



European Union
European Social Fund
Operational Programme Employment



Office for International Legal
Protection of Children

ON THE ROAD TO A NEW FAMILY

Stories of
intercountry
adoption



On the road to a new family – Stories of intercountry adoption

Editors: Ondřej Bouša, Alice Trávníková, Zuzana Senciová, Michaela Zdráhalová

Translation and proofreading: Radka Weberová, Joe Lennon

Graphic design and illustrations: Tomáš Smot Svoboda

Published in Brno

Publisher: The Office for International Legal Protection of Children

Published in March, 2020

ISBN 978-80-270-7623-9

<u>OPENING CHAPTER</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>ITALY</u>	<u>8</u>
An interview with David (9 years old)	9
An interview with Marcel (16 years old)	17
An interview with Daniel and Sofia (7 years old)	25
Rozárie's story (17 years old)	35
<u>AUSTRIA</u>	<u>40</u>
An interview with Anna (6 years old)	41
An interview with Hannah (11 years old) and Jakob (8 years old)	43
An interview with David (6 years old)	45
An interview with Tobias (14 years old) and Jonas (11 years old)	47
<u>DENMARK</u>	<u>50</u>
An interview with Mathilde (17 years old) and Katrine (16 years old)	51
<u>SWEDEN</u>	<u>58</u>
An interview with Maria (12 years old)	59
An interview with Jan (13 years old)	76
An interview with Filip (16 years old)	84
An interview with Karel (12 years old)	93
An interview with Aneta (16 years old)	114
<u>CONCLUSION</u>	<u>126</u>

Opening chapter

Children are the center of attention for everything we do at the Office for International Legal Protection of Children. But perhaps the most essential and visible work we do is in the area of intercountry adoption. **In the 20 years that the Office has been facilitating adoptions abroad from the Czech Republic** (since 2000, when the Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption came into effect in this country¹), **we have helped more than 680 children from the Czech Republic find a new family in more than 15 countries.** Many of these families remain in contact with the Office for many years after the adoption is complete - either in the form of mandatory developmental reports which track the development of the adopted child, or through other voluntary means of communication, such as meetings with Office employees at various events. All of the information gathered in this way is an enormous inspiration for us as we further develop our services for intercountry adoption.

For some time now we have been considering various ways of collecting the valuable information we have gathered from families with successfully adopted children, and sharing it with those who could benefit from it, especially those who are considering becoming adoptive parents. At our conference *JOURNEY TO THE FAMILY – Stories of intercountry adoption*, which took place in Brno on May 15-16, 2019, we hosted a panel discussion at which we invited adopted children to speak about their experiences. This part of the conference was very successful, and it encouraged **us to implement a plan that we'd been thinking about for several years - preparing a publication in which children and parents with direct experience of intercountry adoption would share their stories.** We knew that such a publication would be a powerful way to provide information about best practices of intercountry adoption, help improve our work with adopted children and adoption applicants, and further educate the public in the Czech Republic and other countries about intercountry adoption.

Our original intention was to collect information from families, analyze it, and present our findings in an academic research format. After long consideration, we abandoned this intention, for two main reasons. First, because it would be extremely difficult to conduct this kind of research from abroad. Second, because a research report is not the kind of format that would speak to the readers we wanted to reach. In the end, we decided to present the stories by themselves, exactly as they were told by the people who lived them. Only a few elements remain from the original intended format – **for example, we present every story from three perspectives – that of the child, the parents, and the professionals working with the family in the new country.**²

We invited participants from all the countries we cooperate with, but of course, the legislation in specific countries, the willingness of the families, and the ability of other organizations to cooperate with us had an effect on how many people were able to participate, and which people. The interviews were conducted by local social workers, often people who'd known the family for a long time. For consistency, we asked that they use the same interview format with each set of participants. The interview questions were based on

¹ The Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption from May 29, 1993 (published in article 43/2000 of the code of treaties (Sbírka mezinárodních smluv). This convention is hereafter referred to as the 'Hague adoption convention').

² The interview with the professionals was obtained only from one country.

established research in the field of adoption, and were influenced by the developmental reports and information we have received over the years from adoptive families. Although the basic interview format was consistent, the various interviewers approached the task in different ways. Some conducted very brief interviews, while some developed the conversation in more depth. If there were several workers conducting interviews in the same country, their styles often differed. They sometimes adjusted the questions to the specific family and children. They also reported the data in different ways; for example, one country gave us the results of their interviews summed up in a continuous text.

Our intention with these interviews was to get a closer look at intercountry adoption from the perspective of its participants - the children themselves, their parents, and our foreign partner organizations. **So our aim in this text is not to present objective data, but to present subjective stories which capture the personal impressions and experiences of adoptive parents and children.**

There are various levels of subjectivity in the responses to these interviews which are important to acknowledge. Becoming a parent is an extremely emotional experience, and so the memories which we asked participants to share are associated with a strong emotional background. Most of the adoptions described took place many years ago, and the children were often very young at the time. Their young age and the significant amount of time which has passed affects the stories they tell.

It is also important to point out that the processes of adoption at the Office, as well as at the cooperating foreign organizations, are constantly evolving, and the whole system of intercountry adoption has changed significantly in the last 20 years. For instance, the work done with applicants and children was formerly less systematic and thorough. The children going into intercountry adoption used to come mainly from state institutions, whereas nowadays there are more adoptions from temporary foster care. Adoption from state institutions didn't take as much time as most adoptions today, and a shorter stay for prospective parents was allowed by Czech law. Post-adoption support in accepting countries was not always the norm.

Our aim has always been to prepare the child and the applicant as well as possible, and provide as much information as we can to everyone involved in the process. **But our involvement increased in 2009, when we started to provide more comprehensive psychological support to the child and the applicant, to help them adapt to the challenging life changes that adoption brings.**

Of course, the improvements to our methods have not stopped there – we are continuing to learn from experiences such as those presented in these interviews. For instance, the criteria for applicants has been made stricter. One aspect of this is that the developmental reports submitted after the child leaves with the applicants are now required until the child turns 18. And it is now standard for us to work more directly with the child (informing them, getting their opinions, preparing them for going to a new home). The psychologists and lawyers of the Office now assist the families systematically throughout their entire stay in the Czech Republic; we are in regular contact with them, we deal individually with arising situations, and we provide as much support as possible. Many of these services were sorely missed by our clients (especially before 2009), as you can read on the following pages.

In the interviews from families that have adopted in recent years, there are repeated complaints about the mandatory stay in the Czech Republic – that it is overly long, and unproductive after a certain point. We are aware of this. From a psychological perspective, the ideal length of stay, which enables sufficient connection between the applicants and the child, is about 4 - 5 weeks (of course, long after that, the relationship and the child's integration into the family need to be worked on continuously in a stable family

environment). However, the child and the applicants can only leave the country after the decision to entrust the child to their care is handed down by the Municipal Court in Brno, which has a limited capacity. Despite these limits, and the fact that there aren't deadlines stated by law that would respect the needs and best interests of the child, we feel that there is good will on the part of the court, and an intention to make the situation as easy as possible for the families.

When our clients are asked in the interviews about what they lack, they often mention the need for more information from the biological family. We are also aware of this need and understand it well. It is felt most keenly by adopted children reaching puberty (or young adulthood). It is typical for children going through puberty to focus on the question of their own identity, and to ask where they came from. The fewer blind spots there are in the personal history of the child, the better their personal identity is formed. Only after reading the stories that follow did we fully realize how big of a difference there is between the information provided during adoptions ten years ago and now. Currently, families are provided with much more information than in the past. All the available data on the biological family is given to the applicants in an information package they receive before coming to the Czech Republic. During their stay in the Czech Republic, the applicants meet with a social worker who knows the specific situation of the child, and they can talk to the social worker about anything. Providing this information is a safe way for us to help the child connect to their roots. Sometimes this is not completely satisfactory for the child, and they want to meet their biological family in person. But we need to be cautious about this. First, it is necessary to respect the law and the rights of the biological family. Second, it is absolutely essential that any personal meetings are very well planned beforehand, and that the adoptive and the biological family receive a necessary and thorough preparation. What this planning means, and what the risks and benefits for the child are, are described in a pamphlet published by the Office called "The biological roots of children adopted abroad,"³ which has been available to all our foreign partners since 2019. In less than a year since its introduction, we have received dozens of questions about biological families.

Keep in mind that these stories have been translated several times (from the original language into Czech, and then from Czech into English) and so some shift in meaning and some distortions of ideas might have occurred. Because of the anonymity of the participants, we could not ask them to confirm the accuracy of the translations. This is another way in which the text is not completely objective.

To retain the necessary anonymity, all first names have been changed, and any information which may lead to identification was removed. Apart from this, we have strived for maximal authenticity. If we felt it was necessary to react to something, we chose the form of a footnote.

We would like to thank all the participants of these interviews, who allowed us to look into their personal life and hear their stories of finding a family. We would like to thank the adoptive parents and their children, who didn't just tell these stories within their family circle, but decided to share their experiences with the rest of us too. Another huge thank you goes to our foreign partners and the social workers who, despite all their duties, selflessly made time for a good endeavor that will serve us all. Especially, we are grateful to our colleagues from the adoption department, who provided us with valuable information from their long-term experience with the adoption process, even with many personal contacts. We believe that thanks to this openness and cooperation, we will all continue to help create new homes full of care, tolerance, and love.

³ Available at: <www.umpod.cz>.

Italy

David (9 years old)

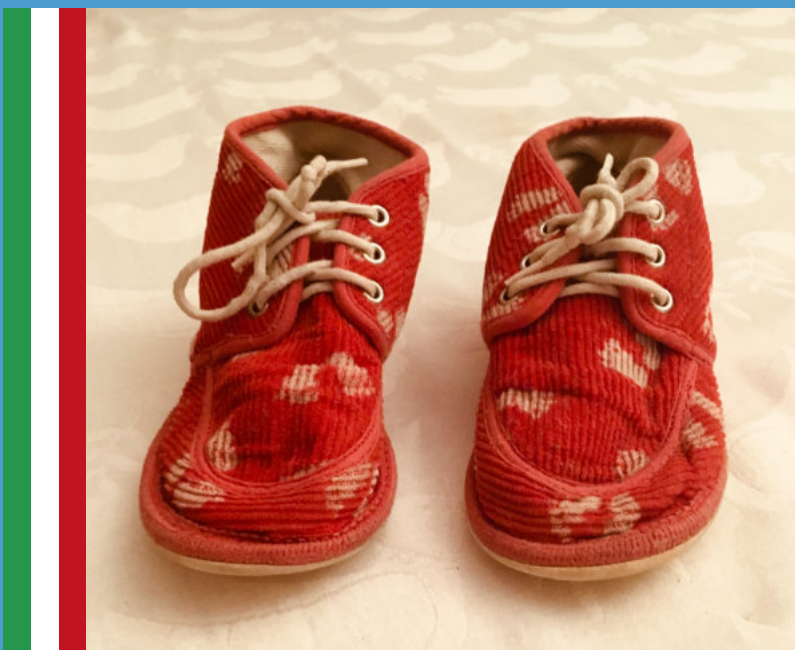
Marcel (16 years old)

Daniel (7 years old)

Sofia (7 years old)

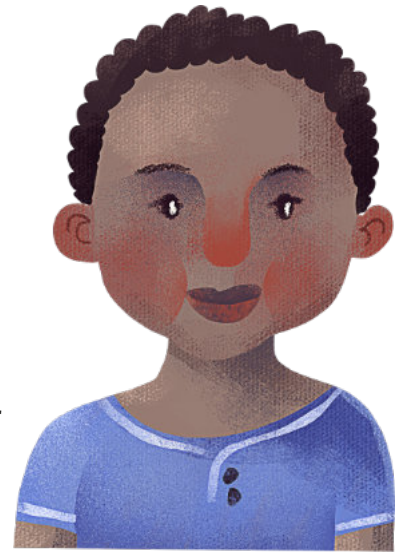
Rozárie (17 years old)

The Office has been working with Italy since 2004. As of January 31, 2020, 89 children have been adopted from the Czech Republic to Italy. The sole facilitator of adoptions from the Czech Republic is the accredited organization “Associazione Solidarietà Adozioni – Onlus” (ASA). Thanks to our long-term cooperation with the same colleagues from this organisation, Italy is the only country where we have been able to conduct interviews with the local professionals working in intercountry adoption.



An interview with David (9 years old)

David moved to Italy in 2011. At that time, he was a little over one year old. At the time of the interview, he was nine years old. His family adopted another boy (six years old) from the Czech Republic in 2019.



A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

I don't remember anything, but I know that my mummy is really tiny. But I think that daddy is probably really tall. Mummy was very young when I was born.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

I remember the dogs (*he attended canistherapy*). I visited the institution in 2016 with my parents and sister and it's a really pretty place. The best thing was that we didn't even ring the bell and the doors opened!!! Inside they'd prepared a huge photo of me as a baby.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

No, I don't. But later on, I watched a lot of videos from that time and my sister talked to me about it a lot too.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

No, I didn't know. I imagine that it was as nice as what I saw on the photos and videos.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic? What do you remember or how do you imagine it?

From the photos I think it was nice, but I was small and don't remember it. I remember the Charles Bridge (but maybe that was from the trip in 2016) and an Italian restaurant.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

I don't remember.

What were you looking forward to? And were you afraid of anything?

I don't remember, but I wish I'd been old enough to understand it all better!

How did you get used to your new home?

Very slowly I got used to things and started being more trusting.

For how long was everything new and unknown?

For many months, I think a year, everything was new, and you had to get used to it.

And what about the new language?

I learned Italian in two weeks. It was easy.

What was the best thing about it for you?

To live in such a huge big house.

What was the worst thing for you?

Nothing is bad.

What was the most surprising thing for you?

It was a pleasant surprise for me that I have a sister.

And how did it go with your sibling?

I always used to play a lot with my sister. At the time she was about eight. Now we talk a lot, she tells me a lot of things about her life.

Did your parents' behaviour or attitude to you change? Did they behave to you in a different way before?

No, they're the same.

And if you look back on it today...

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

No, I wouldn't want anything differently.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

I would recommend to the children to trust their parents. Even if there's something they don't want to do, they have to trust them, because then everything is okay.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

We've always talked about it. After I'd been here for a few years we decided to adopt a baby brother or sister from the Czech Republic.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays at home?

Yes, I'm interested in it. In January we came back here to adopt my baby brother.

Are you interested in the place where you come from?

It was great when I visited Prague and the institution again with my family in 2016.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

I have light brown skin but it's not important.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Does anybody know about it?

Of course, everybody has always known about it. I also wanted to talk, together with mummy, to smaller children and explain what it means to be adopted. We visited my kindergarten teacher's class (last year) and I was explaining that in children's homes there are children who need parents, and that then parents come to take them home and look after them.

Some little girl raised her hand and talked about "real and not real" parents. My mummy helped me, but I also answered on my own. I wasn't really angry with her, I get that a lot of people still don't know what adoption actually is.

Then mummy read a story about adoption and one little girl from the class who was also adopted, but in Italy, then told us about her friend who stayed in the institution. That was really nice.

How do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic?

My parents have always talked to me about everything they know, but I was small and I really only remember the psychologist and other "nannies" from the institution.

What would you like to know about your past?

I'd like to know if my father is African, or American, where he comes from... Mummy and daddy tell me that now that I'm growing up, I probably look like him... so when I look into a mirror I can kind of imagine what my biological father is like.

Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

Of course, like I said, we have lots of videos and photos.

What would you like to know about the Czech Republic?

Nothing right now, because as I said I've already returned there twice, to Prague, to Brno, and to my institution.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents. Unless stated otherwise, one was answering and the other one agreed.

As applicants

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

We didn't expect him to be of colour⁴, or to be so small. We imagined something like a four or five year old, but nothing more specific than that.

And were those expectations fulfilled?

Everything went even better than we expected!

Would you be able to say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an intercountry adoption asked you about it...

It's normal to have some expectations. But maybe the social workers preparing us for the adoption were pushing us a bit too much to imagine everything. In the end you are given a specific child and you have to get to know them and love them the way they are.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

We were immediately incredibly happy!!!

⁴ The applicants knew that they would probably be getting a child of a different ethnicity, but they were surprised that it was a child with African features.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

The reception was excellent!

How would you finish this sentence: 'When we first saw our child, we...?'

Immediately shouted out: 'He's so beautiful!'

What are your memories of the children's home and of your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

We have wonderful memories, we even stayed in Prague a week longer, after the Committee⁵ gave us an entry permission allowing us to return to Italy.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic and what didn't you know?

We'd known everything before we came.

How useful was what you knew in advance? What was the key information for you?

The most important thing was knowing that we could spend the first few days in the institution and rely on the hospitality and support of the workers who knew the child.

What did the Czech Republic do for you (what support and information did it provide)?

The connections we made in the institution were very important, and the advice from the psychologist and the caregivers. We met amazing people that we will never forget.

When you were at home...

How was your departure from the Czech Republic and arrival home? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

As we said before, we felt so good in Prague as 'a family' that we returned home a week later. There wasn't anything negative, but the first significant worry or stress was about him fitting in at kindergarten, deciding when is the right time to send him there. We started sending him to kindergarten after 10 months and he would only stay there in the morning; after lunch we were at home together.

What were the first days and the first months like?

With our son everything developed and continued really smoothly and naturally. In the first 10 months he was always at home, mainly with his mummy because his sister was at school, but then in the afternoon she loved to play with her little brother.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

Family unity was created almost immediately. Our son trusted us at once. He also learned to walk with us, after a few days in the Czech Republic (the caregivers in the children's home told us so too). His little sister was also coming up with lots of activities, all of them ensuring we were all together.

While becoming closer, what role did your language play?

Our son didn't speak Czech because he was too small. His first active language was Italian and so another bond was established soon.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship?

The key moments for us were that he 'discovered' walking and talking with us.

⁵ The Italian Committee for International Adoption answers directly to the prime minister's office. It is the main Italian organ recognized by the Hague Adoption Convention, ensuring that it adheres to the Convention.

What made you happy at first?

That after five years of waiting there were finally four of us.

What made you worried at first?

When he was little we worried about some developmental disorders.

What was surprising for you?

We were and still are surprised by his analytical abilities and his ability to think and observe which are exceptional for his age.

What did you have to sacrifice?

Our time management has changed completely, we had to sacrifice our needs for the needs of our children (even more so now that there are three of them).

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

There isn't much time for our relationship. We manage to spend time together in the evenings when the kids are in bed.

What role did your biological child play in helping the family get used to each other?

Our first (biological) daughter has always been very caring, she was really looking forward to having a little brother.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Did anything make you surprised or uncertain?

No, the psychologist from the agency prepared us really well, without forcing us into anything, we thought everything through together.

What is it good to be prepared for?

Yes, mainly it's good to know something about the differences between the needs of a biological and an adoptive child: we spoke mainly about the abandonment phenomenon, the central role of emotions and about the needs of the child, which should come before the needs of the parents.

Would you do it again?

We've already done it again!

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how did you manage it?

Not having a clear idea of how long we'd have to wait before we got a child.

What do you perceive as risky?

Fear that the adoption would be stopped.

What would you need done differently?

To be certain that sooner or later we would be able to adopt.

What would you want to know, if you wanted to adopt a child again?

Nothing.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

Our advice is, don't be afraid to fully express your motivation and don't approach the waiting in a passive way, or you might start feeling like a victim. In other words, you risk blaming yourself for not having been chosen. Another important piece of advice is, search for information yourself, ask or do research on the internet, and don't just passively listen to other people's experiences.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

Yes, we have lots of materials.

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays?

Mainly we travelled to the Czech Republic, and now that we've adopted another child we've also bought films and fairy tales in Czech. When the children grow up they can seek more information and deepen their knowledge themselves, and we will stand by their side.

What contact does the child have with his biological roots?

We are constantly talking about the Czech Republic and the people we met there. We wanted our son to be proud of his origin, and he is!

In 2016 we visited the workers in the institution and also at the Office in Brno, it was very emotional for all of us! Now we have two Czech kids and the Czech Republic is kind of our second home!

What kind of contact would your child like to have with his biological roots?

He's sensitive to everything connected to his country and his origin. We often talk about our son having dual citizenship and two passports.⁶

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

For us, difference means enrichment. And we have transferred this attitude onto our daughter too.

An interview with the social worker

Parents interested in intercountry adoption

How was your collaboration with the applicants from the beginning?

I would say our collaboration and mutual trust was excellent.

How long did it take for an intercountry adoption to be approved?

The waiting period was standard, given how long it takes to complete all the paperwork at the relevant court.⁷

How long did the parents wait before they learned that they'd been identified as parents for a child from the Czech Republic?

Around 5 years.

What was difficult during that period?

The Czech Republic had suspended all intercountry adoptions because of a death of a child adopted into a different country. In that period of time all couples found it difficult to keep believing that adoptions would be renewed and look forward to them, and mainly to focus their minds on the needs and characteristics of the children, not on the worries and uncertainties accompanying the process.⁸

⁶ Children don't lose their Czech citizenship after adoption.

⁷ In Italy.

⁸ After a tragic incident (the death of an adopted Czech boy in Sweden in 2006) the Office suspended the facilitation of intercountry adoptions. This situation lasted approx. one year. Meanwhile the conditions for facilitating adopting children out of the Czech Republic were toughened, making them much stricter than the adoption convention. The "Methodological Recommendations for Intercountry Adoption Facilitation" was published, and received numerous updates due to changes in the law. The Institution team was joined by psychologists. Sweden published a textbook for social workers which helped increase the quality of their work when choosing appropriate candidates for adoption, and put more emphasis on checking up on the children who have been placed in families.

What is your cooperation with the Czech Republic like?

Our cooperation has always been excellent: good communication and willingness of the workers to travel to Rome and explain the reasons for the suspension to all the couples.

What information did the applicants receive from you before they came to the Czech Republic?

They had everything they needed: the processes in the Czech Republic, the health and mental state of the child, the potential obstacles, the feelings of the parents and the child throughout the stay.

What were the applicants missing before the departure?

Nothing. All the couples always admired the effective processes in the Czech Republic.

Departure to the Czech Republic

How did you interact with the clients during their stay in the Czech Republic?

I was in continuous contact with them over the phone, to be able to react to their feelings, reactions, and specific needs arising throughout their stay, and to provide a psychological analysis of relationship problems.

What do you think the clients appreciated while staying in the Czech Republic?

The cooperation with the institution workers and the possibility of immediate support thanks to the fact that they were staying only one floor above.

What did the clients need more in the Czech Republic?

They didn't have any special needs and didn't really miss anything, they were also the only ones who stayed a week longer than was strictly necessary.

What impressions did the applicants have after returning from the Czech Republic?

