spelling, 'Yakob' is what they say. You see there was an ad painted on a wall across from my parents' apartment in Wölfersheim, Germany. It was for a furniture company called 'Jakob & Sons.' They liked the name, and so here I am, Jakob with a 'k.' Even though everyone in Germany told them it was an old man's name. Now let me cover the usual questions I get: No, I don't speak German. No, I don't have dual citizenship, because I was born in a U.S. military hospital. And I was only in Germany for a whopping six months before my parents moved back to the U.S., ultimately to a small town in Missouri. So when Catherine and I got the opportunity to visit Germany it was exciting. It was going to be part reporting trip, partly to celebrate our ten-year wedding anniversary ... but there was also this feeling, like this was going to be a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage to connect with my parents' experience. What I didn't foresee was just how connected our experience would be. On a cold gray afternoon, three weeks before we left for Europe, I was sitting in a CVS parking lot with my heart racing. My wife was inside on a mission, while I scanned through the radio stations waiting for what seemed like an eternity. Finally! The automatic doors opened, Catherine looked down as she walked toward me and tried to contain a little smirk developing on her face. She calmly got in and just showed me a picture on her phone. On the screen was a little white stick with one word. Pregnant.

Tonya Lewis: At that time, I mean there was no sticks, you know, to take your early pregnancy test or anything like that. So you'd go to the doctor, and you'd pee in a cup, and they would test it and they would tell you if you were pregnant, and everyone that worked in the clinic was military. This lady that's in camouflage, she's working there, and she goes, "The rabbit died," or something like that, and I guess they used to use rabbit, I don't know the context really, and I was like, what? And she goes, "You're pregnant, is that good or bad?" And I started crying, and was like, "I don't know." I was just emotional, because of course we weren't planning, that was not our plan.

Jakob Lewis: There's got to be some German word for that feeling when you find out you were a surprise. My parents were in their early 20s and did not plan to get pregnant. My wife and I are in our early 30s and were in fact trying. My mom and dad were newlyweds – Catherine and I have been married for a decade. But as we rolled through the German countryside and my wife had full-blown morning sickness, I was able to see my mother in a different way. I imagined her young, excited and clueless, watching the rolling hills and windmills. Suddenly I felt like I was on the next cycle of a longer journey. I had a felt sense of participating in the great lineage of humanity, passing down some mix of genetic code and story. I was looking for something.

Alright this is the Friedberg Rathaus, the Friedberg City Hall, here we go ... Hey, does anyone here speak English?

Unidentified Man: Yes.

Jakob Lewis: yes, you do?

Unidentified Man: Hmmm.

Jakob Lewis: So I'm a journalist from the United States, and I'm doing a story for the Goethe-Institut ... about ... my father who was stationed here for the US Army like 31 years ago. I wanted to talk to anyone if they remembered what it was like back then? Is there anyone at City Hall?

Unidentified Man: Yes we have, but today the people, we have, we have a meeting, and you need to have an appointment, yes, I think in the next week.

Jakob Lewis: Okay, I'm not going to be here next week. That's ok – do you know where the military base is? Do you know ...

There's bureaucracy here too. A kind woman behind a counter directed me to leave this building, because they primarily dealt with the school system, and then I should go to another building where she thinks someone could help me.

Unidentified Woman: Here right on the corner.

Jakob Lewis: Okay thank you guys I appreciate it. Danke, okay, bye bye ... Well I don't even know what I'm looking for, but I'm looking.

Floyd Lewis: Well we had just gotten married, and we were on our way back to Colorado Springs at Fort Carson where I was stationed, and we went back to work, and I had orders to go to Germany. But the problem was that we happened we just got married, so the orders came down as a single person going and not a married couple, because we haven't registered that with the government yet, with the army.

Jakob Lewis: What does that mean?

Floyd Lewis: That means that I had to go 'unaccompanied tour' until I could get the paperwork to bring your mom over. It was just me going over and basically living in the barracks for a while until I could find housing and get your mom over there.