A great impression: the transparency of all the processes, the warm attitude of the workers (to the parents as well as to the biological daughter and the child), a high level of professionalism and competence, the amount of care given to the environment at the institution and mainly to the children.

After arrival at home with the child

In your opinion, how did the new family manage the move home from the Czech Republic? What was difficult for them?

They travelled by plane and didn't have any trouble.

What were the advantages for the parents in the early days and early months?

The mum stayed at home with the child and helped him settle in. The sister and dad were really excited and were a big part of the whole process.

What were the limitations of the parents in the first few days and early months?

They didn't experience any special limitations or crises.

How did the child behave in the first few days and the first few months?

He was curious, lively and happy. But he wasn't especially moody or overly stubborn or angry.

At what point did you know that the child was adapting well and the situation at home was stable?

Towards the end of the first year of his stay, his family life was stabilized and harmonious and the child had formed strong relationships with the whole family.

What really helped the family, in your opinion?

The happy and warm character of the child, his ability to seek and accept physical contact and trust new things. The energy and love of both parents and the sister.

What slowed down the family getting used to each other, in your opinion?

I don't think there was anything that slowed down the natural process of the family in getting to know one another.

Looking back

What do you think was the main advantage for the parents?

The dynamic character and energy of both parents. The strong motivation and flexibility of both the parents and the biological daughter.

What did the parents hesitate over throughout the process?

Nothing. They were always very enthusiastic and motivated. Also during the suspension of intercountry adoptions in the Czech Republic⁹ they were one of the most optimistic couples with the biggest faith, never succumbing into anger or frustration.

What support did the parents receive from you?

Preparations for the adoption were required by law, and required an active cooperation focused on parental competence and culture. I was always available to answer any questions and clear up any doubts and uncertainties, and the parents also appreciated the fact that I was always reachable by phone.

Would you do anything differently? What?

No, nothing.

What would you recommend to new applicants for an intercountry adoption?

To avoid idealised images of meeting the child and of the first moments spent together. To be aware of possible difficulties at the start, so that they can face them. To empathise with the needs of the child and not be governed by their own dreams, so that they can create a strong and deep relationship.

Supporting the identity of the child

What approach do the parents have to addressing the child's origin?

The child in question has dark skin¹⁰, but the family was very happy from the beginning and didn't care about what the child looked like. I am sure that this child, the only black one, was chosen for them by the Czech institutions based on a thorough and conscious selection of this family. The parents always spoke of the adoption and tried to spread information about it among their friends and in schools. The child is very mature and conscious of his abilities which are also connected to an unusual past.

Do you have any materials that help the child to understand his whole life story? Could they be sent over?

I don't have any organised materials that I could send.

Do you have methods for supporting a child if they are interested in looking for their roots?

Of course. Whenever parents and children seek more information about the child's family members or friends in the original country (even when it is not the Czech Republic), I actively communicate with the relevant offices and try to gather this information.

⁹ See note 8.

¹⁰ See note 4.

An interview with Marcel (16 years old)



Marcel moved to Italy in 2006, when he was three and a half years old. At the time of the interview he was 16. His parents adopted a second child from the Czech Republic in 2012; the second child was six and a half years old at that time.

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

Yes, what my parents told me, that my mother left me in an institution and gradually started visiting me less and less, until eventually I didn't even remember her. I don't know anything about my daddy. When I'm 18 I'd like to get some more information and get to know them both. We spoke about it with my parents.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember?

Yes, mainly from the photos that my parents kept, I remember friends, games, a garden, but mainly nannies, every single one of them, I was especially fixated on one of them. I remember very well that this nanny had blue eyes, light hair and was chubby. I'd really like to meet her. When I visited the children's home 7 years ago I asked about her, but she wasn't working there anymore.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

Yes, I remember it very well, even the room. Daddy drew me a car and I was drawing it after him. My parents remember that I was scared, and I remember how anxious I was in Prague. I think it was because I was afraid of the future.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you?

I don't know, I don't remember. They just led me into some room.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic?

I remember a room where I was playing. I was running from one side to the other and my parents were running after me. I also remember the social worker.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

To tell you the truth I remember everything from photos. For example, how I was sitting on the suitcases. Or I remember that when we arrived at the airport in Italy, I ran to the toilet because I needed to pee...

How did you get used to your new home?

I don't remember anything special.

For how long was everything new and unknown?

I remember that at the airport everybody was new and strange. And then in kindergarten there were new friends and one little girl even played with me. But I don't have any unpleasant impression from the home.

And what about the new language?

My parents told me that I'd learned Italian in about two months. But at that time I couldn't even really speak Czech.

What was the best thing about it for you?

That I was adopted and I'd found a good family environment.

What was the worst thing for you?

To know that they'd left me in an orphanage for three years, and to realise that I could have still been there now, and that they would have sent me away at 18, but instead of that I got lucky... this is what my biological mother should have realized, that it's not certain that the child she was leaving behind would be adopted.

What was the most surprising thing for you?

The sea! When I saw the sea for the first time, I was with my aunt and uncle and cousins.

And how did it go with your sibling(s)?

I don't know anything.

Did your parents' behaviour or attitude to you change?

I think that mummy is too anxious.

And if you look back on it today...

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

No.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

I would recommend that they take the opportunity to be adopted, because it's the only one. And then when you're 18, they kick you out of the institution.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

From the beginning, but I think that somewhere inside I've always known. They showed me photos and told me about them. Even now mummy likes to look at photos from that time.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic?

I wouldn't be interested in going back there if I didn't want to find my biological parents. I came back for my brother 7 years ago.

Are you interested in the place where you come from?

Yes, I came back and wanted to see my nanny, but she wasn't there anymore.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

It doesn't matter. My friends, when they saw my dark skin, often asked me about my origin, but it's not important. I'm also proud of my Czech name and correct people when they mispronounce it.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Does anybody know about it?

Yes, everybody knows. People are sometimes surprised and tell me how lucky I am, but I tell them that this luck was born out of the fact that I was abandoned.

How do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic?

As I said before, I want to get information to know who I am.

What would you like to know about your past?

I would like to find out something about my parents, understand the reasons why they left me when I was only 2 months old – don't have a child just to abandon it straight away. But I'm also afraid that my biological parents won't tell me the truth...

Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

Yes, I have several photo albums.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents. Unless stated otherwise, one of them was answering and the other one agreed.

As applicants

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

We didn't have any specific expectations, maybe just that the child should be healthy. Or more precisely, we'd asked for two children, but we were given one. A few years later we applied for a second adoption and adopted another child from the Czech Republic (exactly six years later).

And were those expectations fulfilled?

Yes, because not only is he healthy, but also intelligent and mature.

Would you be able to say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an intercountry adoption asked you about it...

No, we didn't have any concrete ideas.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

It was amazing! We still remember that it was a Friday and all the rest... how we talked about it together, who we told about it later...

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

The arrival was okay and everyone was nice.

How would you finish this sentence: 'When we first saw our child, we...?'

...immediately tried to make a connection with him because he was really tense, sweating... we tried to create a positive relationship.

What are your memories of the children's home and of your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

The Institution was very well managed and clean, and our stay there was perfect: we got a beautiful welcome and everything went smoothly.

Father: That period was unforgettable, magical, unique.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic and what didn't you know?

We didn't know we'd be able to sleep in the institution.

How useful was what you knew in advance?

All the information was useful and important. There wasn't anything we didn't know.

What did the Czech Republic do for you (what support and information did it provide)?

The state gave us all the support it could. The workers in the institution told us everything they knew about the mother... we'd definitely like to know more about the biological parents.

When you were at home...

How was your departure from the Czech Republic and arrival home?

We couldn't wait for the bureaucratic part to be over so we can go back home and start our life together. Our relatives had prepared an amazing welcome at the airport, and even the neighbours from our building visited us one by one and brought presents for the child. We didn't worry so much anymore (like we did in the children's home, although there we received support from the agency psychologist, she was our 'lighthouse').

What were the first few days and months like?

Everything went well. After about one month he started attending kindergarten and the teacher was praising him because he was one of the best in his class. That way he learned Italian very quickly.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

A feeling that we are a family, we felt that immediately! Even in the city where the institution is, although it was obviously even stronger at home.

While you were getting to know each other, what role did your language play?

Of course it's important to understand each another. But we didn't have any problems because the child learned Italian in a month and a half. He was attending kindergarten but his mummy used up all the maternity leave she could get, even the unpaid one.

Mother: I had a really good time with my son. His daddy was, at that time and also for many years after, taking the children to and from kindergarten, every day. We didn't want a nanny.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship?

It was a standard development, an increasing affection and trust.

What made you happy at first?

The certainty that we've become parents.

What made you worried at first?

Mother: That the child wouldn't want us.

Father: I wasn't particularly worried, my wife always tells me that I was the driving force. Plus the waiting period, however difficult, helped us to mature.

What was surprising for you?

The unconditional and deep love you feel.

Mother: I felt that my child is my blood.

What did you have to sacrifice?

The time for the two of us and generally everything became very planned. A conscious denial; but since we wanted something different, we didn't mind.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

More than ever before it's changed now, because the needs of the boy in puberty reveal that we have different opinions on some issues; we're talking about the answers or solutions here, and not about basic values, which we share.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Did anything make you surprised or uncertain?

Nothing surprised us, nothing was unexpected.

Mother: I'd like to have had more information about the biological parents.¹¹

What is it good to be prepared for?

Mother: I was prepared for the fact that puberty is more difficult for adopted children.

Father: Actually, I talk to a lot of my colleagues and so I know that many biological parents of teens have even worse and more serious problems than the ones I see with my son.

Would you do it again?

We have adopted again.

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how did you manage it?

The child wasn't affectionate and didn't seek contact with us, but we understood that it was just his reaction of sorts and were persistent.

What do you perceive as risky?

We don't see any special risks. The boy wants to get to know his biological parents and his mum is worried that in the future, when he meets his original family, he might discover some unpleasant things.

What would you want done differently?

Nothing.

What would you want to know, if you were to adopt a child again?

We've already adopted a second child and this time it was nicer to have more information about the biological mother.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

To be patient and not create expectations that might bring disappointment. We didn't envision our kids in any way and didn't create any ideas about them.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

Yes, we have photos capturing various moments, and we are happy that from the Czech Republic we got pictures of the kids when they were really small, newborns. We often look at them together.

¹¹ All the available information about the biological family is included in the 'information package' applicants receive before coming to the Czech Republic. Applicants also have the right to ask about any current changes. The Czech Republic wholeheartedly supports sharing information about a child's history with the new family, including contact between biological siblings. There is also an effort to place siblings into one family, or into one country, but due to various circumstances it's not always possible. More information about this process, and about the risks and benefits for the child in learning about their background, are described in the Office's pamphlet "The biological roots of children adopted abroad" (available at <www.umpod.cz>).

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays?

We made one nice trip before the adoption, to get to know the customs in the Czech Republic. When Italy plays football against the Czech Republic, our kids cheer for the Czechs.

Does the child have any contact with his biological roots?

No.

What kind of contact would your child like to have with his biological roots?

Yes, he'd like to get to know his parents and we are obligated to help him in this search, as soon as the time is right.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

Nothing important.

An interview with the social worker

Parents interested in intercountry adoption

How was your collaboration with the applicants from the beginning?

Our collaboration was excellent. The parents were always full of trust, ready to face any problems and consider any given situation.

How long did it take for an intercountry adoption to be approved?

The waiting period was standard, given how long it takes to complete all the paperwork at the relevant court.¹²

How long did the parents wait before they learned that they'd been identified as parents for a child from the Czech Republic?

About 4 years.

What was difficult during that period?

The waiting period was long but the parents were handling it well; the most challenging thing was the uncertainty of a positive result of this waiting.

What is your cooperation with the Czech Republic like?

It's always been excellent.

What information did the applicants receive from you before they came to the Czech Republic?

They got news, photos and all the information we had about the stay and the legislative side of things.

What were the applicants missing before the departure?

Nothing.

Departure to the Czech Republic

How did you interact with the clients during their stay in the Czech Republic?

Yes, all the time. At first the lady was worried that she wouldn't be able to form a bond with the child, and I was encouraging her, listening to her and supporting her in some moments. She and her husband remember it even today.

¹² In Italy.

What do you think the clients appreciated while staying in the Czech Republic?

The services offered, the cordiality, and the varied and precise information.

What did the clients need more in the Czech Republic?

Nothing.

What impressions did the applicants have after returning from the Czech Republic?

That they'd been to a wonderful place where children, even though they're abandoned, get all the care they need.

After arrival at home with the child

In your opinion, how did the new family manage the move home from the Czech Republic? What was difficult for them?

They travelled by plane and didn't have any trouble.

What were the advantages for the parents in the first few days and months?

The mum stayed home on maternity leave and the dad was working (*and still does*) on his computer from home most of the time.

What were the limitations of the parents in the first few days and months?

There weren't any special limitations. They were very warm and caring.

How did the child behave in the first few days and months?

From the start he seemed to be an intelligent child. He calmed down and was ready to start learning.

At what point did you know that the child was adapting well and the situation at home was stable?

After about half a year, when it seemed like the child had found his place at home, at school and among his peers.

What really helped the family, in your opinion?

A complete adaptation of both parents, in terms of time, energy and emotions.

What slowed down the family getting used to each other, in your opinion?

There weren't any problems.

Looking back

What do you think was the main advantage for the parents?

Flexibility, trusting the workers, a big motivation to be a part of and understand the attributes and inner needs of the child.

What did the parents hesitate over throughout the process?

At the beginning of the adaptation period in the Czech Republic, there was a moment of uncertainty for the mum, because it seemed that the child was keeping his distance; however the lady managed to let it play out and overcome the problems.

What support did the parents receive from you?

Preparations for the adoption were required by law, and required an active cooperation focused on parental competence and culture. I was always available to answer any questions and clear up any doubts and uncertainties, and the parents also appreciated the fact that I was always reachable by phone.

Would you do anything differently?

No, nothing.

What would you recommend to new applicants for an intercountry adoption?

To avoid idealized images of meeting the child and of the first moments spent together. To be aware of possible difficulties at the start, so that they can face them. To empathize with the needs of the child and not be governed by their own dreams, so that they can create a strong and deep relationship.

Supporting the identity of the child

What approach do the parents take to addressing the child's origin?

At the moment, the parents have to deal with some anger from the child, but they have always been willing to stand by him and support his needs.

Do you have any materials that help the child to understand his whole life story?

I don't have any organised materials that I could send.

Do you have methods for supporting a child if they are interested in looking for their roots?

Of course. Whenever parents and children seek more information about the child's family members or friends in the original country (even when it is not the Czech Republic), I actively communicate with the relevant offices and try to gather this information. Specifically in the case of this boy, who has already decided to search for his roots, I've actively offered my help in the eventual search.

An interview with Daniel and Sofia (7 years old)

The children are twins. They went to Italy in 2015 when they were three years old. At the time of the interview, they were seven.

An interview with Daniel

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember?

Yes, I remember a friend I always used to play with. We often played in bales of hay, but we also played lots of other games. Then I remember that once I was cycling, I fell and demanded a sweet to stop the pain.

In the evening they put us to sleep in the dark and closed the door. I don't like sleeping in the dark. Now I always sleep with a little lamp on.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

Yes! I saw mummy and daddy with lots of presents. They brought lots of presents and sweets. I quickly noticed that there was a firefighter car, I took it and turned it on, there were lights and a siren, it was beautiful.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you?

No, it was a surprise.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic?

We went to an amusement park and I went on a ride and was riding and riding. When daddy told me to get off, that we'd go home, I kept on riding and didn't get off. Daddy kept calling, I wasn't getting off, so daddy slapped me on the butt, I got off and he took me into his arms and we went home. One day mummy prepared chicken legs and potatoes, until then I'd never seen that before and so I only took a potato. I really liked it and today grandma makes chicken legs and potatoes every Sunday.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

We went back by car and I was holding the firefighter car in my hands the whole time and turning it on. Mummy said that daddy is a good driver.



When we arrived home, all the relatives and people from the building were in the garden and they prepared a beautiful party. There was panini and pizzas and a lot of balloons and also a sign with messages for us.

What were you looking forward to? And were you afraid of anything?

I was afraid of the boogeyman. Even in the Czech Republic I was afraid of him and didn't want to pee.

How did you get used to your new home?

At first I was scared because it was really big.

For how long was everything new and unknown?

It took some time to get used to things.

And what about the new language?

At first I spoke Czech to my sister, but then with grandma and aunt we spoke Italian.

What was the best thing about it for you?

We went to the seaside, there were waves, I stepped away and they came to me again and I stepped away again.

What was the worst thing for you?

Just the boogeyman.

What was the most surprising thing for you?

The welcome party when we arrived.

And how did it go with your sibling?

They adopted my sister together with me.

Did your parents' behaviour or attitude to you change?

Now mummy is angry if I don't do my homework.

And if you look back on it today...

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

Nothing.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

They have to know that it will be nice to get to know them.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

We watch a lot of videos and look at photos from the time when we were in the Czech Republic. Mummy has them on her phone, we often look at them and talk about them.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic?

I'd like to go back on holiday... but with mummy and daddy! And I'd like to see my friend again.

Are you interested in the place where you come from?

I already know a lot of things.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

Sometimes I ask mummy and daddy why I have darker skin and they tell me that it's because I was born in the Czech Republic, but that it's not important.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Does anybody know about it?

I tell everybody: 'Mummy and daddy adopted me. I come from the Czech Republic.' I tell my friends about it.

How do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic?

Note from the social worker: They haven't had a bigger conversation about their biological parents yet; he just knows that he was born out of a tummy of a different mummy.

What would you like to know about your past?

I don't know.

Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

We have lots of videos and photos from the time we were in the Czech Republic and we often look at them.

An interview with Sofia

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?



Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember?

At the weekends I was going to one man and woman's house and every evening they were playing me a song. The man always stroked my hair, but the woman didn't. I had a bike without pedals, I was pushing with my legs, there was a basket and I put my dolls into it. There was Elsa's bike there.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

Yes, it was nice, we played 'Ring a Ring o' Roses', then we blew up balloons and released them into the air and then we sang 'La bella Lavanderina'. They brought me a beautiful doll with wings.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you?

No, it was a surprise.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic?

We went to a park where there was a fountain with a lot of holes. Me and my brother we playing so that we covered one hole and then water was coming out stronger from the other ones.

Our parents bought us a tent and built it at home. I really liked that. Mummy put it away and this year she built it again in the house by the sea and we were always playing there.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

We went by car. Every time we stopped my brother was greeting people around. And then he sat in daddy's seat and pretended to drive.

When we got home, in the garden there were all the relatives and neighbours who organised a beautiful party for us. There were sandwiches and pizzas and lots of balloons and also signs with messages for us.

What were you looking forward to? And were you afraid of anything?

I don't remember, I wasn't scared of anything.

How did you get used to your new home?

Amazing, beautiful and big.

For how long was everything new and unknown?

It didn't take too long.

And what about the new language?

At first I spoke Czech to my brother, but then I met grandma and mainly I liked talking to my aunt.

What was the best thing about it for you?

I really liked playing with sand by the sea.

What was the worst thing for you?

Nothing.

What was the most surprising thing for you?

Our bedroom which was already prepared.

And how did it go with your sibling?

They adopted my brother together with me.

Did your parents' behaviour or attitude to you change? Did they behave to you in a different way before?

Now mummy is angry when I don't do the homework they give us at school.

And if you look back on it today...

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

I'd like a sister more than a brother, I'd like my best friend to be my sister.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

They have to know that mummy and daddy are kind and they mustn't be afraid.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

We often look at videos and photos.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic?

I wouldn't want to go back.

Are you interested in the place where you come from?

I already know a lot of things.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Does anybody know about it?

I tell everybody: 'Mummy and daddy adopted me. I come from the Czech Republic.' I tell my friends about it.

How do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic?

Note from the social worker: They haven't had a bigger conversation about their biological parents yet; she just knows that she was born out of a tummy of a different mummy.

What would you like to know about your past?

I don't know.

Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

We have lots of videos and photos from the time we were in the Czech Republic and we often look at them.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents. Unless stated otherwise, the one was answering and the other one agreed.

As applicants

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

That we would have 1 or 2 children who would be healthy and would have darker skin than we do.

And were those expectations fulfilled?

Completely.

Would you be able to say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an intercountry adoption asked you about it...

Our expectations were realistic.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

We were happy and would have gone there right away! Unfortunately, the laws changed, and we had to wait another 9 months.¹³

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

We'd already known Brno, and the interview was very pleasant. We were totally honest, even though it was very emotional. The workers in Brno showed us some new photos of our children, but in those 9 months we had already saved and printed lots of photos that we found on the institution's website.

How would you finish this sentence: 'When we first saw our child, we...?'

It was a mixture of very strong emotions: happiness, fear, excitement...

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

The institution was very well equipped, clean, functioning. We played a lot, outside as well as inside. There were lots of professional workers there: nannies, a doctor, a psychologist. They lived in a beautiful little flat equipped with everything they'd need, there was even a computer.

¹³ On January 1, 2014, a new civil law changing the rules of adoption was introduced. The documentation file of the children didn't meet the new criteria for adoption. Before any interaction could be initiated it was necessary to complete the information in the children's file in accordance with the new law.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic and what didn't you know?

We knew everything: information about their health and personal history. In the institution they gave us more detailed information about the biological family.

How useful was what you knew in advance?

Everything was useful, but the most important assurance we got was about their health. Everything that was written in the report turned out to be true and corresponding to reality.

What did the Czech Republic do for you (what support and information did it provide)?

They provided us with the support that we needed and gave us additional information about the biological parents.

When you were at home...

How was the departure from the Czech Republic and the arrival home? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

We went back by car. We couldn't wait to be back home, also because almost nobody there spoke English. We didn't have any special wishes, nor were we especially worried.

What were the first few days and months like?

They were very tiring, very challenging, because of the children's adaptation, the different language...

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

With the girl we formed a relationship immediately. The boy was fixated on dad and was rejecting his mum. He bonded with his dad immediately and was always with him. As a mum I was really worried that he wouldn't accept me. After nine months though, he told me: 'Come over to me and hug me!'; it was a beautiful acceptance.

While you were getting to know each other, what role did your language play?

It was important for us as mummy and daddy to show our emotions clearly and convincingly, and for mummy to not be scared away by the boy's rejection. We brought lots of films in Italian with us to the Czech Republic.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship?

After two months we placed them in kindergarten and after a month and a half they learned Italian.

What made you happy at first?

Our dream of a family finally came true.

What made you worried at first?

That we wouldn't become friends. That we might get ill.

What was surprising for you?

How they got used to life in Italy with us. They showed a great ability to adapt.

What did you have to sacrifice?

Sport (dad), work (mum). Our way of life changed, we only have a little bit of free time, but it was a conscious choice.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

No, leaving aside different opinions on upbringing, especially to do with school homework.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Did anything make you surprised or uncertain?

No, everything to do with the agency and the Czech Republic was clear.

What helped you?

A preparation course before adoption, and stories from couples who'd already gone through the adoption process.

Would you do it again?

We will do it, but now we have two adopted children and the right time hasn't come.

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how did you manage it?

There were only problems with the boy because he was always resisting.

What do you perceive as risky?

Nothing.

What would you want done differently?

The waiting period is too long.

What would you want to know, if you were to adopt a child again?

Before we'd left, we got all the information.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

Public services are inviting us to share our experiences with couples who are applying for adoption. We recommend they choose a country that's ratified the adoption convention, so that they get as much information about the children as possible.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

Photos, videos, films. We saved the first medicine bottles, the first clothes, everything from their childhood that might be significant.

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic?

There is a cartoon show 'About a mole' that the kids really liked and still sometimes watch now. Dad often travels to the Czech Republic for work, and he recently brought back the last episode of the show and we all watched it together. Apart from that we've kept using the same nose medicine they got in the institution (salt solution) and daddy always buys a couple of bottles when he's in the Czech Republic.

What contact does the child have with his/her biological roots?

We haven't focused on this yet because it seems to us that the kids are too small to understand it, and they haven't asked about it themselves.

What kind of contact would your child like to have with his/her biological roots?

They don't think about this yet.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

It's not important.

An interview with the social worker

Parents interested in intercountry adoption

How was your collaboration with the applicants from the beginning?

The parents had a very negative experience with another agency, where they travelled to another country without knowing anything about the children, and after arriving found out the children suffered from serious retardation. In ASA they got clear and complete information and started building trust and opening up.

How long did it take for an intercountry adoption to be approved?

A medium amount of time, because the relevant court was in a small village.¹⁴

How long did the parents wait before they learned that they'd been identified as parents for a child from the Czech Republic?

They were only waiting for two years, but after that it was another nine months between their first contact and leaving.

What was difficult during that period?

Waiting to meet the children who the parents already perceived as their own.

What is your cooperation with the Czech Republic like?

It's always been excellent.

What information did the applicants receive from you before they came to the Czech Republic?

They got news, photos and all the information we had about the stay and the legislative side of things.

What were the applicants missing before the departure?

Nothing.

Departure to the Czech Republic

Did you interact with the clients during their stay in the Czech Republic?

Yes, throughout. At first both parents were sometimes sad about the excessive and unfocused activity of the boy. I was encouraging them a lot, listening to them and supporting them in various moments. They still remember it today.

What do you think the clients appreciated while staying in the Czech Republic?

The services offered, the cordiality, and the varied and precise information.

What did the clients need more in the Czech Republic?

Nothing.

What impressions did the applicants have after returning from the Czech Republic?

That they'd been to a wonderful place where children, even though they're abandoned, get all the care they need.

After arrival at home with the child

In your opinion, how did the new family manage the move home from the Czech Republic?

They went back by car and didn't have any problems.

¹⁴ In Italy.

What were the advantages for the parents in the first few days and months?

They were very emotional and motivated. The decision of the woman to leave work and just care for her children. The discreet but loving presence of both grandmothers and a childless aunt.

What were the limitations of the parents in the first days and early months?

There weren't any special limitations.

How did the children behave in the first few days and months?

The boy, unlike the girl, refused physical contact with his mum for several months. He didn't defy her but he clearly preferred his dad. The girl immediately started showing affection, an ability to adapt to her environment, and she was seeking out physical contact.

At what point did you know that the child was adapting well and the situation at home was stable?

After about six months, when the boy actively asked his mum for a kiss and a hug. At first it made the lady very emotional. After nine months when both children were happy, aware of their position in the hearts of their parents, and sufficiently integrated into the social and family context.

What really helped the family, in your opinion?

A great emotional awareness combined with diligent parenting techniques which helped the children to feel loved and also a part of a social group.

What slowed down the family getting used to each other, in your opinion?

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Looking back

What do you think was the main advantage for the parents?

The big motivation and persistence the parents showed, even while overcoming a big disappointment they experienced during an adoption facilitated by a different agency.

What did the parents hesitate over throughout the process?

They didn't have any specific doubts or problems.

What support did the parents receive from you?

Preparations for the adoption were required by law, and required an active cooperation focused on parental competence and culture. I was always available to answer any questions and clear up any doubts and uncertainties, and the parents also appreciated the fact that I was always reachable by phone.

Would you do anything differently?

No, nothing.

What would you recommend to new applicants for an intercountry adoption?

To avoid idealized images of meeting the child and of the first moments spent together. To be aware of possible difficulties at the start, so that they can face them. To empathize with the needs of the child and not be governed by their own dreams, so that they can create a strong and deep relationship.

Supporting the identity of the child

What approach do the parents take to addressing the child's origin?

They are always talking about the Czech Republic, showing them photos and videos from the first few weeks, and both children tell everyone that they were adopted in the Czech Republic when they were three. Apart from that they use some Czech words when speaking and show the children cartoons they liked before the adoption.

Do you have any materials that help the child to understand his whole life story?

I don't have any organised materials that I could send.

Do you have methods for supporting a child if they are interested in looking for their roots?

Of course. Whenever parents and children seek more information about the child's family members or friends in the original country (even when it is not the Czech Republic), I actively communicate with the relevant offices and try to gather this information.

Rozárie's story (17 years old)

Rozárie traveled to Italy in 2005 at the age of three.

She wrote her story in English and we are sharing it here exactly as she wrote it.



Unfortunately, I don't remember anything about my parents. I have very little information about my biological mother. Surname and age. Nothing is known about my dad. I remember the institution where I lived for three and half years. I remember it was huge, very clean, there were large rooms with small beds, a large kitchen... I loved those dishes. I perfectly remember the bathroom where we did the bath. I always played with a yellow duck. I still have that nice little duck. I don't remember my first meeting with my parents, but I have many photographs of that moment. I looked very happy and they as well. It often happens that I let myself be told what I used to do when I was little and every time, I smile making me transported by those memories hidden in my mind and by those strong feelings. I knew someone would come to me sooner or later. I knew that three fantastic people would come. My mom my dad and my big brother. I never lost hope. I've been always positive. When I was with my "new" parents in the Czech Republic I played a lot with my brother and with my dad, the only one with whom I had no contact was mum. It makes me laugh thinking about it now as I write. As soon as I arrived in this city I live now, which is located in Italy, I had so many difficulties in getting into this new house. There were different smells. Lots of people waiting for me. As soon as we arrived in this new house, mum told me that the two grandmothers had prepared pasta in broth. I liked it a lot and I love it even now. The first nights were very bad, not also for me but also for my parents. I screamed and had nightmares. Fortunately, everything has passed. Looking at the new language was not complicated. It took me a month to understand everything I was told I never had any problems with my brother. We have always had a good relationship. There are four years of difference between us. My parents have always been good and fair. They always made me experience. They always had a right attitude towards me. I believe in destiny a lot and I think that if it went like this my life means that someone had already decided what to do with my life. I would never change anything from my childhood. I've always been well. All I would recommend to a child or a teenager to do is to get to know the new parents in front of them as well as possible, not to create any walls and if this wall has already formed, I would advise you to take it down slowly making "friendship" with new parents. The arrival in the new house can be beautiful but at the same time a bit ugly but you have to take it lightly... because my children and young people want to remind you that if a family wants to adopt one of us it means that it loves us. They do it with loves, remember it. I was very open with my parents. I've never been afraid to say what I thought. I've always asked questions about my past. We have always talked about it with tranquility. I am very interested in the Czech Republic because it is and will always be my place. I returned twice to the Czech Republic after being adopted. I never complained about being "different" from my family. What I think is that when you are comfortable with people, you take their ways. being adopted is not a bad thing, it's just an act of love. I never had any problems telling my story. I never hid my story from my friends and other people. All the people who know me know that I have been adopted and that I was born in the Czech Republic. I am very curious to know my whole story. I need to know. All of us... we all need to know. Our history... our roots. We all need to see and know who really are... who we look like. I have many photos of when I was little, but certainly those are not enough to make me fully understand my story.

Besides the interview, we also received a letter from her which she also wrote in English. It's published at the end of the book.

An interview with the mother

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

At that time we already had one child and we wanted to have another one. We've always imagined a family with more children. It seemed natural to us to consider getting a second child through an intercountry adoption.

And were your expectations fulfilled?

We didn't have any specific expectations. We'd already had a son. For myself, I wanted a daughter (I had a vision of my birth family in my mind: we were two siblings - a boy and a girl). I imagined my family with two children of different genders. We didn't have any expectations in terms of age, except for that the child would be younger than our son, mainly because he wanted a little brother or sister, who he imagined would be younger than him.

Could you say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an international adoption asked you about it...

We knew the unlucky stories of adopted children, and were aware of the difficulties, and of the fact that separation is in any case a serious trauma, and that separation from the country and environment our daughter had lived in until our arrival would be a source of suffering. And that is what happened.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

Every day I had to think about my child living somewhere in the Czech Republic. Every day I was imagining what she was doing, if she was going to school already. Finally the psychologist who informed us of the adoption called, and right at the start told me when the child was born, which is an important date for us, because that same day of the year, we were in Rome to give the office appointed to facilitate intercountry adoption (in accordance with the process established in Italy) a mandate to start the process of adoption in the Czech Republic. A coincidence, the magic of adoption! Our biological son called his father to tell him that we would be joined by his little sister. I immediately liked everything about the girl: her name, her age... I thought to myself: she is my daughter, even though I didn't know anything about her and hadn't seen a photo of her.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

We immediately felt at home in the Czech Republic. We appreciated the attention the office workers gave us, and their professionalism.

How would you finish this sentence: "When we first saw our child, we...?"

...knew that she's our daughter!

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

I remember every minute of those days which we spent in the city where the institute our daughter lived in is. When I later spoke about this home with my daughter, I called it 'the pink house'. The place pleasantly surprised me: it was my daughter's home, where she'd lived, felt relaxed, had people close to her; the nurses were very emotionally important people for her.

The home meant security for her. When we brought her back there in the first week after our meeting, she was happy: as soon as she walked through the gate, she let go of my hand and ran into her home.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic and what didn't you know?

We had all the information about the child; we knew her history and her health.

How useful was what you knew in advance?

We had all the information about the child; we knew her history and her health. This information was useful because we could imagine a real child: suddenly we knew a name, age, health condition, and we were told the child was full of enthusiasm. That really touched me. Everyone who later met my daughter mentioned this side of her.

What did the Czech Republic do for you (what support and information did it provide)?

We got all the necessary support. The child was small and it wasn't easy for her to leave the environment she used to live in. The first few days the little girl came to us happily. Later when we came to pick her up, she was crying. My husband had to pick her up, he hugged her and whispered, and sang her a song in Czech which he made up from the few words he'd learned. The little girl relaxed in his embrace and wept almost silently. It seemed she was suffering greatly; every day we postponed leaving the home, so that the employees gently but firmly told us that we should finally leave. In that situation their support was very important!

When you were at home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

For us, leaving the Czech Republic brought moments of great suffering. We had to go home, we wanted to go home. But we were taking our child away from everything that had until then been her life! We weren't scared, but we felt very sorry because we realised how hard it must be for such a small girl.

What were the first few days and months like?

The first few days in Italy were a celebration! Our house was always full of relatives: there were grandparents, uncles, friends. About three weeks after arriving in Italy the little girl woke up one night, her eyes wide open, and started screaming. It seemed she was suffering from hallucinations. She cried the whole night, didn't want to sleep and didn't want to lie in her bed. I decided to let her stay with me in my bed. There she calmed down and fell asleep on my stomach. For several days she couldn't stand clothes on her body. Before putting anything on she would turn it inside out and check, as if she was making sure nothing was there.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

It took several months before she calmed down completely. At first she was upset and hyperactive. We decided to limit visits from friends and family so as not to tire the child out and allow her to build a relationship with us as her most important people.

While you were getting to know each other, what role did your language play?

There was no problem with language. We used nonverbal communication so that she understood what we were saying; at the same time we respected that she needed her own time before she started expressing herself in Italian.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship?

Yes, a key moment was the return to Italy. During the stay in the Czech Republic the most important figures for her were male: a father and a brother. She ignored me. After returning to Italy her father returned to work, our son was going to school, and she stayed home with me.

We spent the days together: playing, watching Czech cartoons together (because she hadn't yet got over the language change). Slowly she was building a relationship with me.

What made you happy at first?

That I became a mother of a small girl.

What was the first thing you worried about?

That my daughter might be suffering. She had to separate from everything that made up her world and face a whole new reality.

What was surprising for you?

The adaptability of this little girl and the speed with which she learned a new language.

What did you have to sacrifice?

Nothing.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

No.

What role did your biological child play in helping the family get used to each other?

Our son's role was crucial. The girl was clearly soothed by the presence of her brother in the family, as if she was thinking 'If there is a child in the family, it makes me trust them.' She was clearly used to having children around her and being a part of a group. In my opinion the presence of another child in the family made her adaptation in a new environment easier; the girl was mimicking everything her brother was doing.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Did anything make you surprised or uncertain?

I think it was a long but peaceful journey. In any case, that's how we perceived it.

What is it good to be prepared for?

It's good to come to terms with the waiting period, which can be long, and also with possible reactions of the child, especially in the first stage when they're getting used to a new family.

Would you do it again?

Yes.

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how did you manage it?

At the beginning when we were in the Czech Republic, it was essential to manage the emotions of our biological child who, although excited about the arrival of a new little sister, was suddenly hit with the reality of a significant change in the family. It was exciting to see how the two children got closer and closer every day. The boy was always protecting his sister, and he does it even now, and he always was and remains an important person in her life.

What do you perceive as risky?

At the moment, the period of puberty: a natural searching of independence and emotional fragility typical for this age.

Do you wish something would have been different?

No.

What would you want to know, if you were to adopt a child again?

It would be nice if we could adopt again, a child is always an enrichment. The information and humility we were given was enough.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

Realise that every child has their own story of how their life has gone. Now I don't realise which one is my biological child and which one is adopted. Emotionally I feel them both to be my children. Just their stories are different.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

We always talk about it calmly and naturally. I've always been telling my daughter about the moment we met her, about the people who looked after her, the home where she spent the first years of her life.

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

Yes.

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic?

We consider the Czech Republic to be one of the countries of our origin. We know its history, culture and cuisine.

Does the child have any contact with her biological roots?

She knows her story. We know the name and age of her biological mother. We don't know anything about her biological father.

Has your child expressed a wish to have contact with her biological roots?

If my daughter asked for it, we would allow her to do it. We have always thought that to grow with firm roots, we have to know our origin.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

No significance. The bond you are creating with your children is based on emotions and far outreaches a blood bond or a skin colour.

Austria

Anna (6 years old)

David (6 years old)

Hannah (11 years old)

Tobias (14 years old)

Jakob (8 years old)

Jonas (11 years old)

We started cooperating with Austria in 2000, making it our second-longest-term partner. Since January 31, 2020, 54 children have been placed in Austria. This country is unique because there is a federal main office as well as a main office for each of the 9 federal states. In the last 20 years, we've worked with nearly all of these offices.

Our Austrian colleagues chose a slightly different style of interview. They asked the same questions, but composed the answers into a continuous text. The texts are presented here in the form and sequence that they were given to us - first, the interviews were conducted with the parents, then with the children. This is probably due to the lower age of the children.



An interview with Anna (6 years old)



Anna lived in an institution until 2017, when she was three years old. At the time of the interview she was six, which means she had spent half of her life with her new family.

The Gruber family first turned to their local district office to enquire about the matter of adoption. There they were told that there was only a very small chance they would adopt within Austria, since only a few children were available for adoption there. After that, the family started enquiring about intercountry adoption. They felt it was important that they adopt from a European country. The couple decided on the Czech Republic because of its accessibility by car, which is very important to the family, because they wanted to be able to visit the country whenever Anna had any questions about the country she came from. The Gruber family was very pleasantly surprised because they received a proposition for adoption of a child very quickly. They were added to the list of applicants in June 2016, and in March 2017 they were introduced to their daughter.

Mr. Gruber can still recall the entire process. He remembers that he and his wife went to Brno in March 2017. First, they had an interview with a lawyer and a psychologist in Brno. Then the whole process was explained to them and they were able to ask questions about everything. They remember this interview as well as all the subsequent ones very positively. They got all the relevant information. The next day they had an interview with a hospital director, a doctor, and a hospital psychologist who'd also written a report on Anna. They were also told basic information about her story, and her psychological report was explained to them. That day they also met their daughter Anna. During the meeting they were monitored and received a plan for her daily regime. From that moment on, Anna has been their daughter.

They describe the children's home as being small and located right inside the hospital building. The group Anna was in consisted of 15-20 children. Anna was the youngest child, and the oldest was about 12 years old. The caregivers in the home were very nice, and looked after the children as well as they could. However, to the Gruber family, 2 caregivers for 15-20 children did not seem like enough. They also talk about Anna sleeping in a bed with steel wires, where she rocked back and forth, and as a result had a lot of bruises. In the same room there was a boy who they think had autism, and they think that Anna had copied his symptoms (rocking back and forth, staring into space, fits of anger, etc.). On the third day of getting acquainted, they could go outside together for the first time. Mr. Gruber said that they felt the looks from passersby were scornful, probably because Anna is a Romani child. It didn't make him feel anything special, because he didn't care what others thought. He did, however, feel a need to protect Anna. On the fourth day they were able to take Anna with them. On the seventh day the family had an interview with a psychologist from Brno and the respective social workers. All of them had to agree to Anna staying with the Gruber family, so that the family could go to Brno with their daughter. In Brno, an interpreter helped them find accommodation. They also kept in contact with a lawyer from the Office and met him on the day of the court session in Brno.

During her first few days in Austria, Anna kept rocking back and forth. She also often stared into space. The language barrier was also difficult for the family, even though they had learned some key words in Czech before the adoption. But they still didn't know how to help Anna. They were also worried they'd done something wrong that caused Anna to behave like that. The Grubers were also asking themselves if they could make it, and what this would mean for their relationship. At the beginning Anna didn't eat anything she didn't

know. Everything had to be pureed. These days she loves chocolate and biscuits and even tries foods she doesn't know. Anna also didn't know what a playground was, or a field, or leaves, or many other things. At the beginning she was especially scared of the family dog called Nia, and the dog was scared of her too. One day, a friend of Mrs. Gruber visited them with her small child, and Anna went to the dog and said that they didn't have to be afraid of him. From that moment on, they've been friends.

At first it was quite difficult for the Grubers to get used to the new situation. In a second their life was turned upside down. They had to adapt to Anna's rhythm, and couldn't spontaneously meet with friends or go to the cinema. Mrs Gruber also had to stop working. At the moment, she's able to go to work again part time because Anna is attending kindergarten.

The Gruber family would adopt another child from the Czech Republic any time, and concerning Anna, they'd do everything exactly the same way. They love their daughter more than anything in the world. At the moment they're preparing the documentation for a second adoption from the Czech Republic.

Addressing the child's roots/origin

Anna knows she's adopted, and that she has a different biological mother (who had her in her tummy). Sometimes when she sees a woman she doesn't know, she asks if it's her mummy who had her in her tummy. Her parents tell her no, that the mummy who had her in her tummy lives in the Czech Republic. They also have photo albums with pictures of Anna as a baby. The family incorporates the child's origin into daily life. Also when Ana asks questions, the family tries to react. Furthermore, they are in contact with Jakob, Anna's biological brother, who also lives in Austria. The family also uses various books for children focusing on adoption as tools. However, they don't use these books very often, because Anna doesn't like the books yet.

An interview with Hannah (11 years old) and Jakob (8 years old)



Hannah lived in an institution almost until her second birthday. At the time of this interview, she was almost twelve. She joined her new family in 2010.

Jakob lived in an institution from his birth until 2014, when he joined his new family at age three. At the time of the interview, he was almost eight and a half.

The Huber family had the option of being on the list of applicants for both local and intercountry adoption. They decided on the Czech Republic because it's easily accessible by car, and the differences between Austria and the Czech Republic aren't as big as between Austria and South Africa. Before they received the first proposition for adoption of a child (Hannah) the family attended a course to learn a bit of Czech. Through the children they later learned even more, because both children could already talk. The family remembers the adoption propositions very well. With Hannah the proposition was very clear (a medical report and a report on her development). With Jakob the family didn't know much, because the report was a mixture of texts from various doctors. They didn't know the current state of the child. Judging and interpreting the development of the child was hard for the family. They can only say good things about the interview with the Office in Brno. The social workers put in a lot of work and were competent. The social workers were very happy when they could see Hannah again while they were meeting Jakob. They've continued to show interest in the children and their development. Mrs. Huber remembers their stay in the Czech Republic very positively, because she considers it to be crucial in building a good relationship with the child. In that time, they knew they had to focus solely on the child and really invest their time, because in Austria there would soon be the everyday troubles to occupy their minds, and every member of the family and friends would want to visit and welcome the new family member.

When the Huber family received their first proposition for an adoption, they were worried about whether they'd be able to make it, and also after bringing Hannah to Austria, they felt unsure if they were doing everything right.

Life in Austria with Czech children

The parents noted that their children got used to things faster than the parents did. The children didn't have any problems with the language either, because children learn fast, and Hannah and Jakob were immediately trying to repeat words. The children needed about 2-3 months to feel truly at home in Austria. The parents needed about six months to adapt to the new situation. As far as their relationship goes, the family observed some changes. Mainly, at first they both focused all their attention on the children. The children also interrupted them several times throughout this interview. Grandparents are a great support for the family, enabling the parents to sometimes do things without the children. In terms of upbringing, they found out that,

for example, their father will let them do something that their mother has forbidden, and vice versa. The Huber family would adopt a child from the Czech Republic again any time.

The family feels that the current development of the 6-8 week stay in the Czech Republic is problematic. Their reason is that in Austria, the official parental leave from work starts only on the day a child enters Austria. An employee is entitled to 5 weeks of holiday a year, and getting more time off can be difficult. According to the Huber family, adoption applicants don't have any other option but to quit their job. The family would like the adoption proposition and the information about the date of the first contact in the Czech Republic to also include the following: current shoe and clothes sizes; information about accommodation near the children's home and in Brno; the child's interests; and the child's favorite animals. The family would also like the Czech Republic to support the child's contact with biological siblings. According to the Hubers, the Czech Republic doesn't have a positive attitude to this.¹⁵

Addressing the child's roots/origin

The family has several photo albums of the children, including from the time when Hannah and Jakob still lived in the children's home. They also have videos from that time. Sometimes they use some Czech words with the children. They often meet with other families who have adopted children from the Czech Republic. They try to maintain contact with the children's biological siblings. Shortly before the interview with a social worker from the main office for Lower Austria, it was Hannah's birthday, and she received a card from her biological brother. They also make a point of celebrating the day they met. The family travels to the Czech Republic quite often, and while there visits the children's homes. The children themselves don't agree on whether they enjoy this.