Tonya Lewis: I don't know why they sent him over there right before Christmas because he just sat for three weeks; basically they don't do a lot in the military around the holidays. So he gets there, he celebrates his 21st birthday in the barracks, you know, he ... it was depressing for both of us basically, but I didn't get to go over until about mid-March of '85 and, he had secured housing. They call it housing 'on the economy,' meaning he did not get housing in a military facility on base or a military area where they have apartments, but it was out in a German community, and that little community was about 12 kilometers from Friedberg where he was stationed, which by the way was where Elvis was stationed, and it was a little village called Wölfersheim. There was a little castle there, and it was just a quaint, cute little village.

Jakob Lewis: My mom spent a lot of time alone in Wölfersheim. That's because it was the Cold War. My dad would be called out on countless exercises. He was a motorman driving an armored personnel carrier. His unit would mobilize to the border between West and East Germany. It was nerve-racking for both my mom and dad, because they never knew if it was a drill or a real threat.

Floyd Lewis: We would load up the vehicles and start heading through the countryside of Germany heading for the border, going through these little towns and down the Autobahn. We would just take over Germany basically and go. You could about imagine if you have over 100 tanks plus all these support vehicles and different things, there's gonna be some damage to the countryside. Sometimes we'd go through these little towns, villages, we'd get new tank drivers in or they were tired or whatever 'cause sometimes we're up 24, 30 hours doing stuff, and we would actually run into bridges, we would run into people's houses with tanks. We'd hit their livestock, we would tear up the roads ... it wasn't on purpose. The big joke was, don't hit a chicken, because you had to pay for that chicken and the number of chickens it would produce in 10 years and the number of eggs it would produce in 10 years, so the big joke was the farmers never locked their chickens up. [LAUGHTER] They were hoping they would get them run over so they could get the compensation for that.

Jakob Lewis: Good morning!

Sigrid: I'm Sigrid.

Jakob Lewis: What's your name, Sigrid? I'm Jakob, nice to meet you, and this is my wife Catherine. So nice to meet you.

After going to another building I was in a government office with four women. Sigrid spoke the best English so she took charge. She told me the military base where my dad was stationed was closed. It was called Ray Barracks. The German government owned it, and it was unlikely I was going to get in on my timeline. So I asked her: what was it like back in the late '80s to have a U.S. military base in her town? I pictured my dad sitting alone on a metal bed frame celebrating his 21st birthday while Sigrid was out at a restaurant with all her friends.

Sigrid: It was very scary for us when we were young. Because there were a lot of ... at the beginning of the month there were a lot of trouble with Americans in the town when they got money and they went to the bars. Got money, drinking German beer, and they were a lot of trouble, but ... um that's what I remember.

Jakob Lewis: That's funny because my dad taught me one German phrase and it's "Ein Bier, bitte!"

That means: one beer please.

Sigrid: German beer is not similar like the American beer. It's very difficult; we have more alcohol in, and it's very hard when they drink it the first time. That's what I remember.

Jakob Lewis: Would you say that's kind of the town's opinion typically like was that kind of ... because I in America, I've never had another country occupy space so I'm curious does that feel like: "Hey get out of my country" or is it like ...

Sigrid: No, no, for us when we were young it was normal that a lot of people from America were here, and also a lot of Germans had jobs in the barracks and worked there in the kitchen, in cleaning, I don't know, a lot of things. The taxi drivers earned a lot of money with Americans when they drove to Frankfurt or back. So I think it was for us it was normal, it was no problem.

Jakob Lewis: I remember my dad telling me that the same barber that cut Elvis's hair cut his hair.

Sigrid: Yeah ok, we have these barber stories here every year. Around the 16th of August when Elvis was, I don't know, was it his birthday? ... no, it was the day when he died. It's always a very, very big festival here in this area.

Jakob Lewis: I used to believe everything my parents told me. And then I realized just how adults talk to children, and how family stories evolve over the retelling, and how unreliable memories can be, so I thought I would do a little test. I asked Sigrid about the tanks driving through town.