An Interview with Jakob

He knows that his biological mother (the mummy who carried him in her tummy) is called Iva, and he knows his biological sister who also lives in Austria (Anna Gruber). He only vaguely remembers the time he spent in the institution, but he knows that he had several 'siblings' (other children in the home) there. One of them was called Marie, but unfortunately he can't remember anything else. Jakob knows that as a baby he was called Lukáš, but he was renamed because Mrs. Huber's father is called Lukas. Jakob can still say a few words in his mother tongue, for example maso (*meat*), ahoj (*hello*) and čaj (*tea*).

An Interview with Hannah

She knows that she slept in her own room in her bed in the children's home, and she knows the name of her biological mother (the mummy who carried her in her stomach). When she came to Austria, she found the stairs very interesting. She occasionally remembers a few words in her mother tongue, but less than Jakob. Her friends and children at school know that she's adopted. Two other children from her school are also adopted.

At the moment both children find the videos from their childhood much more interesting than the photos.

¹⁵ See note 11.

An interview with David (6 years old)



David lived in an institution for two and a half years, until 2015, when he joined his new family in Austria. At the time of the interview he was almost seven.

His adoptive parents decided to apply for adoption in 2014/2015, after 5 failed attempts at artificial insemination. They both wanted a family and wished to give some child a home. After that everything went very fast. In 2015 the couple was accepted into the list of applicants in the Czech Republic, and half a year later they were able to start looking forward to a child suggested for adoption. It was a bit too fast for Mrs. Bauer; she was asking herself why were they chosen as parents. She can remember very clearly that in October 2015 - on her birthday - she received the information that everything had been sorted out, and that she would become a mother. She then had some good news and some bad news for her employer. The good news was that she was going to become a mother. The bad news was that she was quitting her job, and wouldn't be available from November 2015, because in November she was travelling to the Czech Republic to meet her son. She also remembers the proposition of the child for adoption. She felt it was all moving very fast, because in a very short time she had to decide if she'd accept the proposition, and she was worrying about what her family was in for, and how David would develop. One thing is clear for the family: they would make the same decision again, they'd accept David, to bring him up together and become a family.

The stay in the children's home was a great experience for the family. They'd recommend other future parents to seek accommodation right in the children's home and not nearby, because the staff provided them with a lot of support. Among other things, the family was able to borrow a pram, a bed, diapers, equipment for care, and many other things. They also got information and support concerning the boy's daily regime (when he wakes up, when and how he bathes, when he goes to sleep, when he eats, etc.). The home also cooked for them there. Mrs. Bauer mentioned the latter as very positive, since she didn't have a lot of time to cook herself, and it seemed important to spend as much time with David as possible and build a relationship with him. She still remembers how the family saw David for the first time and played with him for one or two hours. The next day they could spend even more time with him. That day, when David was supposed to go back to his caregiver in the home, he started crying and held onto his dad, not wanting to leave. From that moment on, he hasn't left his parents. In the interview Mrs. Bauer also talked about the fact that she's David's tenth mummy. He's been through a lot of interrupted relationships because children in Czech children's homes have to change groups every year, and each group has three caregivers.¹⁶ Given that David joined his family when he was about two and a half, he's been in three different groups. These interrupted relationships significantly slowed David's development and behavior, and gave him a big fear of abandonment.

Mrs Bauer has good memories of the stay in Brno. During the initial interview there, she took the opportunity to ask how the matches are made and why they were specifically chosen to be parents. She also got some other information necessary for her stay, for the adoption and further actions. She feels that the fact that she can understand and speak Czech has been a big plus, and remembers all the interviews fondly.

¹⁶ The fact that frequent changes of caregiver are very stressful for a child is currently taken into consideration in institutional care, and efforts are made to minimise these changes.

Staying in somebody else's house in Brno was slightly more complicated. They had to adjust everything to create a safe environment for the child, and had to be careful not to damage anything - it's easier in one's own home.

Arriving in Austria

At first David was just running around like a table tennis ball. They moved everything around to give him enough space and allow him to develop. They hid vases, installed plug socket covers, etc. David also wasn't scared of anything and would walk away with anybody. The family had financial difficulties because Mrs. Bauer couldn't go on maternity leave and was unemployed (*due to Austrian law*). David was only able to stay in kindergarten for an hour a day because of his hyperactivity, and that wasn't long enough for her to go to work. Mrs. Bauer's brother moved in with the family for half a year to help them.

Mrs. Bauer can now say that they feel like a family, but it took about two years before David felt safe and stopped worrying that a new mummy would come into his life.

Consequently, the family says they'd do everything again the same way. They would only have liked to have more time to think about the child suggested for adoption. At the same time, she says that it was also good not to have too much time to think. They would only have liked to know that the first year would bring big expenses – they had to buy a bed and a pram, accommodation in Brno, developmental reports for the child's placement, translations, etc. It's important for future applicants to know this so they can get their finances ready. Also, the first developmental report in intercountry adoptions is required of the family too soon, since the first period of time is spent in Brno, and then after arriving home with the child they have to get used to each other. However, the family is aware that this report and all the subsequent ones are very important for the Czech Republic.

David is in continuous contact with his roots and country of origin, because Mrs. Bauer talks to him in Czech as well as German. They don't have a diary yet, but Mrs. Bauer wants to start working on it as soon as possible, when she has some time. The family tells David that he now lives in Austria with his family, but that he comes from the Czech Republic. Further work with his roots isn't possible because of David's slower development; he isn't ready and from a cognitive standpoint wouldn't understand it.

Mrs. Bauer recommends that future adoptive parents get ready for financial expenses, learn important words in Czech, and arrange accommodation in the children's home where their child is placed. She also wishes for the sake of future adoptive parents that Austria would change its maternity leave for adoptive parents, because about one year of maternity leave is essential. Under current Austrian law, parents who adopt or foster a child younger than 7 years old can take maternity leave for only half a year after taking the child in.

An interview with Tobias (14 years old) and Jonas (11 years old)



Both boys lived in the same institution, and both for approximately the same amount of time - a little over a year. They are biological siblings. Tobias came to his current home in 2007 when he was about one year old. The family took in Jonas when he was about the same age, in 2009. At the time of the interview, they were 14 and 11 years old.

The Wagner family had been on a list of Austrian applicants for four years before their intercountry adoptions. Since their wish to have children didn't come true, they decided for intercountry adoption and sought information from the association 'Family For You'. There they were given advice and chose the Czech Republic. The reasons for this choice were, among others, that it's easily accessible by car, and they'd be able to go on a trip to their future child's country of origin much faster and easier. They didn't want to adopt a child from a country they'd have to fly to because it would make visiting regularly with the children difficult. It was also clear that they didn't want to adopt a child from South Africa, because at that time there had been some racist incidents in Austria, and they didn't want to put a child through such difficulties because of the color of their skin. In 2006 the family applied for an intercountry adoption, and in March 2007 they received a proposition for a child. For Mrs. Wagner the date of receiving the proposition, along with the date of their first meeting, was always very important, and every year she has put these into her calendar – although this year, for the first time, she didn't.

The family feels that the process of getting to know each other was better with Tobias. They met their son and then left to stay at home without him for 4 weeks.¹⁷ During this time they got a bedroom ready for Tobias, and arranged for everything he would need. The family also thinks that Tobias was being prepared for the move to his family in Austria by the caregivers in the home. The couple speaks very positively about the children's home. They felt very good there. Everybody was like one big family, and also the care was professional and corresponded to the children's needs. Every time they left with tears in their eyes because they'd got such a warm welcome. They spoke about how the people¹⁸ from the village where the children's home was took the children on walks and spent time with them. They can't say anything about their stay in Brno because they went from the children's home straight to Brno and the same day they were allowed to go home.

¹⁷ This demonstrates how the process of adoption has changed over time. The process described here by the parents has not been used for over 10 years. Even though this family actually preferred it this way, there isn't any plan to reinstate this process.

¹⁸ Volunteers who often work with the institution and try to make the situation nicer for the children.

The first days in Austria were a bit difficult because both Tobias and Jonas were ill, and were scared of men. Also the change in diet was difficult for both children. Tobias was familiar with mainly porridge-style dishes, and Jonas ate things such as spaghetti with sugar in the children's home. This is very unusual in Austria. From the very first night Tobias felt very good in his new home. Before, he'd been used to sharing a room with six other children, and in Austria he had his own bedroom. The first night he slept for a very long time, and Mrs. Wagner kept going in to check that he was breathing because she thought it was unusual for him to sleep for so long. Both boys came to Austria before they'd learned to speak. That's why there wasn't any trouble with the native language.

The partnership between the couple has changed since they've become parents. They spend very little time together as a couple because their children are always with them. At the moment it's a little better, because they can sometimes go for a walk alone and the boys occupy themselves. The couple argues a little more than before because, for instance, the mother thinks the father is too lenient, and of course there are other stressful topics.

Shortly before meeting Tobias, Mrs. Wagner was worried about whether she could even handle a new child.

The couple hopes that both boys will work through their traumas well and will achieve everything they want to. They also hope that both children will keep getting stronger and will be able to confidently step into the world.

What information was the family missing? What do they wish would be changed for future adoptive parents?

These days because of growing xenophobia, it is very important to talk about the child's origin. For example, Tobias's schoolmates were calling him a 'negro'.

The family thinks it's very important that future adoptive parents send the child they've been paired with a stuffed toy. That would help the child get used to the smell of the parents and the new home, and would help him or her prepare a little before the first meeting. Furthermore, the family would like it if the preparation course in Austria was a little more focused on real life, and questions like 'What am I supposed to do with a one-year old child that is joining our family?' Also the family would like to have had answers to the question, 'Where can I get suitable psychotherapy for my child?' The family is trying to support the sons in any way they can. They attend psychotherapy, ergotherapy, and physiotherapy, and they go to a psychologist. Time management and coordination is very hard, and it's difficult to find the right specialists so that they don't have to wait for years for a psychotherapy appointment.

Working with the children's origin

Each boy has his own photo album. I could look through the first photo album of both of them. Tobias's photo album begins even before he met his parents, because the children's home gave the family some photos of him. The family also received both of the boys' family trees. Once every 1-2 years they go on a trip to the Czech Republic to attend a garden party at the children's home. The boys' siblings are placed in Austria, and the family is in contact with them. They are also in contact with other children in Lower Austria who were adopted from the Czech Republic. The parents have always talked to the boys about where they come from, and told them the information they got about their biological parents. When Tobias and Jonas grow up and are old enough to want to look for and get to know their biological parents, their adoptive parents will support them.

An Interview with Tobias and Jonas

Unfortunately, neither of them remembers their stay in the Czech Republic. Jonas only remembers the moment he met his parents and Tobias. He and his big brother played with a small car. Tobias doesn't remember it anymore. While looking at the photo album, Jonas remembered that at home he used to ride a scooter in the shape of a car and Tobias wanted to take it away from him. Tobias also remembers that at first he was very curious about his little brother and was really looking forward to meeting him. These days however he finds him annoying because he copies everything he does. Tobias also remembered that when he met Jonas there was a big building site next to the children's home.

At first Tobias would look at his photo albums almost daily. Now he prefers books about fish, tractors and other things.

In preschool everybody knew that both boys were adopted and everybody had a positive attitude. Tobias hasn't told anybody in his new school; not even his girlfriend knows yet. It's a little uncomfortable for him, and he doesn't want to be discriminated against because of being adopted. One time they were insulting him at school, calling him a 'negro'. He says he tries to ignore things like that and he doesn't care about what others say, but I noticed that he's – of course – very hurt by it.

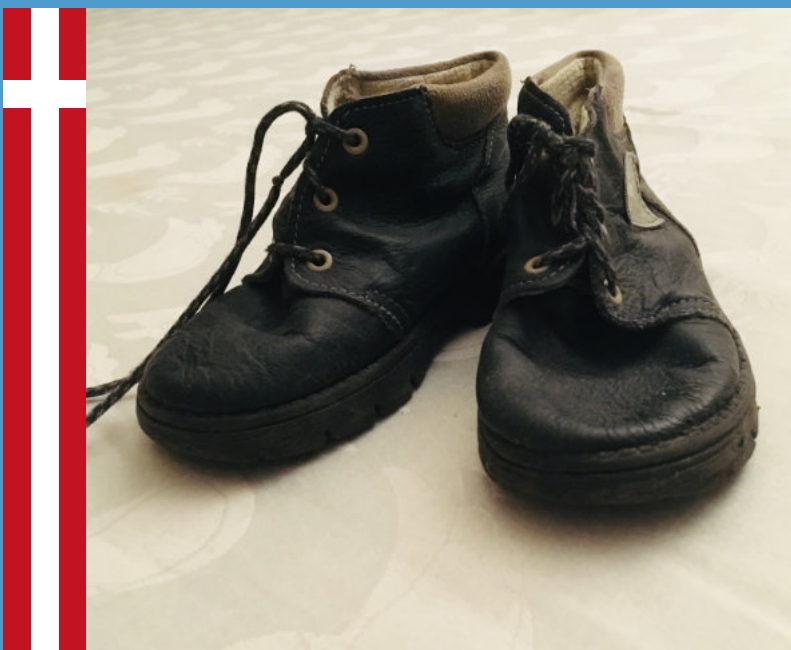
In Jonas's class and group of friends, everybody knows he's adopted, and he doesn't have a problem with it. According to Tobias it's because children at Jonas's age don't yet understand what adoption is.

Denmark

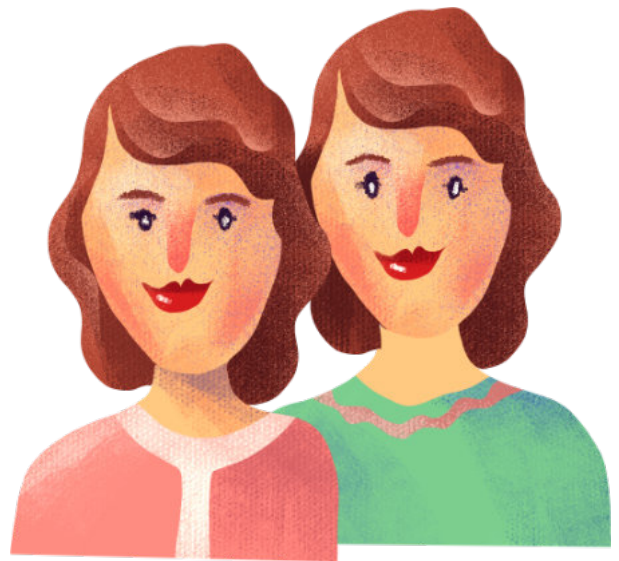
Mathilde (17 years old)

Katrine (16 years old)

The cooperation between the Office and Denmark is the longest of all our relationships, dating back to 2000. As of January 31, 2020, 182 children had been adopted from the Czech Republic to Denmark, more than to any other country. Our cooperation with this country is facilitated solely through the accredited organization 'Danish International Adoption' (DIA).



An interview with Mathilde (17 years old) and Katrine (16 years old)



Both biological sisters joined their adoptive family together in Spring 2006. At the time they were four and three years old.

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

Mathilde: I used to live with my biological mother when I was really small, so I remember my home, it was small and cold. I was with her until I was 6 months old, then I was in hospital for a year (*infection and malnourishment*), but in between I must have been at home. I don't remember mum or dad. I got into the children's home when I was about a year and a half.

Katrine: No, I don't remember anything - they took me away from mum at birth and I got into the same children's home as my sister. We lived in the same home and we knew that we were sisters, and we also felt like sisters.

Mother: The biological mother used to visit them there the first year, maybe even with the grandmother, but the visits stopped. The girls don't remember them.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

Mathilde: I don't remember much, it's more like, when I look at photos from that time, I remind myself of the home. What I remember most is that for birthdays they would make huge cakes. Birthdays were always celebrated by several children at the same time.

Katrine: I remember the cakes too, they were delicious.

Mathilde: I remember the taste of a cream cake, it was so yummy, I haven't had anything like it since. When it was our birthday, we also used to wear this little hat.

Katrine: I remember the staff a little, I remember that birthdays were something special and I also got a kiss from the nanny.

Mathilde: I remember one nanny who was really funny, and she was nice to me. Especially when drying off after bathing she was nice to me.

Katrine and Mathilde: We had our own stuffed toys in the home. We got them to take home on our way to Denmark, and also shoes. Mum told us that we also got children's cutlery, it was a present from the Rotary Club.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

Mathilde: It was awkward, I wasn't ready. I was naked and I'd just bathed before bed. I felt like mum was staring at me. There was a psychologist there and he told me that those were my parents. I wasn't expecting that.

Katrine: I don't remember it - I know it was something to do with bathing, and that I was sitting on a potty when they came in - I didn't understand anything at all. It was weird and a bit embarrassing.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

Mathilde and Katrine: We don't remember anybody preparing us for our new parents coming.

Mother: My ex-husband and I had prepared a photo album for the girls. The home used it to prepare them - but the girls don't remember it.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic? What do you remember or how do you imagine it?

Mathilde and Katrine: The beginning we remember mostly from photos, but we remember that our parents gave us a huge lollipop which tasted really good.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

Mathilde: I remember the drive home, there were duvets on the backseat where we were sitting. And we had stuffed toys and we got raisins. I thought that it was just some kind of a holiday and we would be going back to the home eventually.

Katrine: I also remember the drive with the duvets in the back and stuffed toys and raisins and all those pee breaks, although I don't remember us drinking more than normal. It was a long journey.

What were you looking forward to? And were you afraid of anything?

Mathilde: When we got to Denmark, I understood that we would never go back to the Czech Republic. It was an adventure, but we didn't know about most things - I didn't understand what was going to happen.

Katrine: I remember that I found out we'd see our older brothers, I was looking forward to that. I remember being scared of the future, when we got to Denmark, I didn't know what was gonna happen or what kind of life was waiting for me there.

And what about the new language?

Katrine and Mathilde: We know that we quickly forgot Czech and after just one week we knew French and Danish words. Now we don't speak Czech at all.

What was the best thing about it for you?

Mathilde: To start over, get a new chance and have parents.

Katrine: I can say the same thing as Mathilde - a new life and parents, that was the best thing.

What was the worst thing for you?

Mathilde: For me the worst was starting at a new school. It was hard to tell people at school that I'm adopted. I experienced bullying for not having a real mum and dad.

Katrine: For me beginning at a new school was hard too. I think that it must have been hard to explain why I didn't look like my adoptive mum. Sometimes I just decided that I wouldn't say anything about being adopted. At different times, when I spoke about it, I got various reactions. Some people thought, 'Poor her, she doesn't have a 'real' mum,' others were praising me and saying that I was dealing with it well. Nowadays it's fine that I'm adopted. I like my life here with my adoptive mum.

And how did it go with your siblings?

Mathilde: I have a sister, and I also have brothers, they're my adoptive dad's sons. They're grown up now and we have a good relationship.

Katrine: My sister and I got closer after the adoption. We lived as sisters in the home, but I remember not being sure if we really were sisters. I have a close relationship with my older brother (my adoptive dad's son). He used to babysit me and play with me when I was younger.

And if you look back on it today...

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

Mathilde: I'd have liked to know more about my biological mother and father. Even now I'd like to know more, but when I was younger, I really wanted a photo of mum.

Katrine: I'd also like to know more about my family, when I was younger and now too. Mainly about my older brother, but also about other siblings. I'd also like to know if I have any younger siblings. It looks like mum managed to have a lot of them. I was looking for them on Facebook but I'm not sure they are on Facebook if they are poor. I'd also like a photo of mum and dad. It'd be cool to know if we look similar.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

Mathilde and Katrine: We'd recommend the child not to be scared. The child should take everything at their own pace. Everything will be ok. It would be nice if the child was properly prepared for what's about to happen when he or she is still in the home. The child should know that good things are coming. A new life and a whole new world.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

Mathilde: I've always known I'm adopted and I'm from the Czech Republic. I was never super interested. I'm still not really into it.

Katrine: I'm the same, I've always known I'm from the Czech Republic and I'm adopted, but I was never super interested. Now I'm starting to take interest in the country a little bit and I'd like to learn a bit of Czech.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays at home?

Mathilde and Katrine: We're starting to take interest in the Czech Republic and we'd like to go there. We don't celebrate any special Czech holidays. We didn't take anything from the culture with us.

Are you interested in the place where you come from?

Mathilde and Katrine: Yes, we'd like to know more about where we come from.

Mathilde: I'd like to find my mum, I'd like to just hug her and see if we look similar. I don't feel like waiting too long to go on that journey to find her. I feel ready but I don't know if mum agrees with it. My sister isn't ready yet. I don't know if I can wait for my sister to be ready.

Katrine: I'd like to find my siblings but I'm not ready for mum. I'm not ready to leave yet. I'd first like to finish grammar school and do entrance exams. Imagine if I left now and found out some bad or complicated things about the family. They're probably poor, maybe mum is a prostitute or has a really tough life. I think that it would impact me negatively and then it would also impact my school results, if I came back from the Czech Republic with bad or harsh experiences.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

Katrine: No, but I'd like to know who I look like - whose lashes I have, for example - are they like mum's?

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Does anybody know about it?

Mathilde and Katrine: Our friends know now, but it was more difficult when we were younger. (*Mathilde went through bullying when she spoke about being adopted.*)

How do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic? What would you like to know about your past? Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

Mathilde and Katrine: We talk about the adoption with mum (we don't see our adoptive dad anymore, we're not really sure why he doesn't want to see us). We talk about the Czech Republic and adoption openly, and now we're starting to be a bit more interested in our roots. Mum is cool with us wanting to go back. We have stuffed toys from the home and stuffed toys that our adoptive parents brought with them. We have pictures from the time we were in the home, and we have our shoes from there.

Katrine talks about a stuffed toy her parents brought for her which used to belong to an older brother – she likes that one a lot.

Mother adds: It would clear up some things for the girls if they visited the Czech Republic and contacted their biological family.

An interview with the mother

As an applicant

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

I wasn't ready for the wait; the whole process lasted five years. I'm French and we tried to adopt from France, but it wasn't possible because we were living in Denmark. I don't think that such a long wait is good for the children, even though the process has to be legal of course.

And were those expectations fulfilled?

We wanted two siblings together and that's what we got.

Would you be able to say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an intercountry adoption asked you about it...

I have to say you should get ready for a long process, you have to be patient. So it's true that adopting takes a long time. You have to be aware that it won't be easy with the children, and that in the future they will struggle to find their own identity.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

The best day of my life was when I found out that they chose the girls for us. It was an amazing moment. When I got the email with information and photos of the girls, I was at work. My ex husband and I celebrated by going for lunch together.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

The girls came in 2006, and at that time there was no meeting at the Office in Brno. We just went straight to the children's home. I don't remember anybody from any offices being there. We arrived in the evening at around 7 and met with the staff, including a psychologist – the plan was that we'd be there with the girls for about a week and we'd meet them on Monday.

How would you finish this sentence: 'When we first saw our child, we...?'

...that it was a bit awkward, because after our arrival on Sunday evening they were showing us the home, and the girls were there. We weren't ready for it and neither were the girls. The girls were naked and had just bathed, one was brushing her teeth and the other was sitting on the potty. And at the same time I was touched, and felt very emotional, and I thought that they were the most beautiful little girls in the whole world...

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

We were at the children's home for a week. I felt like it worked very well. There were a lot of staff and they were professional. The children looked like they had a good life there and weren't missing anything. There were plenty of clothes and toys. We could live in a flat in the children's home. We were gradually taking the girls into our care. The last nights they slept in our flat. We found out a lot of information about the girls' life and personality from the staff. We got their early photos, and we could take pictures or shoot videos ourselves.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic and what didn't you know?

How useful was what you knew in advance? What was the key information for you?

I was in Prague and travelled around the Czech Republic a bit before we got the girls - it was nice to get an idea about the country beforehand. At that time everything was still very affected by communism. I hadn't really known much about the country before that; for example, I had no idea that religion isn't very important there. For instance the girls weren't christened. We got them christened when we arrived home in Denmark. I also had no idea that the Romani people are so discriminated against, or that the majority of children going into intercountry adoption are of Romani origin.

What did the Czech Republic do for you – what support and information did it provide?

Nothing special, as I mentioned before. They were sweet to us in the children's home and gave us lots of information about the girls, for example about their biological siblings. In the home we found out that the girls have older siblings and a younger brother. The younger brother was also in the home, he's deaf, and so he was in another section. The children didn't know each other. When I saw him I asked my ex-husband if we should take him too, but of course it wasn't possible.

When you were at home...

How was your departure from the Czech Republic and the arrival home? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

We left the Czech Republic after about a week in the home - it was a long journey and we were a bit worried about it, mainly because of the language barrier. We learned a few words – a really important one was 'čůrat' (*to pee*) – we were constantly making stops. The drive went well – the girls were nervous to see what would happen. We were worried about language since the girls were speaking already (even though not particularly well) and at home we spoke French and Danish. We were really looking forward to the girls meeting their two older brothers, my husband's children from a previous marriage. They were 10 and 12, and were really excited to meet their little sisters.

What were the first few days and months like?

It was hard, we had to get to know and understand each other. I was at home with the girls, and my ex-husband was going to work. The children were really dependent on me because I was their main person. I didn't get much sleep at night because the girls wanted to be with me. They were scared when I moved away from them a bit, so we were always together. A few times I tried to nap during the day to get a little bit of energy, so I asked them to play in the garden for a moment, but they didn't want to be there, they came right back inside and wanted to be with me.

After six months in Denmark with the girls, my husband wanted to get a divorce – it was really hard for me and it came very suddenly. We decided to keep it a secret from the girls and we continued living together for another year, before the divorce was finalized and before we found new accommodation for me. We didn't want to make the girls feel unsure so we didn't tell them we'd be moving away.

At that time I also lost my mum so it was really a very hard time, but I managed to not drag the children into it, so I didn't feel like the situation had any impact on them. At that time I would have liked to have some help from offices, but there wasn't any post-adoption support available yet. A social worker from the government office was helping me a little.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

I feel like we only became one family when it was just the three of us, when we moved away from my ex-husband and had our own home. When we moved out we became closer. At first the girls were meeting their adoptive father every other weekend, which is when they also saw their brothers.

While you were getting to know each other, what role did your language play?

Language meant that we understood each other more – they learned the language quickly and so they felt closer. The girls quickly forgot their Czech and weren't interested when I later wanted to show them a Czech film. At first they learned French, and then at preschool Danish. Now they are bilingual.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship? What made you happy at first?

I was happy from the start because I could see that they were nice girls, sweet and happy, smiley and great children.

What made you worried at first?

Mainly the language.

What was surprising for you?

I was surprised by how quickly the girls learned French and Danish.

What did you have to sacrifice?

I sacrificed my free time; I was always at home with the girls. I had no support in Denmark, nobody to be there for me and help me, and that's why I didn't have any adult life besides my life with the girls.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

We got divorced and moved apart a year and a half after the girls came to Denmark.

What role did other children play in helping the family get used to each other?

The girls are sisters (*they don't have the same father*). They had a good relationship right from the start. They lived together in the home. The adoption made their relationship even stronger. The girls have a good relationship with the now grown-up sons of my ex-husband. The boys look after the girls, and they see each other, maybe not so often, but there is a bond there. The girls don't see their adoptive father – he doesn't want to see them, so we only meet with the brothers without him.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What is good to be prepared for?

That's difficult to say. Preparing for an adoption is good, but you can only prepare for so much.

Would you do it again?

DEFINITELY! I'd do it all again, even though it was hard.

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how did you manage it?

The hardest thing was to be alone with two adoptive children. I really didn't expect that to happen. We asked for siblings straight away - we assumed that my ex-husband and I would live together with the children as one family.

It was hard and challenging that the girls were adopted a little older, that we didn't get them when they were very little. The girls have traumas from their early years which have damaged them and their development.

What do you perceive as risky?

It's riskier to take older children. It was difficult to manage the feelings of the girls, and hard to help them.

What would you want done differently?

If something could be different, then because of the divorce I'd choose only one child. I felt inadequate with two children. The children had different needs, and it was hard to give them individual attention when I was on my own with them.

What would you want to know, if you were to adopt a child again?

I'd have appreciated more counselling about adoption, mainly after the adoption, when I felt that I had to deal with it alone. A few times I spoke to a government social worker, and privately I paid a psychologist who helped me.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

It's important to have a support network to help you when you're at home with a child. It's important that someone helps you with basics. For the child's sake, it's important that as an adoptive mother you are not completely shattered. It's important to somehow get enough energy for the child.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

I have photos from the stay in the Czech Republic, from the home. I also have photos of the younger brother. Then we have stuffed toys the girls had in the home, and shoes. And then of course we have the adoption process paperwork.

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays?

We've always been open about the fact that the girls are from the Czech Republic, but until now they've never been very interested. We haven't been there on holiday. The girls are now at an age when they're starting to take interest in their history. We've talked about going back to the Czech Republic with another family that has adopted a boy of the same age from the same children's home. We're close to that family. So far nothing's concrete though. I want to be sure the girls are emotionally ready for that trip.

What contact do the children have with their biological roots?

We don't have any contact or any addresses. We think that they have two older sisters and an older brother, and all of them are either in foster care or adopted within the Czech Republic. And then there is the younger brother who was in the children's home when we came for the girls. Maybe there are more siblings; the girls' mother was quite young when she had them. We have no idea how the mother is doing. We know her name and age. We don't know anything about the fathers.

What kind of contact would your children like to have with their biological roots?

Yeah, the girls are starting to take interest in their roots. One would like to meet her biological mother and would like to have her photo. She'd also like to see her siblings. The other isn't ready to meet her biological mother yet, but if it was possible she'd like to see her from afar. She'd like to meet her siblings.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

The surprising thing was that the girls can work completely differently from me. Sometimes it's very obvious that we are not related and that they don't look like me.

Sweden

Maria (12 years old)

Karel (12 years old)

Jan (13 years old)

Aneta (16 years old)

Filip (16 years old)

The Office has been working with Sweden since 2002. By January 31, 2020, 119 children have been adopted from the Czech Republic to Sweden. Our cooperation with this country is facilitated solely through 'Barnen Framför Allt-Adoptioner' ('BFA'), an accredited organisation. The interviews were conducted in a more relaxed style; the interviewers chose the questions based on the reactions of the children and parents.



An interview with Maria (12 years old)



Maria and her younger biological brother Erik (now nine years old) joined their new family at the same time in 2014. At that time, they were seven and four years old.

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Yes, that's alright.

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

No, I think that I have a picture of mummy. But I'm not sure. *(Her mother adds: 'A picture in her mind.')*

You don't have a photo of her?

No.

When you were adopted, you were 7 years old?

Yes.

You have a brother. Are you biological siblings?

Yes.

How old is he?

He's 9.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? When did you live there?

What do you mean?

Do you remember anything from the time when you lived in the Czech Republic? Before you came to your parents?

You mean before I lived in the children's home, or the whole time?

Well, the whole time actually. How old were you when you came to the children's home?

3 years old.

Do you remember the children's home?

Yes, I remember the swings and a terrace and a gate and a bedroom.

Oh, a bedroom. What do you remember from the bedroom?

That there were those things.

Things? What things?

Well like a kind of ladybug.

Do you remember anything from the time before you came to the children's home?

No.

Which children's home did you live in?

I don't know. *(The mother said the name of the institution.)*

Mother: A beautiful children's home, we have lots of photos we look at. Beautiful beds of roses, a swimming pool, and everything was nice and clean and pretty.

So you remember something about your stay. Do you remember any people?

Yes, I remember two, three, four. Four.

Four people, who were they?

One friend and her little brother who my brother played with... idiot...

He was an idiot?

Yes, and then I remember one or two more people, one teacher.

Do you remember your first meeting with mummy and daddy?

Yes, maybe the first, well, but... I remember when I saw them first, but...

Father: You saw us before we entered the room, before we were even introduced, you were outside playing.

When you saw them for the first time, did you know they would be your mummy and daddy?

I knew they were my visitors, but I didn't understand everything.

For example, what it means to be adopted. Do you remember what you felt when you saw them for the first time?

No, just that I saw them.

Did you know beforehand that you'd have a visit?

Yes.

Do you remember what they told you?

I remember they told me that someone would come to visit me.

Is that how they prepared you and your brother?

Yes.

What was it like when you were living with your parents in the Czech Republic? Do you remember anything from that time?

I remember one room, a play room.

Was it a play room in the children's house or somewhere else?

In the children's house, at least I think so, we were in the back.

Anything else you remember?

I remember that I played the guitar.

Mother: The first week, we were visiting the children's home in the morning and then also in the afternoon, later we all moved into a rented accommodation.

Okay, and was that in the same area as the children's home, or in Brno?

Mother: It was in a neighbouring village, about a quarter of an hour by car.

I think you stayed there for a few weeks?

Mother: Yes, we stayed there for four weeks altogether. After one week the children joined us and they stayed for three weeks.

Do you remember the house?

I remember that there was a Hello Kitty in the window.

Father: It was some boarding house where we rented a room. There were a lot of young people who we shared a kitchen with.

Did you return there or to the children's home sometime later?

No.

And when you were in your new home...

Ok, and then you went home to Sweden, what was it like to come to a new home?

I wasn't thinking about it much, I just got there.

Was there something you were worried about? Or something you were looking forward to? Do you remember anything?

No.

In the time when you were leaving for Sweden, did you already know mummy and daddy a little, but not that much?

No.

Were you thinking about what it would be like there?

No. *(laughter)*

No, you were a brave girl. Obviously your little brother was with you?

Yes.

Do you remember how it was in the flat in Sweden?

I remember the rooms, a living room, mummy and daddy's room, a kitchen and a staircase.

How did you get used to everything, for example the language? Do you remember?

No, not really.

How did you learn Swedish?

I don't know.

It just happened...?

Yes.

You were seven years old when you came to Sweden and you spoke Czech. Do you remember anything in Czech, or did you forget everything?

I remember some words like 'Popejka' (*a king*)¹⁹, 'pradelna' (*in Czech prádelna, laundry room*).

Do you remember what you liked the most in Sweden? Something you maybe didn't have in the Czech Republic?

No, I don't remember.

Do you remember what was difficult for you in Sweden?

Difficult...?

Mother: Can I add something? Can we say something or is it only supposed to be Maria talking?

¹⁹ Maria remembered the Czech word 'Popelka' (*Cinderella*) as 'Popejka' and thinks it means a king from a fairy tale.

Yeah sure, go on.

Mother: I remember that soon you started to miss your friends because we spent a lot of time together, everybody was going to school and you were so grown up that you missed friends, that's what you used to say. After some time you became sad because of it.

When did you start going to school, was it immediately or did you have to wait a bit first?

I remember that I started going to school, but after some time or something like that.

Mother: We wanted to stay at home together from October to spring break, then you started attending a preschool class. There you suddenly had lots of friends all the time. At first it was hard though, and difficult to balance - on the one hand we were trying to connect as a family, but because you were so big, we also had some activities where there were lots of children, but they weren't friends.

Who are your best friends, how does it go with your friends?

I think well.

Who was your first friend in Sweden?

It was my friend called Lisa, and she was in the preschool class with me.

Are you still friends?

Yes.

The first friend is always very important... and what do you do together?

That's a long time ago. We were just doing things together...

Like what?

Running around and screaming.

Mother: She moved away; it's been a long time since we last saw each other.

I know that Erik is your brother, you lived together in the children's home in the same section; did you know each other, and did you know that you were siblings?

Yes.

How is your little brother?

Annoying.

What does he do?

He argues.

And if you look back on it today...

From your perspective today, how do you see the adoption, is there maybe something you'd change? If yes, what would it be?

I can't think of anything.

Okay, I work with people in the Czech Republic who are in charge of adoptions, so I'm curious if you have any advice for girls or boys who are now meeting their new parents and are going to go to their new home in Sweden. What advice would you give them?

That they... oh, it's difficult, everything went so fast, I couldn't keep up.

You mean the trip went fast, or what went fast?

Everything... I can't think of anything.

Ah, that's ok, if you remember something later and want to tell me, say it to mum or dad and they will email me.

Yes.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

Did your parents often talk to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

Yes.

In what situations do you talk about the Czech Republic?

Situations, well, when I ask them...

You just randomly think of a question, or is it more like you sometimes think about the Czech Republic?

Yes, it's that I sometimes think about the Czech Republic.

What do you think about?

Well, for example, why was I in a children's home, and why didn't I have the same things I have here in Sweden with my parents, but in the Czech Republic.

Do you know something about what happened?

Yes, but I don't really understand it..

Do you feel like you can ask about it when you're thinking about these things?

Yes.

That's great! Are you interested in the Czech Republic as a country?

No.

Sometimes when there's a sports event on, or a music festival?

Then yes...

Or when the Czech Republic plays ice hockey with Sweden, who do you root for?

The Czechs.

Mother: When we see a Czech flag, for example in town, it makes us happy.

Do you have something at home that reminds you of the Czech Republic?

I mean, a book with words.

A book?

A dictionary with pictures which we have and often look at.

Do you celebrate any Czech national holiday?

Mother: No, we've never done that.

Father: We celebrate the day you came to us.

I see, and what date is it?

(Maria stated the correct date.)

It's the day you came home to Sweden. And how do you celebrate?

I enjoy it, when I think about it, I know how cool it is for me that I've been here so long.

Father: We have a special dinner, look at photos and talk, remember how we met.

That's nice. And do you do this every year on the same day?

Yes.

Father: This year it will be especially nice because it'll be exactly five years. This time it'll be a big party.

Amazing, a five year anniversary! Is it important to you that you don't resemble your parents?

Just a little.

When you say a little, how important is it for you?

Well, it's really good when people are at least a little bit similar, at least I think so.

I'm thinking about your friends, if they ask you if you're adopted, and if they know about it? Do they ask you questions?

Well not much anymore. Sometimes they ask why I'm in fifth grade and yet I'm older than them and so on.

What do you tell them?

Well I say that I started as a preschooler when I was seven. That's what I tell them.

Mother: And that's true.

If somebody was asking you about these things, what would you think about it? Would it be ok or would it annoy you?

It would be uncomfortable for me.

How would you respond to this person?

I'd say, I'd ask: 'What do you care?'

But you said it'd be ok?

Yes.

Do you ever talk to your parents about your biological parents? You said you sometimes think about it...

Yes.

Do you have any photos, maps, books or something else connected to your story?

Yes, I have a photo album.

Do you have anything else?

A teddy.

Mother: And Cinderella.

Do you like it at school?

It's good.

What do you like most?

Swedish and natural history.

What do you not like?

Civics.

What do you like doing in your free time?

I like being with friends and playing Minecraft, and I like writing, that's fun.

Would you like to go to the Czech Republic sometime?

Yes.

What would you do there?

I'd look at all the rooms and the house with Hello Kitty and the room where we stayed.

Would you go back to the children's home?

Yes and to the beach we used to go to.

I guess you will one day...

Father: Definitely, just when they're a little bit older to manage that journey.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents.

As applicants...

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

Mother: Right from the beginning? Even before the Czech Republic came into the picture?

You can talk about whatever you feel like...

Mother: We were ready for it taking a long time. Then it was hard to have any expectations, we knew so little about what it would look like when we were there, etc.

Father: The whole process with the district²⁰ was challenging the whole way through, it was like a victory in the end...

Mother: Yes, it was quite wild.

Father: Every second we felt that they could kick us out because of some regulation that somebody else interpreted in a different way.

Mother: Every district has its own rules. We've met people in our district who've also adopted children, and their process was totally different from ours.

Father: According to the rulebook in our district, you are only allowed one child, and the Czech adoption office got in touch with us saying they have two children for us... so we had to go through the whole process again from the start. It was a huge problem. When it was our turn at the social office, we were very eager to meet them and explain our situation, they couldn't understand why we'd come. With social workers it went slowly, and later, when we got to the committee, they weren't very communicative.

You first got an approval for one child?

Father: Yes.

And the Czech offices then asked if you'd like siblings?

Mother: Yes, we were really happy because we'd wanted two children, but in our district they had the system set up for one child.

Father: We were too old to go through the whole thing again later, that's why we wouldn't have had two children if we had had to do it one by one.

Mother: So we were lucky.

How did you decide on the Czech Republic? Was your decision based on any information you had about it? Did you have any special expectations?

Mother: Yes, we had to choose, there was just so much, so we simply made a square table with several categories that were important to us, such as how far it is, how long the waiting period is, what's the price, how many trips you have to make, what the whole process looks like, and how it all makes us feel – what our hearts and our guts tell us. And the Czech Republic won. They had a reasonable waiting period, it's in Europe so it's accessible by car and you can easily return, it's just good.

Father: First we were interested in Russia, before we did some research and found out exactly what rules they have. It was the Murmansk District, and compared to that the Czech Republic looked like Las Vegas, when we found out what kinds of relationships there are. That we have to stay there for a month was okay, it's an EU country between Germany and Austria, and then because of the child – Czech children are vaccinated, and most of them are physically healthy. The information we got was about how in the country of origin there is not much interest in the adoption of children with a different skin colour, which is terrible, but it was lucky for us because there was a bigger chance we'd get healthy children. Our children are never ill.

²⁰ District - the local social security office.

They are healthy?

Father: Completely. Our son had a fever once in the last five years, and our daughter basically hasn't been ill.

Mother: Well, they've had a cold a few times... But basically they're very healthy. So when it came to making the choice, it was obvious it'd be the Czech Republic, and it was a good decision.

Yes, I remember that in Russia they wanted three trips, and there are other significant differences.

Mother: For example there is the risk that in the middle of the process it'll be cancelled, you can be travelling there to visit one specific child and then go home alone, that's very unpleasant.

Father: On the other hand, in the Czech Republic the whole process was completely transparent. Everything went exactly how it was supposed to and they also stuck to the timeline. They kept their word.

Mother: Yes, everything went very well, it was excellently organised.

Father: We trusted the adoption office, we trusted the judges, we trusted the whole process. The decision came exactly on the day it was supposed to.

How did you feel when you found out you were given the children?

Mother: We were unbelievably happy, it was a beautiful surprise that there were two of them, then we had those problems with our district, when they said that it wasn't possible, and that we had to start over from the beginning, and everything was really hard because it was summer, vacation time...that was one thing; another was that when we received the message, we were happy, it was just amazing... fantastic, that there were two of them and that they were healthy. That they were healthy was absolutely fantastic because we weren't at all counting on it.

If I understood correctly, it came as a total surprise that there were two children – you didn't know that beforehand.

Father: Yes.

Mother: Yes.

Father: They called me when I was in the car on my way back from work, sometime in May, if I remember correctly... I thought that it was probably some bad news about the child, I could tell by the tone of voice, it was the first message and I was, as my wife said, completely happy that it worked out for both of them. We knew very well that the approval had been for one child and the district didn't want to give us an answer. They could have prepared a decision, which would only have taken a while, but they didn't want to, they were waiting for all the members of the committee to come back from vacation. The decision had already been made and we were absolutely devastated, so we asked them to accept us and were ready to answer all of their questions directly, so that the thing wouldn't get stuck there even longer.

How long did it take before you could travel to the Czech Republic?

Mother: Three and a half months instead of six weeks.

Father: We went in the middle of September.

Mother: It was also a problem for them in the Czech Republic, because our daughter was a bit old for the children's home, so they had to arrange for her to be able to stay there and wait... but it was fantastic that they were waiting for us. They were waiting to hear from us.

Father: Otherwise they'd have had to move her.

Mother: But they wanted the siblings to stay together.

Father: I was in contact with an adoption office in Sweden, with BFA, and two lawyers from the adoption office who were pushing the district. They told them that it was unacceptable to let children wait just because they weren't able to publish a decision, it was a bit... well, they heard some critique. It really was a bit messed up. A huge bother and we didn't understand anything.

Mother: But it was good that they were waiting for us in the Czech Republic.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

Mother: The Czech Republic is beautiful. It was really great to go there. I'd never been there before. And then Brno, a beautiful town, it was amazing just to walk around there. At the Office we had an excellent meeting, and the people that we met there... I don't remember their names, I've got them written down somewhere... But they were very positive. They were professional and friendly... and they gave us clear information. They were warm and straightforward. We trusted them completely. It felt amazing.

And after the interview you went to the children's home?

Father: Yes, that evening.

Did you see the children the next day?

Mother: Yes, I guess it was like that? Yes, the next day.

Father: We arrived in the evening, two days early, and spent the night before meeting the children. Yes, exactly one month after the first meeting with the children, we went to Sweden (*he also stated the exact dates*). It was to the day one month after our first meeting.

What was your first meeting with the children like?

Mother: Oh, it was fantastic, beautiful to come to the children's home, they've got a really beautiful place there. Wow, now I'm emotional, I didn't even expect it to touch me so much...

Father: We had to overcome our prejudices and misconceptions several times. In films we'd seen children jumping behind bars.

Mother: We didn't know what to expect, what we'd see.

Father: And then we walked in and saw that it just looked like a regular person's home.

Mother: Yes, like a beautiful kindergarten, with bedrooms and a beautiful park. Maria was talking about a pool and a beautiful garden.

Father: They have a fully equipped gym, they employ a speech therapist, they just have everything. Beautiful, really beautiful.