Sigrid: Because always after the tanks drove through the cities, there were so many houses broken and the streets broken, and afterwards always the reconstruction was made from the workers, and when they are finished, the next tanks came.

Jakob Lewis: All right, that checks out.

Floyd Lewis: The one thing was transportation, because we were a little far out. The military especially at that time, they still do have them, they used to call them boneyards, they were cars that were ...

Jakob Lewis: Boneyards. They were essentially the army's used-car lots. When someone left Germany they'd sell their car and then some new schmuck like my dad would buy it.

Floyd Lewis: I think I gave like \$500 for our first car. It was an Audi, it was orange, and it was an Audi 100. I think that's what it was.

Jakob Lewis: These things were clunkers and usually had been around for a while, passed from one new recruit to another. They were rusted out and covered in patches of a gray substance called 'Bondo' to fill in the holes and keep the thing from falling apart.

Floyd Lewis: And it was probably 75% Bondo literally. Stick Shift. I bought it and took it home.

Tonya Lewis: I was not acquainted with the standard shift, you know. Driving a standard vehicle. I would stall out at the stop signs, and Germans like to use their horns. They use their horns and their lights a lot. So that was frustrating for me. I'm like, I'm trying my best.
[LAUGHING]

Floyd Lewis: That one finally bit the dust, and then I got a green Audi 5000 and that's what was there.

Tonya Lewis: And it was 60% Bondo. [LAUGHING]

Floyd Lewis: Yeah it was 60% Bondo, but it was a better car. It was a bigger car. And that was the car that we had when you were born.

Jakob Lewis: My parents brought up vehicles a lot. I think it's just something tangible we can talk about, like work, or the weather. I also think it was a genuinely large anxiety for my mom. My dad had one day, one day to find an apartment off base, get my mom a car, teach her to drive it, and then leave again for war games. She told me stories of how someone smashed their windshield with a beer bottle one night, and how one day my mom was driving down the road and all of a sudden the hood came off and flew over the car. She said an old German woman on a bicycle stopped, pulled it off to the side of the road, and kept going. These kinds of problems made my parents dependent on the world around them, particularly one of their neighbors. One of the few people from that time they mention by name.

Um and this is a very longshot, but they said that their neighbor was a guy named Peter Reeb. He owns an autobody shop in Wölfersheim. Reeb autobody. Does that ring a bell?

Sigrid: No, no, Wölfersheim is not my ... but ... I can check!

Jakob Lewis: First of all Sigrid is the hero of this story. She is an angel. Secondly, it's just so interesting to me to think about my parents in their early 20s. I think about the people that surrounded me during that time. When I first got married, I painted houses. My wife and I were barely making rent and eating a lot of ramen noodles. My painting boss one day gave us a gift card to a chain Italian restaurant. We thought we'd died and gone to garlic-bread heaven. Peter Reeb was one of those characters in my parents' life. Just an ordinary guy that showed them simple kindness.

Floyd Lewis: He was an autobody guy. Worked at an autobody shop. So he was a big help trying to figure out when my car would lose a piece of Bondo. I don't know if we ever had him over for dinner. I think no, probably not.

Tonya Lewis: He was busy. He was young, and he was a very good-looking guy. Dark hair. You know, he was young then. Dark moustache. Ummm. He wore lots of leather. Dressed, he was always going out. He was never home really, you know.

Floyd Lewis: He liked to disco ...

Tonya Lewis: ... and he had a dog, I think, I would call it a Rottweiler probably, that was ...

Floyd Lewis: It was a Doberman.

Tonya Lewis: Oh, a Doberman? Okay, okay. Yeah, that's true, it was.

Sigrid: Wölfersheim ... what was his name?

Jakob Lewis: Reeb. R-E-E-B.

Sigrid: Should I call them for you? Or ...

Jakob Lewis: Thank you so much.