Mother: The children have a team of professionals at their disposal, from doctors to psychologists, nurses that are always with them, I don't know what all of the employees were called but they were all professional.

Father: Social workers...

Mother: They were really very trustworthy, everybody was calm and we could understand them... they had an interpreter with them the whole time, she was great. And then we met the children, that was really surreal, suddenly we were in the middle of it, we wanted them to like the meeting. We had a task, we were meant to be funny, to make them happy, we brought presents as we had been advised to. Balls and a bubble blower, we wanted to play a little and have a good time.

Father: Well it was a bit hard to be spontaneous when there were five office workers standing over you, watching. They opened the double door and said: 'Please, come in and meet the children,' what can you do, they're just standing there watching you... it was difficult for me, I had to improvise.

Mother: They were emotional too, they liked it (the office workers I mean).

Were you nervous and anxious before the meeting?

Father: Well, this is how I am, I was a bit unsure – what do I do now, I have to be funny on demand. I felt almost lost, but I was trying to breathe it out. To take it one step at a time... it was an initiation by shock... to suddenly be a parent... boom... “

At the time Maria was seven, and her little brother?

Father: Maria was six at the time. A week after we returned to Sweden, she turned seven, her brother was four and a half.

Mother: Yes, but they were very active and happy and healthy... like children are.

Father: Yes, we suddenly had a lot to do.

Mother: We weren't ashamed. We'd sent them our photos beforehand and photos of our house and the caregivers showed them to the children. As Maria said, the children knew somebody was coming to see them, so they were ready, they ran inside and said 'Ooooooh we have a visit.'

Father: They'd never had any visitors before, so it was very important to them that somebody came especially because of them. Suddenly they were kings among the children. Nobody had come to see our children for many years. The others sometimes had a visit.

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

Mother: The first week we went to the home in the morning and returned again in the afternoon and played with the children. It was really strange. It was well organised. After a week they discussed it and decided that we could look after the children... After that we were together for three weeks. Looking at it now it seems like three weeks is nothing, but then it seemed like a very long time... They recommended some routines that we adopted. It was good for us and even better for the children.

What kind of routines?

Mother: Well it was about how to deal with eating and sleeping.

Father: For example, to sleep after lunch.

Mother: They used to sleep a lot, two hours after lunch and then at around six in the evening they went back to bed. They slept until seven... Yes, they slept a lot, then that continued back at home, for a long time... it was pleasant for us too... and for them. Then we went travelling to various places. There was a forest near our accommodation, we went for walks there and played there and we were also going to the lake Maria mentioned. We were also going to parks... We had a few favorite places.

Father: We went to the Czech Republic by car, we had a modern Swedish estate car, we travelled on the ferry from Trelleborg to Rostock. A day before we were supposed to pick the children up, we were thinking, what are we gonna do? Our children's room wasn't anything special, so we went to Ikea in Prague and filled our car with things that might make our stay more pleasant, to make it look more homey. We bought things that we'd then take home with us... And our car looked terrible on the way home... we also stopped in Jysk and bought bedsheets, to make it nice for them when they come. It was great that we weren't shut away somewhere and could move around freely, there was a supermarket, a department store where we could buy things for half the price that we'd pay back at home. So we could make ourselves at home. We recognized some brands.

Mother: They didn't have a lot of fish in the Czech Republic.

Father: We managed somehow. We went to the forest and collected mushrooms. Just like we do at home. We were acting the same and having a good time just like at home. We weren't stressed out, we didn't have financial troubles, we could do basic everyday things, which was fun. Like, for example, going outside, going downtown, going shopping, for a coffee – everything was easily accessible. The town we were staying in is very friendly, very nice.

What did the children enjoy doing?

Mother: They really liked going to that lake, to be on the beach and dig in the sand. Dig and dig and pour water... especially the water was fun. At the home they'd lived in, they could play with water in the sink. Playing with water is relaxing. And they also enjoyed being in the forest.

Father: Yes, we went out twice every day. And we were also walking a lot, walking like mooses. It's not so easy these days to get them to go outside. Near the children's home there was a stable where we would walk to watch the horses. It was about a kilometer away, but they could walk over there no problem.

You've talked about what you knew about the children, that they were healthy, how old they were... Did you get any new information that you hadn't previously known - for example, about their health or their origin?

Mother: Most things were in the paperwork, and then the adoption office told us the whole story.

Father: We received a very thorough psychological report, a report from a social worker about what had happened, where the children come from, what their home was like, and what they'd had to deal with during their visits. Especially about the biological mother. The father is unknown, there isn't any mention of him anywhere, just speculation.

Mother: I asked Maria if she remembers anything, and what she's thinking about. In certain periods of time a lot of questions emerge, so we're taking it step by step... It's a very sad chapter.

Father: About two weeks before we turned up, the biological mummy came to see the children. They explained to us that she came for economical reasons... She'd found out that the children have an opportunity to go into intercountry adoption. Before that she hadn't been to see them for two and a half years. It was maybe slightly unfortunate, several people from the home expressed something like this, that it wasn't very suitable that she'd come at this time. The children were a bit upset. But that's how it went, before that they hadn't had a visit for several years. Because of that they were reminded of her a bit, and maybe that's why Maria now remembers her more, even what she looks like.

Do you have any photos of the biological mother?

Father: No, actually we have very few photos in general. We have about three photos from when the children used to live in the children's home, even before we'd arrived, but no photos from the time before that (before the children's home).

Mother: We don't have any photos from the time before the children's home, but we have a lot of photos from the children's home. They save photos of the children, of their birthday parties, from Christmases, every child has them. Every child has their own album.

Do you know the name of the biological mother?

Mother: No.²¹

(The interviewer informed the parents that the Office has created a document about how to find a child's biological roots which, when it's finished, will be translated and available to them.)²²

Father: We told Maria that we're open, we don't keep secrets from them, so when she's old enough to look after herself, I mean, when she's of age, or how do you say that, she's free to find out about everything.

Mother: Exactly. And that just confirms everything we've been saying about the Czech Republic, everything's been very carefully documented. It's a good feeling, knowing we can find out all this information.

Father: The report we received was very extensive, they described several visits to the biological mother and the reports written about this. It seemed that for a long time they were trying to help her, but fruitlessly, and eventually they decided that they couldn't wait any longer. They turned to court. Even the judge could see that it wasn't going anywhere, and decided to free the children for intercountry adoption. Everything is very carefully documented, and it's clear that they were keeping an eye on the biological parents.

Did you need any special support during your stay in the Czech Republic, and did you receive it?

Mother: No, we didn't, but I knew that I could contact the children's home and also the interpreter at any time. We knew what to do in case we need to speak to someone about something. And then after two weeks a whole group came over to our accommodation to see how we were getting on. They met with us and the kids at our place, it was useful for all of us.

Father: We contacted the children's home a few times with the help of the interpreter because Maria had a big insect bite, and we needed a doctor to take a look at it. Her face was swollen, her forehead and she looked like... and then she had a tooth ache. She had really bad teeth, we had to seek out a dentist. The social workers from the children's home helped us with that, they got us an appointment with a local dentist. But these situations were rare... otherwise it was exciting when we got permission to go home. The message came on Wednesday evening, and on Friday morning we were supposed to go to a courthouse on the other side of the country.

Mother: We didn't expect it, because we didn't receive any message on Wednesday. We thought that it must mean that it wouldn't happen that week. We were constantly checking our email. We thought that it must be happening the following week. The message came late Wednesday evening, it was actually lucky you went to check it one last time, because we didn't have a very good internet connection, and so we weren't completely in control of our mail. So we jumped up and started packing the whole apartment because the children were sleeping at night.

Father: The next day we went to Brno and spent the night there. It was a strange feeling. At the court they had passports, and when they finished speaking (Czech), the judge shook our hands and handed us the passports and said, now you can go to Sweden.²³

²¹ Adoptive parents now receive the child's birth certificate with the mother's name listed.

²² At the time of this interview, the Office's pamphlet "The biological roots of children adopted abroad" hadn't yet been published (it is now available at <www.umpod.cz>).

²³ Currently, the applicants receive the court's decision about entrusting the child to their care before the adoption, and a lawyer from the Office gives them the child's birth certificate and passport.

So you went straight home?

Father: Yes, a ferry from Rostock left at ten at night, so we had to get a move on.

When you were back at home...

Now we get to the question: How was the journey home, for you as well as for the children, and what was it like to arrive home?

Mother: The journey home went very well. The children were very patient. Maybe it was the whole situation, but they were sitting nicely in the back seats and napping. We had snacks so it all went very well... nobody was carsick... so the journey went well... and then it was amazing.

Before we travelled to get the children, we took pictures of our flat and looked at them together... you asked if Maria was afraid of anything – well, on one of the photos there was a bedroom with unmade beds – there were really just mattresses and pillows and a duvet. And I remember that Maria asked (we had dictionaries and were trying to communicate) if we were also going to put sheets there... she was a bit worried about that. So I asked my parents to come over and get it ready and send us new pictures. We also showed the children pictures of our loved ones, grandma and grandpa, siblings and their families. Later I understood that Maria thought they would all live with us.

Like one big family.

Mother: Yes, I remember that she asked: 'Where are they all?' But you were asking about how it felt after coming home, it was wonderful.

Father: Yes, it was wonderful. When you're driving you stick to the speed limits... In Germany we thought we were almost there, back in the west and we could go fast, they have a highway, and then the ship in Rostock, that was almost Swedish land. We were saying: 'Even if anything goes wrong now, we will definitely get home. Everything will be fine now.'

What were the first days and the first months like?

Mother: It went well. We continued with the daily routines. It was really helpful to have them. The children were eating and sleeping and healthy, which is the basis for everything else, and since that was working fine, everything was fantastic.

Father: And I can say that it kind of works like that still.

Mother: But they don't sleep so much anymore.

Father: No.

Mother: And then we also stuck to the recommendation we got, in the parenting course as well as in the Czech Republic – we stuck together just the four of us. We were always doing something together. They'd opened the winter stadium, so we went ice skating, we went swimming, we were outside a lot, in a park playground...

Father: We were on maternity leave together for a long time, so we really did do everything together.

How long were you on maternity leave?

Mother: You went back to work in January.

Father: We were home together for three months, then I started working again, my wife was at home and then we switched – after half a year.

Mother: So our son was with us at home for almost a year and a half. It had its pluses and minuses, when the children were old enough and wanted to spend time with friends. Yes, but anyway that was the decision we'd made.

Father: Maria started preschool – because she'd already managed to start going to school in the Czech Republic, for about two weeks she attended the first grade... They were going to school from the children's home, so we had two reasons for postponing it: one, we needed to connect to one another; and two, she needed to learn the language to be able to function in preschool and school, that's why she started a year late... you can think whatever you want, but the most important thing was that we had to work as a family. There's nothing unusual about that. She has friends who also started late.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

Mother: I think that on some level it was really fast, because the four of us were always together, but even after that it continued in that way and still does. I think that a person has to be active in the family project, or what do you call it. And even now it's maybe one weekend when we are just together, maybe not even doing anything much, just relaxing together. It's important to invest in it.

So it's a never ending process.

Father: Yes, that's how I see it, the children were quite old, and connecting to one another isn't the same as with younger children, it's much more fragile than with a biological relationship. You have to make an effort. At first some dangerous situations can come up, they might try to bond with anybody, for example when we were in a park, they would try to get the attention of just about anybody, we had to always be on guard. Sometimes it was difficult to do everything that was necessary, sometimes we forgot that we have to be very clear and specific about things that even little children know about. The watch and remember how their parents behave. They gather experiences, like layers of an onion, or how could you say that. Like who's the closest and who's next, I mean family members, parents, grandparents, the next layer cousins and other friends etc., you move back and forth in these layers.

Mother: Yes, in our family cousins are closer than neighbours, but we see the neighbours every day and the cousins once every three months... it's a strange logic.

Father: We had to explain how close you can allow a stranger to be, that had to be very clearly described, otherwise...

Mother: An aunt at a swimming pool who's smiling isn't our aunt... she's just nice.

How long did it take before the children learned Swedish?

Mother: I think Maria learned very fast, I didn't really keep track because we've been communicating together from the start, I myself like learning languages, and so I knew a few phrases and I could use Czech words... Then when Maria started preschool, her teachers told us they admire the speed with which her speech was developing.

Father: Yes, after just 4 - 5 months.

Mother: As far as I understand, when she came to us she already spoke very good Czech, she was good, she could form sentences well and express herself. I think that she just learned more new words, it wasn't a very dramatic change for her, she was just trying to improve her ability to express herself.

It's one thing that she could communicate, but how were you deepening her knowledge of the language?

Mother: We have nothing to compare it to, but we think that we're still working on it... She's still learning new words... maybe it's especially our son who has trouble with the aspect of time... Maybe because it's confusing with words like 'before' and 'later'... So yes of course, it took longer, and in a way, we're still working on it today.

Do you remember any especially important moment in your relationship with the children that you've experienced in the last few years?

Mother: Yes of course. There are a lot of them... Some were really a bit strange, kind of milestones, like when they learned to ice skate, because we weren't there for their first steps – and the first time they stood on their own feet... so the fact they'd learned to ice skate... it was amazing they learned to swim... a huge step in their development... Also the first Swedish words. That's something I feel especially strongly... and then when they first got close to us... for example, when my son was sitting on my lap and was very cuddly.

Father: Maria was cuddly even in the children's home. She let us take her into our arms.

So she sought out close physical contact from the beginning?

Father: Yes, and she was also more tired compared to her little brother. She could switch off and hang, like a little monkey.

Do you remember something you were worried about at first?

Mother: Yes of course. It was very intense and aimed in one direction. For example: 'Is this (some behavior of the children) alright?' We didn't have the opportunity to worry about too many things, we just existed here and now.

Father: Yes, and then we had to arrange a lot of things – residency permit, developmental reports that had to be sent right from the beginning – and then Maria also had some physical problems right after our arrival... It was about two things, firstly her eyes... she was given strong eye drops and medication even in the Czech Republic, and we had to have it checked right after getting home. We went to an eye doctor who immediately took all her medication away and said: 'Well, let's see what happens after the change of environment. Come back if anything happens.' And nothing happened.

Mother: But that's what they thought in the Czech Republic too, that she might do better in the Scandinavian air.

Father: In the Czech Republic they also gave her glasses, so we went to an eye doctor to have her eyes checked. They said the glasses are absolutely useless and took them away too. Only now, half a year ago, she was given glasses for reading, which she needs when reading for a long time. But otherwise she has no problems. Then it was the state of her teeth, which was horrible.

Mother: Yes, that was really keeping us busy.

Father: When she arrived at the children's home, she was three and a half, and until then she hadn't been given any proper food... When they gave her anything at the biological mother's place, it was soup, so her teeth didn't sit firmly in her mouth. Luckily they were just baby teeth. They were bad, I think they took out 10 or 12 of her teeth...

Mother: Yes, it was terrible.

Father: But... and now I'm emotional... We came home and went to the dentist. Maria didn't have an ID number yet, nothing, and they just said: 'Whatever,' accepted her, gave her medication to make her forget she was there, we took her in and she was fine. Then we arranged her provisional ID number.

Mother: She needed to be operated on twice... it was difficult...

Father: Also when they came to us they had a huge vitamin D insufficiency. We had suspected as much even before that, so we had started giving it to them straight away. They were given a lot of flour-based dishes and didn't spend so much time outside... Now they sunbathe a lot and thanks to their skin colour... they're very beautiful. When we were on holiday in Southern Spain it was just perfect for them. They absorbed the sun straight away and had very smooth skin.

Mother: We never needed creams with a protective factor, they just wear shirts...

Have you had to make any sacrifices over the years?

Mother: Yes, there were a lot of things.

Father: But we were expecting that... it can never be the same as before.

Mother: There are many important things you have to come back to again after a few years – exercise, relationships with friends... Actually it's only been a year since we've returned to our social life, and we take the children with us because we spend time with families... at first we were only focused on us as a family, and it stayed like that for several years... We were also very conscientious about sticking to all the routines to make the four of us work. When we were socialising with other families, it was all thrown off balance, because they had completely different routines in everything from food to sleeping late at night. We wanted to keep doing things our way.

Father: In the end, it was good for the children and they were sleeping a lot... Also before the children joined us, we'd been living in an apartment, we had two incomes, good jobs, and we could do whatever we wanted, we traveled a lot... So obviously a lot of things changed.

Mother: But these were changes we could predict and we knew about it... we couldn't expect it to be any different. And it wasn't anything negative.

Father: Nobody can just have everything... and we did...

Mother: Basically we wanted it this way, but after some time we realised that activities and exercise are also important to us, and so are the social contacts...

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

Mother: Yes, we very rarely do something with just the two of us.

Father: Oh yes that's true.

Mother: We've only been gone a few times, and not for long.

Father: And also our relationship is a lot harder and different than in those earlier years, when everything led us to the decision about adoption... Of course, that has an effect on a relationship.

So getting the children was an improvement; we had to worry about the existence of other people, not just our own, because it's easy to drown in oneself... so we had to change our outlook... personally I think that

it's not necessary to dig too deep into oneself, now it's time to help somebody else and look after them, since then you don't have a choice anyway... you can't choose if you want the best for the children or not... you just have to do it... First you deal with whatever they need and then with what's left for you... So it's clear that it's a big change, but mainly positive... and because we were quite old when we got the children, I was 45... we managed a lot of things before that. One had enough time to fully enjoy a lot of things.

Mother: The things we like, we enjoy doing together, we do them together with the kids... Going to the cottage together... spending time outside... we can do all those things together...

Father: So actually, we didn't really lose that much.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Was there anything that was surprising or unsettling? I think you've already partially mentioned one thing, about being surrounded by those office workers...

Mother: But at the same time that's not something to be debated, because it just had to be that way, they had to see how it was going.

Father: Yes, it was only awkward for 10 seconds. Then it was okay. At first I had butterflies in my stomach, I was worried about how it would go. Then I understood that it was working out.

Mother: Yes, it was positive and very well prepared.

What is good to be prepared for in the actual handing over?

Mother: I'm certain that we were very well informed from the beginning to the end, by the written documentation as well as by the Office in Brno, where they also gave us information. Then we came to the children's home and met first with all the professionals. They told us a lot of things, what a normal day looks like, what the children like to do, how they react to different situations – and they described their personalities. So we knew a lot about the children and we had clear ideas.

Father: If that's how the system still works, then there's nothing to point out. The only thing I'd recommend to future adoptive parents is... when people come from such a liberal western country like we do, they should forget about how to deal with offices over here and how we feel about it. When you go to the Czech Republic, it's all kind of old fashioned, formal, that's good to point out, that you should respect that - for example, that you wear a suit and shave before you go to court, you should be clean and act formally, which I understood is important. I remember reading a psychological report – they stressed that so and so didn't look smart, his hair wasn't brushed etc., which are things that Swedish offices don't care about. Over there it's important how you act, they call each other Mr. XY, even though it's people at the bottom of society... Just a lot more formal, so it's necessary to forget the Swedish tramp style when dealing with a Czech office.

Was there anything in the whole process that seemed risky?

Mother: No, I don't think so... they told us what the timeline was going to be, that if it went well with the children they could move in with us after a week, then they'd all come to visit us after another week and after several weeks we were supposed to decide. And not just us, but also the children, should say what they'd like and how they feel – we were a little nervous about that. We were hoping it'd go smoothly. We couldn't calm down until we received a stamp on the decision. But even so it was the only way. It was professional.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

Father: Definitely travel by car. To have a car over there... it meant a lot to us. I'd worked as a traveling salesman for many years, I was basically living in that car, it's a familiar thing for me... Also it's a certain freedom, you can move around freely, which is great, you don't have to depend on anybody. I really recommend it.

Mother: And then also... We listened very carefully to all the advice and recommendations and followed them, because they were given to us by professionals, and they knew the children best at the children's home because they lived there with them. I thought that was brilliant. Then you didn't have to think about the basics, because in a way we'd already had everything prepared.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

How do you talk to your children about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

Mother: We were following the information you gave us, to take pictures of things in order to keep them in our memories, and it was a bit strange, we didn't know what kinds of things it should be. I'm wondering what specific things we have here. We have a book we got in the children's home, it's a tourist guide with lots of pictures, with texts in English and Czech, so we look through it together... whenever something about the Czech Republic comes up we start talking about it: 'Look there's something on TV about the Czech Republic, some sports event or music.' Our little boy's teacher has a dog, it's a Czech breed – or a horse, those white horses at the Stockholm castle come from a Czech breeder. We talk about it positively.

Father: We don't pressure the children, but we're also not leaning away from it. Maria and I sometimes look at Google Maps and look at the streets around the children's home. It's all completely transparent. We're also planning to go to the Czech Republic in a few years time (maybe three), when the children are older. We've promised each other that when she's 18 years old and mature and independent, she can seek out her biological roots if she wants to and is interested... we're really offering that to her. As far as her age is concerned, we don't have any specific plans, we're just going by instinct. Maybe there are some EU rules about at what age children can search for their biological roots.

For children younger than 18, the parents' approval is required.

Father: Yes, exactly as we said. We've tried it a bit and we think it's the right way to do it, because she came to us at a relatively older age, and so we felt that it's important they become Swedes, that they settle down here and don't have an even bigger existential crisis than is, I guess, necessary, although I'm not really sure... they have one foot over here and one foot over there, but they should feel that Sweden is their security. The security of having their own home they can always go back to.

Mother: But then we decided for Swedish. We didn't want to maintain Czech. We could consider that if they were older, at least seven years old. Then it could be done differently. I guess there's a lot of research done about this... but we chose to do it this way. So that in our family we all spoke the same language.

Father: That was based on a recommendation from the Czech Republic as well as from here.

Mother: It was, wasn't it?!

Father: At school several teachers mixed together children with foreign parents and children who are entitled to lessons of their native language, and they were asking us if the children should go to the native language lessons, but our children's native language is Swedish... of course they meant well, but the children were just trying to change their language, it was very challenging for them at that time.

Mother: At first the children were bonding without us... We didn't understand what they were talking about... they were speaking Czech to each other.

Father: It went quite fast... after three months, she could barely count to ten in Czech, it went incredibly fast... and it keeps going, especially with the little boy, who's learning fast, compared to people who come to Sweden at an older age.

If I've understood correctly, the children aren't in contact with any biological family member, is that right?

Father: No, and it's very explicitly pointed out in the report, that the social workers in the Czech Republic were trying to find some biological family member, but nobody was interested in the children... it's terrible to read things like that in black and white, but it's true.

If at some point in the future Maria wants to contact somebody from her biological family, what will your attitude be like?

Father: When she's old enough to have her own bank account and she wants to do that, we won't stand in her way.

Mother: But we will of course want to be there, to talk to her about it.

Father: It's easy to trick people online, when you're not face to face, that's just how it is, so it's very important that we're there with her, so we can interpret the information for her, because we won't know who's sitting at

the other end. We've already spoken about this a lot. We are strict and we put limits on social media, not just to prevent any research about biological family members, but in general. We're trying to find some good way to explain our reasons, so that the children understand how serious and dangerous it is online, that the person at the other end of the conversation could be anybody. It's because that's what the world of today looks like, and not because they are adopted.

What is or was the significance of Maria having a different ethnicity ?

Father: No, we're just cautious because she has a different skin colour, and unfortunately we're expecting her to hear about it somewhere... I was a bit tense about how the children would react to people sitting in front of shops and begging, how they are dressed, how they speak and look... But they didn't react at all. For example 'Oh my god, they look just like me,' but no, nothing like that happened.

Mother: When we are in Spain, the children say: 'Everybody looks like us.' They do it subconsciously, like when siblings say that they look similar to each other, you look like my sister and I. In our case, but nothing is certain, it will be a surprise for us, for example, how tall they'll be... we just can't estimate these things.

Are both biological parents of Romani origin?

Mother: Yes, that's how we understood it.

Father: That's what we were told.

Okay, so a double heritage – Romani and Czech. Have you thought about it this way?

Mother: Yes, but it was a bit... Yes, it was also the reason why we didn't celebrate any Czech national holidays... Because there is more of them, and then there are the other ones, but the children had never lived in that culture, as far as we've understood, and so we set it up differently... in the media there is a lot of talk about it, and we know about the discrimination, that's why we've decided to go to the Czech Republic when they're older, so we can talk to them about it... sometimes the children react to things like, he's Czech and he looks different to us, he looks the same as you... we've never spoken to them about this... We've never ever spoken about it – about origins.

Mother: What we've done was, we read about 'Katizi' (*a Swedish children's book about a little girl of Romani origin*), and when we're in Spain we go to flamenco together, we talk about where it comes from and we tell each other stories.

Father: The children don't see it as something familiar, and they don't take it very personally, they just think it's 'cool'.

Has Maria ever been bullied?

Mother: No, not like this. Both children have found friends very easily, wherever we've been. It's really amazing. They sometimes came home saying somebody commented on their skin colour or something. But the teachers are very careful about it at school, so it's never been a problem... it's been more about someone saying... then Maria sometimes said that she wished 'there was somebody else who's dark at school.'... But currently it's quite mixed... in our street it's very mixed... for example there is a Turkish dad, a Japanese dad, next to us there is a family from England, a Spanish mum. Everywhere around us it's mixed. There are also a lot of adopted children, which wasn't really the case in our previous home.

Are you friends with any other family with adopted children?

Mother: One family has children adopted from Korea, she's the friend Maria was talking about... her mummy is adopted from South Korea.

Is there something I've missed, or that you'd like to add?

Mother: No, I don't have anything like that. I'll just sum up that we are very grateful for how everything was organized. We've spoken about this a lot, from your side (*BFA*) it was all amazing, how you've accepted us, it felt very good. Thank you for giving us the chance to speak about everything, we also want to take this opportunity to thank you very much. It was also great in the Czech Republic.

Father: Very family-like, but very professional and very fast reactions to our questions... we were slightly traumatised by the behaviour on the Swedish side, but from the BFA and the Czech side it was all excellent.

An interview with Jan (13 years old)



Jan joined his new family in 2010, at the age of three. At the time of the interview he was almost 13. His sister Anna (now nine years old) was adopted by the same family in 2013, at approximately two and a half years of age.

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

No, I don't remember my biological parents.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic? What do you remember? If you do not remember, how do you imagine it?

I remember that we lived in a flat, and that every evening I wanted to watch films on DVD. And also one TV show that I really liked, about trains. I also remember that I was constantly looking for chocolate in the fridge, I love chocolate.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

I don't remember much, just a little bit. I knew that somebody was coming, but I didn't know who it would be. When I saw mum and dad, I just said to myself: 'Ooooooh, what are they like?' Then I came over to them and touched them and investigated what they were like.

Did you know in advance that someone would come to visit you?

I didn't know that it would be mum and dad that were coming, I just knew it would be an aunt and uncle.

What was it like when you were still with your parents in the Czech Republic?

I remember it a bit. I felt safe with them but I had trouble sleeping. Mum and dad told me later that I was afraid they'd disappear.

And when you were in your new home...

What was your departure from the Czech Republic and your arrival at your new home like?

The journey went well, I was talking to a Czech couple that I got on with and so the journey went fast. I wasn't afraid, I was curious, I was looking out of the window and watching how high we were and stuff like that. And when I got home, a new world opened up for me. I was walking round and round and touching things, looking at what was in the closets and stroking animals, pulling their tails and so on.

What were you looking forward to? And were you afraid of anything?

Well, arriving in a new home and learning about everything new. I don't remember being afraid of anything, but I guess the stuff with sleeping. Nothing else that I was afraid of that I can remember.

How did you get used to your new home?

That was quite fast. I was walking around touching everything, then I also met a lot of new people, my new older sister and older brother. I got used to things pretty quickly, I looked at everything, I knew all the rooms, I remembered them and I knew which things were where.

For how long was everything new and unknown?

For maybe about two weeks.

And what about the new language?

That was a bit weird – I didn't really understand what they were saying, but I repeated a few words after them, and then, after maybe one or two months, I could understand Swedish.

What was the best thing about it for you?

To arrive in a new home, to have a family, that was the best.

What was the worst thing for you?

I really don't know. Hmmmm...

What was the most surprising thing for you?

That was the animals, there were lots of animals and I love animals. The first thing I did, we had a dog called Isa, and the first thing I did was, I stroked her and touched her and the cats and kittens.

And how did it go with your siblings?

That was great. Mum and dad asked me if I'd like to have siblings and I said yes. I wanted a little sister. And then I was always asking. Until one day they told me that we're driving to the Czech Republic to get her, and I was happy.

Did your parents' behavior or attitude to you change? Did they behave to you in a different way before?

No, I don't think they've changed, they treated me and Anna the same, they're good parents. When you did something bad, they said so. I know they haven't changed at all.

And if you look back on it today?

Is there anything you would have wanted to be different then?

No, I don't know about anything like that.

Do you have any advice for a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is going to a new home she/he doesn't know yet?

Yes, I definitely do. If they feel unsure and afraid, it's not necessary, because they will have a family where they will always feel confident, a family that will always be there for them and will protect them if something happens.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

How do you and your parents talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

Well, sometimes I want to talk about it when I think about my biological parents. Sometimes I ask them something about my biological mum, dad or siblings, like what are they called, and things like that. They answer the questions they can answer, and don't answer the questions they can't. That's okay, they don't have to answer everything I ask about. But it doesn't happen very often, just sometimes.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic? Do you maintain any Czech customs or holidays at home?

Yes, I'm very interested in the Czech Republic, but we don't celebrate any holidays, we only keep Swedish traditions.

Are you interested in the place where you were born?

Yes, I am interested, really, I'd like to find out more about it.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

No, it really isn't. Mum and dad have slightly lighter skin colour and I am darker, but dad says that it's nice, that it makes me unique. So I'm not ashamed of having darker skin.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Do others know about it?

Yes, almost the whole school knows. Sometimes my friends ask me about different things, so I answer as well as I can. Sometimes it's a bit difficult when somebody asks about the same thing over and over again, or about something I don't really understand, that's really difficult. But I tell them that I just don't know so they should stop asking me about the same stuff all the time.

Do you and your parents talk about the biological family that you were born to in the Czech Republic?

Yes, I always ask them about that – for example, how many siblings I have, what are mum and dad's names, and so on.

What would you like to know about your past?

What my mum and dad's names are. What my siblings are called. Why did they leave me and put me into a children's home? I'm interested in these kinds of things.

Do you have any pictures, maps, books, photos, or other things that remind you of your life story?

I have videos from when they came to the children's home for me. I look really content and happy. And in the children's home they gave me a book from the time when I was a baby.

What would you like to know about the Czech Republic?

I'd like to know more about the history of the Czech Republic, if they have a president or king, just more about the history.

Do you want to add anything I haven't asked you about?

No, I think you asked good questions. Although there is one thing. I'm not sure which hospital I was born in. It would be cool to know which hospital, and which room I was born in. But I guess you can't find that out.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents.

As applicants

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

We didn't know what to expect. We were open, we had no expectations. We wanted a child we could look after. The fact we chose the Czech Republic was a question of location - it's close, and also we met their requirements for adoptive parents. We didn't have any special wishes, so it seemed good.

And were those expectations fulfilled?

We heard it would be very complicated, that it's a long process, it doesn't happen just like that, and that's also how it was.

Would you be able to say which expectations are realistic and which aren't? For example, if anyone thinking about an intercountry adoption asked you about it...

They should know that it will take quite a long time before they promise anything. When somebody tells you that the documentation will be in order and ready by a certain date, it will still take longer. It always takes longer than they say, but you just have to accept that, there's nothing strange about it...

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for your child?

It was really nice, we felt halfway there, we were very happy. It's really hard waiting for something and not knowing anything.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

It was really adventurous, just walking through that door, I remember it was thrilling. I have to say that we'd met with them earlier, back in Sweden the previous year at a summer meeting... and they came to us and talked to us, they were really sweet. So actually, for us they weren't strangers. If we hadn't known them I'm sure it would have been much worse. They were office workers, so we were a little nervous about it, but the fact they weren't complete strangers helped. Although I think that it was all very bureaucratic. It's an office, and so on, it was a bit stiff, but I suppose that's how it has to be.

How would you finish this sentence: 'When we first saw our child, we...?'

We were emotional, it was fantastic, unbelievable, you couldn't believe that he was standing there. He was happy. It was a happy first meeting. Really happy and successful meeting. Jan was ready for us, he had a show prepared. He knew that an aunt and uncle would come visit him, but he started calling us mum and dad immediately. Then he was singing and dancing and he had a show prepared for us. He was really happy.

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

We remember everything. We stayed in the children's home and spent all our days there, partly at the section where he lived. We lived there and with them, it was completely natural. We remember so much, we remember everything, it was our anchor. Everything was amazing and totally natural, we can make that comparison because later we made another one of those journeys... it was fantastic. It was good in all aspects. We also saw and remembered some things that weren't so good, but actually in general it was absolutely brilliant.

What did you know before arriving in the Czech Republic, and what did you learn once you were there?

We had photos of him, we knew how old he is, we had a medical report, that was about it. It seemed to be enough, I didn't have any need to find out more information.

How useful was what you knew in advance? What was the key information for you?

Well, it's hard to say, we didn't really know much, nobody wanted anything from us, we didn't want anything specific, no... We read the medical report, there was nothing there to be worried about, there was nothing serious. We were content with what we got and we were full of expectations. We were looking forward to meeting him and to what we'd see when we got there.

What did the Czech Republic do for you (what support and information did it provide)?

They helped us a lot there. The social worker in the children's home was absolutely amazing in every respect, and the psychologist – if you could put anybody on a pedestal, it would be him. We were unsure and had various questions, and he was there the whole time like a big calming 'bear'. He's really amazing and capable.

When you were at home...

How was your departure from the Czech Republic and arrival home? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

We were really looking forward to the day when we'd be able to go home. We were quite tired, we longed to go home, as a family, but the day was also very hard. Just the journey was scary, obviously, we couldn't communicate together, we had no idea how Jan would react to the flight and to everything new he would have to discover. On the plane he wouldn't sit still, but he was talking to one Czech couple, which calmed him down a lot, so in the end everything went smoothly. I think a lot about how we left the children's home, that we left his home at the time, his friends, it was really hard, and we were there with him for two weeks... We were crying, but Jan wasn't, he was just happy.

What were the first few days and months like?

At first after arriving home he wouldn't sleep, that was a bit hard. He didn't want to sleep, he was always up, sometimes I took him to my car so he'd sleep at least for a moment. It looked like he was afraid to fall asleep, so we wouldn't leave him, he was afraid that it would all end. And that's what it was like in the flat in the Czech Republic too. He always wanted to do something, he was browsing through books and taking VHS tapes. He just didn't want to close his eyes. And that's what it was like in the first few months. Gradually it calmed down and got better.

How long did it take before it was all settled and you felt like you were a real family?

We felt that straight away when we saw his photos: 'Oh, that's our little boy,' it's just that he wasn't with us yet. After we arrived home there was a dog, cats, and a horse, and an older sister and older brother.²⁴ There was so much happening around him, but he managed the whole situation very quickly.

While you were getting to know each other, what role did your language play?

We made several tapes and now we laugh about it. He said something and we said something too, then we used body language and mimes, but Jan took everything in incredibly quickly. Even back in the Czech Republic he started using Swedish words. He was mimicking and repeating everything we were saying, he spoke Czech and we spoke Swedish, but slowly he started to forget his Czech, which is in a way a bit sad. But speaking was never a big problem for us. Of course, sometimes he wanted to say something and we didn't understand, so he laid down on the ground and started screaming. We were trying in every way we could, with pictures and body language, to communicate with him, and in the end we did, and he was happy again.

Do you remember the key moments in the development of your relationship?

What we thought was fantastic was that he loved animals. He wanted to explore everything, to touch everything. He could be standing and turning a lamp on and off over and over again for a long time. Everything was going smoothly and settling down, that's how I experienced it...

What made you happy at first?

I think that it made me really happy that Jan was always so content and happy and positive, in this way it's been very easy with him. He's a very open boy, that's how it's been with him from the very first day. That was amazing, because at the beginning we heard from somebody else how it could go instead, so of course it was great. He's very open, in a very positive way. That made everything easier. He was like any other child. We very quickly began to feel like he had always been there with us. Our relationship was completely natural very quickly.

What made you worried at first?

We talked a lot about how we took him away from the Czech Republic, from the children's home, and took away his certainties, and we were worried he'd miss that. He had lived together with five other children he was very close to. And of course, it was hard. What's nice is that one of those children, Martin, that Jan used to live

²⁴ Currently the presence of all the adoptive parents' biological or previously adopted children (*the child's future siblings*) is required throughout the entire acclimation period in the Czech Republic.

with, now also lives in Sweden, and we're in contact with him. We met him accidentally at a summer meeting in Mora. It was amazing. When he came over with his parents, he had a teddy in his arms that we had given to him when we were in the children's home. We also filmed it, how we were giving presents to the children in the home. Martin's mum really appreciated it. It's very nice that the children can grow up together.

What was surprising for you?

How fast he learned the language. We were mentally prepared for some unpleasant reactions, but they never came. Jan was like a ray of sunshine. That was fantastic. I think it depends on the personality of the child, how confident he or she is. We never felt like he was unhappy, anxious, he was always content and happy, and actually he's still like this today, open and sociable, and he'll get far with that.

What did you have to sacrifice?

Nothing, I don't know what we're supposed to sacrifice, we were in a situation where everything was going well. No, we didn't sacrifice anything. You could say that we have completed our life, that's what we were expecting and what we wanted.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

Of course, it made it stronger, it didn't alter it in any other way, in a negative way. At the same time I think that every couple has a slightly different outlook on things, but there's nothing negative about that either. It's strengthened by the fact that we have a child together.

What role did your older children (*Interviewer's commentary: the woman had two children from a previous marriage*) and the other child you adopted play in helping the family get used to each other?

Actually, it was beneficial. The good thing about having had children before is that we already had parenting experience. We of course also reacted when we were speaking to other parents who had biological children, and they said: 'Well at least now you'll see what it's like to have children.' But it's not the same. It's good that we have the Czech Group²⁵, where we can talk to other parents about our problems, and that helps us. When we took in Jan's little sister, already having Jan made it a hundred times better. Anna, when we think back to it, was very closed off, shy, quiet and careful. Jan was an amazing asset in those days. He helped us maintain a pleasant mood, which my husband and I struggled with at first.

Looking back from today's perspective...

What was the process of adoption like? Did anything make you surprised or uncertain?

The only thing I can remember is that right on the second day they came to us with a box of clothes and nappies and said: 'Here you go, now Jan can sleep upstairs with you.' I remember that I was scared. I was thinking 'Already right away? But we don't know each other at all yet.' But then, we did it. You just have to try it, and if it doesn't work, I'm sure they'd come up with some other solution. It was definitely the only good solution, but I remember that I was really scared, and I was afraid how Jan would feel when he was with us upstairs the whole night through – maybe he won't like it. But he wanted to do it. Although he didn't want to sleep at all, but that was something else. It was okay, we'd have had to make that leap at some point anyway and go through it, so actually there was nothing to wait for. It wasn't bad, but I have to admit that when they first told me, I felt like, 'Oh my god, I don't know if I'm ready...' But of course, you never know that until you try.

What is it good to be prepared for?

From the beginning to the end, the problem is the waiting period; it's a long time and you have to be patient, and yes... even so, it's a trial of patience, you have to be mentally ready for the fact that it's a journey. And throughout the journey various things can occur, although I think that we didn't have anything like that, our journey was completely smooth. But we heard different stories, when everything went wrong and they didn't manage to connect – yes, we heard very sad stories, and you have to be ready for something like that. It's difficult to imagine it beforehand, how are you supposed to approach it. Even though it sometimes sounds

²⁵ This is a group of Swedish families who have adopted children from the Czech Republic. They meet regularly at a summer camp organised by the BFA, and keep in touch through social media.

terrible, I think that you should be ready for the worst sometimes. From the moment you apply for the adoption at the social office, to the moment you're actually going home with a slightly tense stomach. It's difficult to give advice; everybody's different, it depends on what kind of parents we are, what the child is like, and how to approach it. It's very individual, everybody's different. But of course, for some people it's important to go home to some peace and quiet... with us it was the other way around, when we got home, suddenly everything was happening. He wouldn't sit still – on the contrary, he was everywhere, and so the entire family became a part of it. You had to be able to adjust, Jan and Anna just cannot be compared, it was the other way around there. There we had to be very patient and be very careful, then her personality grew slowly but steadily. Jan was, again, very active. It's difficult to say what people should prepare for, but I guess for it being hard, you should be... you should take it as it comes. It's probably hard for someone who wants to have a clear picture about what it will be like, but you just cannot say that, you cannot predict it at all.

Would you do it again?

Yes, of course.

When you look back, what was the most challenging thing, and how do you think you managed it?

Well I guess the thing with starting school. I was a bit worried... how it would go, but it went very well. Well, I think that the time before that was much more difficult, all those examinations and everything at the city council. I remember that a few times I left thinking we'd never have a child because these people would never give us their approval. While in the Czech Republic we didn't experience anything negative with the officials, not with Jan nor with Anna. What was unpleasant was that when we were done in the children's home, we had to go from there to Brno to sign papers. We'd much prefer to avoid that, because it's a bit dangerous to travel by car in the Czech Republic. So we tried to avoid it. In the end my husband went on his own and I stayed with Jan in the children's home. Otherwise we'd all have to go to Brno, but to travel with a small child and not be used to the cities and the traffic... We tried to persuade them to fax us the papers, that we'd sign them, but they didn't agree with that, so they at least met us halfway.²⁶

What do you perceive as risky?

That was what I said a moment ago, that seemed pointless to us.

What would you need in a different way?

We think that the long stay in the country, from 6 to 8 weeks, isn't good for anything, and especially not for the parents. We understand that it's a court process, but it's a process that can be difficult also for the child. With Jan we were in the children's home the whole time, but not with Anna, we could take her away after just four days. Because we couldn't stay in the children's home anyway. In the children's home where Jan is from, everything was different; we were there the whole time, did everything the way he was used to. He could play with children – actually we didn't take anything away, it was more gradual. With Anna it was a few days and then: 'Here you go and you don't have to come back.'

What would you want to know, if you were to adopt a child again?

I think that we got the appropriate amount of information. You are just happy that you have another child. Maybe a medical report, but we did have that... I don't think that anything was kept from us, they are very experienced and that's how it is, that's all.

Do you have any recommendations for someone in your situation prior to adoption?

Patience, and what we said before.

²⁶ Future adoptive parents are required to appear in person at the City Court in Brno to pick up the decision about entrusting the child to their care. This meeting takes place in the judge's assistant's office. There the future adoptive parents give up their right to appeal the decision, and they must confirm this in person.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

How do you talk to your children about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

We've had a very open relationship since right after coming home. Jan considers the Czech Republic to be his home country, and actually also Sweden is his home country – we have two countries, and in our family it's nothing strange. Sweden comes first and the Czech Republic comes second. It was natural that we went to the Czech Republic, it's just a part of us. We explained to him that he's a unique person because he has two home countries.

Do you have any materials that clarify that the child is adopted?

Yes, we have lots – a whole box with lots of things from the Czech Republic we've collected over the years, films and a beautiful album from the time Jan was a baby, which he got in the Czech Republic. We look at it, and as time flies, we talk about it more and more: 'It's you, Jan, who decides what we talk about. What are you curious about and what are you interested in?' It also changes as he gets older. It's natural.

Did you look for any information about the culture and history of the Czech Republic? Do you maintain/practice any customs or go on holidays in the Czech Republic?

No, not exactly. We went there on our own and explored a bit. It's also about the fact that Anna and Jan have a slightly different origin than Czech, so we didn't really think about it too much. It's about acceptance, which is not always easy – in the Czech Republic they are a minority.

Do your children have contact with their biological roots?

No, they don't.

Would your child like to have some kind of contact with his/her biological roots?

Yes, Jan would like to. Now he's denying it.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

None whatsoever to us.

A space for the parent's further ideas (whatever didn't fit anywhere else):

We've always had a very good relationship with the office workers who come to the summer meeting in Sweden, and it's very nice and we love this relationship. We also want to praise the staff in the children's home. Everybody who looks after the children, they are so good at their job and are doing something fantastic and difficult. They are very conscientious and keep information for the children, you can tell they take interest in the children and don't just let them disappear into the world, as is clear, for example, from this project.

An interview with Filip (16 years old)

Filip joined his family in 2010, when he was a little over five years old. At the time of the interview he was 16.



A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Yes.

Do you have any memories or information about your biological parents?

I don't know.

Do you remember your stay in the Czech Republic?

A little bit, now that we're talking about it. When I was sitting on a windowsill, and then when they came.

Do you remember that a bit?

Yes.

Do you remember anything specific, or do you mainly remember what they've told you about it?

Mother (sitting next to him): Wait, you remember what kinds of shoes we had. Many years later, when you saw dad's shoes, you said: 'You were wearing these when you came to see me for the first time.'

Yes, that's right.

Mother: That was exactly the thing that you saw, our legs.

Yes.

I was thinking more of the time before your parents came. Do you remember anything from that time?

No. I saw photos, but I don't remember anything.

How did you get on in the children's home?

I think well.

When we spoke of meeting your adoptive parents for the first time, you remember their legs?

Yes. (laughs)

How did you feel when they suddenly appeared there?

New people.

Did you know in advance that they would come to visit you?

No.