Sigrid: Yes, Bartsch, Friedberg City Hall, hello. I have an American couple standing here. They're looking for a Peter Reeb who was next door.

Jakob Lewis: Sigrid got a hold of Peter. He lives in a small town nearby called Berstadt. She convinced that we weren't trying to scam him or steal from him and he said he'd love to meet us.

They've got taxis galore here.

Catherine Lewis: They've got taxis for days.

Jakob Lewis: Taxis for days! Taxis on Taxis on Taxis. Hello! How are you? Can you take us to that address?

Mr. Kahn: Ja.

Jakob Lewis: Okay. A man named Kahn asked us a lot of questions, like why do you have that microphone? While he drove us to Berstadt.

Yah, that white building right there that says Reeb, that's this guy's last name, and I know he has an autobody shop, what I don't know is, is this the shop or is this his house ... but I think ... yeah, let's ... drop me off at this white building right here.

Hey puppy, two puppies, hi.

Peter Reeb: Hallo.

Jakob Lewis: Hi I'm looking for Peter Reeb, are you Peter?

Peter Reeb: I'm Peter Reeb hallo.

Jakob Lewis: Hi Peter! I'm Jakob Lewis. Floyd and Tonya's son. Yeah. Oh yeah ...

Catherine Lewis: Catherine.

Peter Reeb: So your name is Catherine. I'm Peter.

Jakob Lewis: This is my wife.

Peter Reeb: Ah, alright.

Jakob Lewis: We can do this, if you'd like.

I hold up my phone showing him Google Translate. I tried to ask him something complicated that I don't even remember, and he said ...

Peter Reeb: I don't understand.

Jakob Lewis: You don't understand?

So as I started to try again, he said ...

Peter Reeb: Will we go ... Kaffee drink?

Jakob Lewis: Sure.

Peter Reeb: Yeah, come ...

Jakob Lewis: He directed us to a little kitchen and made us coffee.

Peter Reeb: This is Lucky and this is Milos.

Jakob Lewis: He shows us his two dogs. Lucky and Milos. He recently adopted them from Greece.

Peter Reeb: They are nine months old. Little dog. And in my time, in Wölfersheim, where your father ... I had Doberman, I had Doberman. In the time I lived in Wölfersheim. Jeffrey was his name.

Jakob Lewis: How long ago did he die?

Peter Reeb: He died in 1999. He was 16 years old.

Jakob Lewis: How old? 16 years old, eins, sechs, sixteen. Very old. Very old for a big dog.

Jakob Lewis: We willingly struggled through about a half hour of conversation. But overall Peter was a jolly hospitable guy. He had fluffy gray hair, a round gut, and that faint smell of grease that you expect from a car guy. He offered to drive us to see my parents' old apartment, and he started to get excited.

Peter Reeb: Hallo Tonya! Hallo Floyd! Vor (i.e. "ago") 30 years I was a small man, and yes, I'm a big man!

Jakob Lewis: [LAUGHING] Hey, so is Floyd. Floyd's a big man.

Peter Reeb: We eat hamburger und cheeseburger und sugar ...

Jakob Lewis: ... and beer!

Peter Reeb: Beer! Genau, (yes, right) our beer very good, ja.

Jakob Lewis: What I loved the most about Peter, was that his memory was similar to my parents. He didn't remember a lot about their personalities or things they talked about, but across three decades he remembered my dad's car.

Peter Reeb: Audi 100, the color was green, and the car was broken, and we drive the car in my garage, we drive the car in the garage, and we make it okay.

Jakob Lewis: In college I remember finding a box of photos from Germany. There was one that struck me the most. It was a small print, 3 by 5, of some red tulips. To me it made my parents more human. I asked about it, and my mom said that they took a trip to the tulip fields in Amsterdam. Tulips as far as the eye could see, they said. They brought some bulbs back and planted them in front of their apartment. I just love thinking of my mom excitedly turning over the soil, starting a new life, embarking on marriage and motherhood. It's hopeful, and I hoped there that some tulips might still be there.

[CAR DOOR OPENS]

Jakob Lewis: Tulips?

Peter Reeb: Tulpen Gartenhecken. Here, it was here.

Jakob Lewis: And now I see some flowers but no tulips.

Peter Reeb: Ja, ja, good, many time. 30 years. But it's the same. This house, this house, the garden. The same for 30 years.

[CHURCH BELLS RINGING]

Jakob Lewis: As church bells rang out, I held up some photos from 33 years ago of my parents' apartment. It really did look identical. In fact, the sky was the same shade of gray.

Ah to the back!

We walked to the back, and there was a small balcony. I have a picture of my mom waving off that balcony.

Yeah look!

Peter Reeb: Ja, ja, exactly, that's an old picture.

Jakob Lewis: That's my mom on that balcony.

Peter Reeb: Ja ... for 30 years [ago].

Jakob Lewis: Floyd and Tonya will be happy.

Catherine Lewis: Can I get one more picture?

Jakob Lewis: One more picture? yeah okay.

My wife got a picture of me holding the picture of my parents' apartment with the exact scene in the background. It's pretty cool.

Bahnhof

Peter Reeb: Friedberg! I drive you to Friedberg.

Jakob Lewis: Yeah? Oh, danke. Say that again?

Catherine Lewis: He was so nice. It's funny, you know, on our way up here and even talking to that woman, it was kind of ... I think we both had this bleak feeling like it must have been really sad and lonely for your parents, especially your mom, but after talking to him it's like nah ... they were fine. [LAUGHING]

Jakob Lewis: Alright, I'm going to turn this thing off. Let's get something to eat and walk around Friedberg.

Catherine and I explored an old castle, we ate at a tiny restaurant where I had some of that strong German beer Sigrid was talking about. It was an important day for our lives. We were human beings, so was Peter Reeb, and so were my parents.

Tonya Lewis: That was amazing to me and to see that you were standing in front of where we used to live. That you got to walk the same streets we walked, because we had a little, um, path we would walk, we would go to the Italian ice shop, and get ice cream and walk back home. And walk around the little village, so yeah, very, very exciting.

Jakob Lewis: What did you think of those pictures?

Floyd Lewis: It was exciting because first of all Peter's really changed. He's kind of like me, he's gotten a lot bigger and a lot grayer, but my favorite picture was with you standing in front of the old house holding up your cell phone with the original picture of the house that we had, and it really hadn't changed really that much at all. It was just, I was just thrilled that you were able to get to do it.

Jakob Lewis: And um one thing that I think is an interesting correlation is like the fact that Catherine is pregnant, over there. So what was that like to find that out.

Tonya Lewis: Well, we were over the moon excited that you were pregnant. Sorry that she was sick while she was there, but that was really cool to find out that she was actually there when she was pregnant and that I was pregnant with you there. I think it took a while to process when you told us that, "Oh by the way, we're going to have a baby in June." It was, uh, we were very, very excited. But kind of shocked, I think. We were very shocked. Very excited.

Floyd Lewis: I mean we're just excited to be grandparents again.

Tonya Lewis: Very exciting.

Floyd Lewis: One thing we instantly said was that you guys were going to be great parents.

Tonya Lewis: Don't cry ... don't cry. Yeah so, yeah, we were ...

Jakob Lewis: My dad's parents died when he was young. His mom when he was a teenager and his dad shortly after I was born. I never knew them. I highly doubt his father told him he was going to be a good parent. Maybe he thought it, but having a little insight into how my dad was raised on a pig farm in Missouri ... I just don't think he was ever told something like that. And in the end, I think that's what I was looking for: A connection, a blessing, some indication that I'm doing this thing called life right, that we, Catherine, myself – and now our son – are going to be okay. And there is something about the fragility, the uncertainty, and just the ordinariness of where they were when I entered this world ... it gives me hope.

[TRAIN ANNOUNCEMENT: "NEXT STOP, BRUCHENBRÜCKEN, EXIT ON THE RIGHT SIDE."]

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