Did you know that you'd be leaving with them?

No, but I think that I would have probably left with just about anybody.

What was it like when you were living with your parents in the Czech Republic? Do you remember anything from that time?

Yeah, we went into that hotel where we stayed and there was a playground.

You remember the playground?

Yes.

And when you were in your new home...

And then you went on a long journey, you left the children's home and the Czech Republic. What was the journey and the arrival in Sweden like?

I don't remember that.

You don't, is it a long time ago now?

Yes.

You don't remember anything from that journey?

No.

Were you afraid of anything?

No, I don't think so.

Do you remember how long it took before you started feeling at home in Sweden?

Straight away. Oh and grandma and grandpa came to visit us right on the first day, there where we used to live. They had our dog and I was a little scared. It was a bit unpleasant.

Maybe you'd never seen any dogs before?

No. Well, and then I stroked him, and in the end he was my best friend.

And how was it with the new language, how did you learn Swedish when you could already speak Czech?

I don't know, I don't remember.

What was the best thing about getting a new home and a new family?

I don't remember that.

What was the hardest thing for you? What was the most surprising thing?

I was surprised the most when I saw the dog.

I guess you didn't expect that?

No, and he was almost as big as I was.

Has your parents' behavior or attitude to you changed throughout the time you've been together?

Sometimes we're angry with each other, maybe not angry, but we're grumpy. But very quickly we like each other again.

And if you look back on it today...

And when you think about the adoption, is there anything you would have wanted to be different then, something you were missing?

No.

What would you recommend to a girl or a boy who is just getting acquainted with new parents and is getting ready to travel to Sweden?

I don't know. I was really happy and content the whole time.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

Do you and your parents ever talk about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

No, we all know it.

Is there something you'd like to say yourself?

No, we don't really talk about it. That was more when I was little.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic?

Yes, a bit.

For example when something's happening in the Czech Republic, or when they play ice hockey?

No, I don't watch ice hockey much.

Do you maintain any customs or celebrate any holidays from the Czech Republic at home?

No.

Are you interested in the place where you were born?

(His mother stated the place he where he was born). No, I don't even know I was born there.

Mother: Maybe you remember the other place more. When you got there, you were two years old.

Do you ever think about it? Do you have any memories?

No.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

No, not everybody in the world looks the same anyway.

How do you talk with your friends at school about being adopted? Do they know about it and are they interested in it?

Yes, some of them ask about it. I just answer them.

So your friends know that you are adopted?

Yes.

Do you ever talk to your parents about your biological parents?

No, not anymore, just when I was little.

What would you like to know about your origin?

It would be cool to meet them.

Is there something you'd like to ask them about?

That's a bit hard.

I've already asked, do you have any photos or memories that remind you of your life story? You can share them with us.

Yes, I can.

Is there anything else you'd like to know about the Czech Republic?

No.

Did we forget anything?

No.

And what about the championship?

Yes, I won the Swedish championship on skis with a dog. There was an article about it in the local newspaper. I'm also very interested in music; I sing and play the guitar.

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents.

As applicants...

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

Mother: It's so long ago – we really wanted a child. Expectations – well, we just wanted a child, because we were already 41 years old. It was our last chance and the waiting periods were long. That was what made us nervous.

Do you feel your needs were fulfilled, looking back at the adoption?

Mother: Yes, we got a child. What can I say – it went well. I also have an older sister who's had two adopted children for a while, so it's nothing new in our family. My husband was the one for whom it was new. We knew what to expect. It could have been a disabled child, a child who's traumatised, or a child that brings a lot of problems with them. We were aware of all of that.

Can you say which of these expectations were fulfilled, and which were completely off? For example, if somebody who was thinking about adopting asked you.

Mother: I think that you have to do some things independently. You helped us a lot, but then there were a lot of things we had to deal with on our own. Which actually we would do anyway, even if there was somebody there who could help. I guess we are quite independent.

Father: Actually, it went a lot more smoothly than we expected.

Were you well-prepared?

Mother: Yes, I just really wanted to go to the children's home and meet him. And everything was going so smoothly.

What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for that specific child?

Mother: Well, I was at home, I was ill, and suddenly I got an email from you with a photo of Filip. Oh, actually you called first. And during that call the email came and as soon as I saw the photo, I saw that he looked really similar to my husband. Yes, and he was beautiful. And my husband was just driving a tractor, he was at work when I called him, and told him what happened. And then he hurried home to look at the photo. I still remember the text that accompanied it. It said we could call this doctor in Göteborg who could explain it all to us, but we didn't really care anymore, because it was him. He is as he is and we will see him soon. The whole story about how he was born prematurely and weighed this much, it didn't matter. We didn't need to know anything else.

Travelling to the child and staying in the Czech Republic

How was your arrival in Brno and your interview with the staff of the Office for International Legal Protection of Children?

Mother: It wasn't in Brno, it was at the children's home.

Oh, so you didn't go to Brno first. Maybe this was before the new procedure?

Mother: No, we went straight to the children's home. And then, before we went home to Sweden, we went to Brno. They came to the children's home, we were sitting in a meeting, and all we wanted was to go out and meet Filip. We were drinking coffee. When we were driving in we saw a little boy sitting on a windowsill looking out, but we couldn't go to him, we had to go to that meeting first.

What was it like seeing Filip for the first time?

Mother: It was absolutely incredible. He was anxious, like a little... like a little ferret.

Father: Yes, he was on overdrive, the whole time.

What was it like?

Mother: It was good, it was our boy. We wouldn't let him go, he got straight into our hearts.

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic? How long were you there for?

Mother: We were in the area of the children's home for two weeks, and then a week in Prague. We were waiting to be invited to Brno.

What was your stay in the Czech Republic like?

Mother: The first day we just came to visit the children's home, where they decided we should come back the next day, and we made a plan. The next day we were there for several hours, visiting, and the third day we were supposed to come for a visit again, and he could go with us to the hotel we were staying in. It was a very beautiful golf resort with a playground and a zoo. We could take him there and then return him. The third or fourth day we were allowed to keep him overnight; that went very well. After that we never returned him to the children's home. From then onwards we had him 24 hours a day.

What do you remember? What was it like?

Mother: Amazing. At the golf resort there was so much to see. Even though Filip was very active, he slept well at night and so we could rest. It was a beautiful time we spent with him, it was wonderful. We were driving to one town, we'd never used an escalator before, nor been in a city... It was positive, but we really wanted to go home and lead a normal life. We had a photo album with us with pictures of his room, so that he was ready in advance.

What did you know before coming to the Czech Republic, and what did you not know? Do you feel like you had a realistic idea about everything?

Mother: We didn't know much, just what was in the documentation. His measurements and that he was born prematurely, etc. There weren't really any surprises... although, there was one thing I reacted to. He was living in a children's home in a poorer part of the Czech Republic. But when my husband and I were in the children's home, Filip suddenly took dad's phone and started taking pictures. It was a surprise for me. How did he know how to take pictures with a phone? He just knew these things.

How did knowing things about Filip help? What information was the most valuable?

Mother: We were trying to find out for ourselves how big he would be, but we didn't buy any clothes for him at home in Sweden. We went into town with him and bought him clothes there. I had no idea how big he'd be. He was quite small. He has one pair of jeans saved, he got them in the children's home, it's a memory.

What kind of information and help did you receive in the Czech Republic?

Mother: They helped us in the children's home. I don't know how many children leave that place, but I think that the director was excellent, it was easy to work with her. She invited us to her home, to her family. She has a daughter who speaks English and she was translating for us. They looked after the children in the home very well. We saw that Filip was doing well, even though he didn't have parents. They treated the children very well. Filip also had an aunt who was looking after him. She was a pensioner, we only met her once, it was very emotional for her. We respected that. She looked after Filip a lot and Filip spoke about her a lot. She took on a role of a mummy in a way. We'd like to meet her again and hug her. She was an important person for Filip.

When you were back at home...

Then you went back to Sweden. How did the journey go, when you left the Czech Republic and came to Sweden?

Mother: It was the same there. My husband and I are a bit older. We never thought that there would be any problem, and if there was, we'd deal with it. Filip was carsick so we were worried about the drive back. He was sitting in the back in his seat smiling the whole time. Whenever we turned around, he was smiling at us from ear to ear. He was really happy. Then we travelled by ferry and spent one night in a hotel. It was a long journey. Then in Malmö he fell asleep.

That sounds like a great journey.

Mother: Yes, it was a nice journey. One of us was always in the back with him. He was really happy the whole time. As soon as we looked at him he started laughing.

What were the first few days and months like?

Father: It was really easy.

Mother: Easy. We used to live in a small shared building in a village, we had a lot of neighbours who were older and at home. Everybody was always talking to him and he could visit any of them to have a chat. He had people to play football with and I was with him on maternity leave. It was a wonderful, superb time.

When did you feel like you were properly settled in at home? Obviously it takes time.

Mother: He was five, and started preschool a year after that. We came home in April. In December he turned six. He started preschool in the autumn and attended it for two years. The first autumn I used to go with him because I was on maternity leave. But he could manage on his own. He didn't want me there. He connected with others easily. He wasn't afraid of the adults – on the contrary he preferred them, which is not unusual with children from a children's home.

How did it go with the language? He had to switch languages, didn't he?

Mother: It went really fast. In October or November he was already speaking Swedish, and we had only come home in April.

Father: Yes, it went fast.

Mother: Our neighbours had a friend who could speak Czech. One day she came to visit, and Filip opened the door for her. She told him some expression, a basic Czech expression, and Filip didn't understand her at all.

Is there a moment you remember in which you realized he was really yours?

Mother: We felt like that from the very beginning. He was naughty and wild, but very sweet. The other adults didn't tell him off, but we did. We were bringing him up. It made him feel confident.

Did he listen to you?

Mother: Yes, he quickly understood that he could do whatever he wanted with other adults, but not with us. I think that with us he always felt confident.

What made you happy at first?

Mother: That's a difficult question to answer. We didn't have any problems at the start.

Father: No.

Was there anything that worried you at first?

Mother: Yes, I suppose the fact that he didn't know any boundaries and didn't keep his distance from strangers. We tried talking to him about it, telling him that we were the ones who were his parents – but that came later. He kept that behaviour for a while. He just liked running up to people and speaking to them. We spoke about this a lot at home when he started school.

So that was something that made you feel nervous?

Both parents: Yes.

What was surprising for you?

Father: That he learned the language so fast.

Did you have to sacrifice anything?

Both parents: No, on the contrary. Before then, it was always just the two of us.

Has your partnership been affected in any way?

Both parents: No, we've never thought about that. We've always had animals, so we've always had to take someone else into consideration. Obviously there is a difference between a child and an animal – but it just made us mature more.

Looking back from today's perspective...

Let's go back to the handing over of the child in the children's home. Is there something we should think about? How did it go?

Father: He was following us the whole time, so actually it was automatic. He knew he'd be coming with us.

It looks like he was prepared for it.

Mother: Yes, but they didn't tell him that we would be his new parents. He didn't know that. Which I think was terrible.²⁷ They told us that the first days are a kind of a trial period. But at the same time they claimed that Filip would be with us. We were decided. It was a bit like we could still change our mind and refuse him.

Would you do it again?

Both parents: YEEEEEEES.

It looks like it.

Mother: But we'd have to be several years younger.

When you look back, was there anything that was difficult? Was it just that he didn't know any boundaries?

Mother: Yes.

And I also know that at the time you were afraid that he wouldn't like you.

Father: Yes, he was five years old and we thought: 'Maybe he won't like us, he won't want us...'

Yes, he was already quite big.

Both parents: Yes.

How do you think you managed it?

Father: Well, it sorted itself out immediately. He just wanted to be with us from the very first moment.

Mother: I wasn't really that worried about it, but you were a bit scared.

Father: Yes, but it went away quickly.

Do you think that something should have been different, I mean concerning the adoption? Do you wish something had been different?

Father: No. Everything went completely smoothly.

Mother: We heard one story when we came back 5 years later. The director told us about a little girl who was adopted and who was really sad and crying, so the director went to visit her to make her feel better.

Obviously, when you look at it like that, things could have been done differently. But we weren't in a situation like that, and the waiting period wasn't even that long. I've also heard other stories. My sister was waiting in Colombia for a month. We remembered that when we were going for Filip. We were in the Czech Republic, in a European country. We had a car and we could leave town. So the time spent there was nice. We got to know each other in a nice way.

²⁷ A child is told that the applicants are just coming for a visit. The applicants are not introduced as potential parents, so that the child is protected in case the interaction process fails for some reason (although that rarely happens).

Would you have liked to have more information?

Mother: No, maybe just about the biological parents. We found out that he was left at a birth hospital, as a prematurely born child. We spoke about this with him, we told him that when he's 18 and if he wants to, we will find out more. We spoke about a tummy mummy – not now, that was before, when he was asking questions. In the last few years, Filip hasn't been talking about it at all. He would like to buy the tummy mummy some flowers.

That's nice.

Mother: Yes, very nice. If I met her, I would hug her, because she gave us the best gift. We're not against it, we'd like to meet her too.

So you'd eventually want more information about his origin?

Mother: I don't know if I'd want that. I don't know why. I would have to answer a lot of his questions if he'd asked. He was so little that it was easy to tell him we just don't know anything. You think about these things more at a later age. Of course when they're adopted they ask where their biological mummy is.

Is there anything you'd recommend to somebody who's about to adopt a child? Something that helped you in the whole process?

Mother: I'm thinking about why it went so well, without stress – it was because we were mature and calm and stable. He was wild, but we have to take into consideration that he'd spent 5 years in a children's home, he needed to vent everything he'd been through. We didn't run around to doctors' offices with him. He is the way he is, that's his personality. Anyway he grew out of everything. Apart from that there was nothing strange about him, there are lots of adopted children who have various psychological problems, but Filip doesn't. He's always been very active and curious about everything. I think that in the end it's really great that he's totally not embarrassed. We never stopped him, we just spoke about boundaries with adult strangers, so that he understood that and tried to limit it.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

How do you talk to Filip about being adopted?

Both parents: We talk about it all the time, when there's a sports event on TV where the Czechs play, we tell him, the Czechs will run now, or the Czech ice hockey team is playing now. The Czech Republic is always with us.

Do you have any materials, a photo album or a diary?

Both parents: We have a lot of photos which we've sent to you.

As an appendix to the developmental reports?

Both parents: Yes, we have a lot of photo albums from the time he was little and after that we took a lot of pictures ourselves. We also have newspaper clippings. He's a successful sportsman.

Do you have any special interest in the Czech Republic, the culture and history?

Mother: We've spoken about going to Prague because we haven't really seen it yet. Next year, Filip will have been with us for ten years, so we will celebrate by going to Prague.

Do you keep any Czech traditions?

Both parents: No.

Do you mind in any way that Filip is of a different ethnicity?

Both parents: No.

Is there something you'd like to add?

Mother: For us it's just a normal everyday life with Filip. We can't even imagine living without him. He's a part of us every single day, and that's amazing. He grew up, he's very beautiful, and now he's entered puberty. He's not a child anymore. We travel with our camper van and we're not taking a little child with us anymore.

Yes, it's different. But you've been by his side for ten years already.

Mother: Well, not quite yet, nine or ten years.

Is there anything else you'd like to add? Did you go back five years ago?

Mother: Yes, when he was ten, we went back with our camper van. We stayed in the same golf resort, but in our own car. He saw the zoo and the rest of it, and then we went to the children's home for a visit. We'd spoken to them and they were waiting for us. There was just the director, because it was a holiday. She was very surprised that Filip doesn't speak Czech anymore. She'd learned English in the meantime, so we could speak to her. Filip was running around looking at everything. He went to the playground, to his room, the kitchen, he was running around and we were behind him. He decided how much time he wanted to spend there and what he wanted to see. He looked at us and said, now let's go back home, and then he slept the whole way home to Sweden.

Do you remember that, Filip?

Filip: No. I don't remember anything, I don't have any memory. *(laughs)*

Mother: You wanted to meet your aunt. She was invited too, but she didn't have the strength to come. It was a disappointment. We sent her greetings and left a drawing for her.

Filip: The director called me Fildo when we came in, but you said Filip.

Mother: I think that it was a good trip, that Filip could go back.

Filip: Yes.

An interview with Karel (12 years old)



Karel went to Sweden in 2014 with his two younger biological sisters Teresia (now 10 years old) and Julia (now 9 years old). At the time he was almost seven years old (his sisters were five and half and four and a half).

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

What was it like to come to a new family in Sweden, and all that? Is it okay to talk about it?

Hm.

Do you remember anything, do you remember your time in the Czech Republic?

Ehm... I remember that I lived in a children's home.

What was it like there? Do you remember?

Yes. It wasn't very nice.

No? What wasn't very nice there?

Ehm... *(silence)*

Was there something strange that you didn't like?

Yes, there was the one called Zorka, she wasn't nice at all.

She wasn't nice...? And what was she doing?

(silence)

Maybe you don't want to talk about it...?

No.

Do you remember the mummy and daddy you were born to in the Czech Republic? Do you remember if you ever saw them?

Yes, I remember mummy. And also grandma.

What do you remember about them? Do you remember what they look like?

Yes, mummy had black hair, long black hair. Grandma had curly hair.

Do you know anything about your other relatives in the Czech Republic? Did you get any information about them?

Hm... I remember an older sister. She also had long black hair.

Do you remember anything else from the Czech Republic?

Hm... *(silence)*

Do you remember what it looked like in the children's home... and if there were other children there, and stuff like that?

Yes, there were.

Were there many of them?

Hm.

So I'm thinking... Do you remember when you met your mummy and daddy for the first time in the Czech Republic, I mean these ones? (His parents were sitting next to him.)

Yes.

Can you tell me about it?

It was great. Very nice.

Were you nervous before the meeting?

No.

What did you know about it, what did they tell you? Did they tell you who'd come to visit you?

Mummy and daddy sent us their photos.

So you knew beforehand what they looked like?

Yes.

Did you know that they'd be your parents?

(silence)

Do you remember?

Ehm... no. I don't remember.

But you remember that it was nice and happy when they came?

Mm.

Do you remember what you were doing together when they came?

Yes, we were sitting on a sofa eating chocolate.

You were sitting on a sofa and eating chocolate... you remember that?

Hm.

And then after you'd met for the first time... do you remember that you lived together in the Czech Republic? Even before you went to your home in Sweden?

(silence)

For example, the place where you stayed... Do you remember that you were staying somewhere together, even before going to Sweden?

It was a red house...

Mother: No, it was white, with the facade crumbled.

Yes...? And who was staying there...? You...? And who else?

Mummy, daddy... and Teresia and Julia *(his sisters)*. And then other people I didn't know.

Mother: The people who owned the house lived on the top floor.

What was it like to live with mummy, daddy and siblings in a house?

It was good.

Were you able to speak together? Do you remember how you spoke together?

Hm... with sign language.

Was it hard to speak to mummy and daddy because they didn't speak Czech?

I don't remember that.

But it seems like you remember a lot from that time...?

Hm.

And then... when it was time to go to Sweden and leave the Czech Republic. Do you remember the journey? Did you go by car or did you fly? Do you remember?

We went in my mummy's car. And then by ship... which we thought was a helicopter.

Haha. That journey... did you understand that you were going to a new country, away from the Czech Republic?

Yes.

Do you remember how you were feeling?

(silence)

Was it unpleasant, or adventurous, or...?

Adventurous.

It was adventurous. Was there something special you were looking forward to – going to a new house in Sweden or anything like that? Do you remember?

Well...

Well?

To meet new friends.

Mother: We showed them pictures of their rooms. We have a dog, so they were a bit excited about that. At least as far as I can remember. We were talking to grandma and grandpa over Skype and the dog was there... hahaha... but I don't know how much they understood.

Well exactly... Karel, do you remember that there was a dog waiting for you?

Hm.

Okay, but you remember that you were looking forward to new friends?

Hm, and to Gibson, that was mummy and daddy's dog.

Were you afraid of anything before you left the Czech Republic?

That they would send us back.

You were worried that they would send you back... you didn't want that?

...yeah.

And when you were in your new home...

Was it difficult to get used to your new home?

No, it wasn't difficult.

Did you like your new home?

Yes.

But at first everything was very new, right?

Yes.

Mm. Do you remember how long it took before you felt good there?

Well...

Was it more like several days, or weeks, or even longer?

Well, I don't know that.

And then also the fact that everybody around was speaking Swedish...? What was it like when you didn't understand them?

It was a bit difficult.

It was a bit difficult, yes? Maybe also a bit strange, when you didn't understand anybody?

Well... a bit.

Did you want to learn to speak Swedish quickly?

Yes. And I also learned a lot!

Yes, your Swedish is excellent. There is nothing in your accent that shows you weren't born here. But I think that at the time it wasn't like this. It must have taken some time before you learned Swedish?

Hm.

What was the very best thing about coming to Sweden and to a new family?

That we finally had our own home.

Was there something difficult for you that you remember, after you moved and started a new life?

Ehm... no. No, I think that I mainly liked it.

Okay. Was there something that surprised you, that you didn't expect, when you came here? Something that wasn't the way you'd like it to be?

(silence)... Yes, Gibson.

The dog?

Hm.

What was different about it?

I'd never seen... well actually I did... but I'd never seen such a huge dog.

Oh, so that was new for you, to have such a big dog in the household?

Hm.

Were you scared of him?

No. It was cool.

And your sisters were with you too?

Hm.

What was it like for them... do you think they were also looking forward to going to Sweden?

Sure.

Do you think that it was better that you moved together?

Ehm... yes.

You've been here for several years, I think five years, right?

Yes.

And if you look back on it today...

Now you're older, you're attending school in Sweden, you speak perfect Swedish... But when you remember the time when you met your mummy and daddy and you moved here together, do you think it would have been better to do something differently? To make it even better, should something have been changed, something you know about?

(silence) ...now I don't really get what you mean.

I know, it's a difficult question. What I mean is, whether something could have been different, if somebody had said or done something different, to make it even better for you when you were moving to Sweden? Have you ever thought about it?

Ehm... nooo, I don't know.

If you heard that some other child was getting ready to move to Sweden to a new family, that he or she was just meeting the new parents... Would you have any advice for him or her? Like for example: Think about this... or do it this way... or something similar...?

I don't know.

Okay, that's alright, they're not very easy questions. Let's leave it. Instead I'll ask about something else.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

At home, do you ever speak about you and your sisters coming from the Czech Republic, what was it like when you were living there, and so on?

Yes, but it's a really long time ago.

Mother: It's been several weeks... It's always a specific period of time, at first we talked about it a lot, but then it kind of stopped... Now it just comes up once in a while.

Do you think you talk about it enough, Karel?

Yes.

When does it happen, when you're sitting down eating, or in the evening before sleep, or ... when do you talk about it?

Hm... it's usually when we eat.

When you sit together and eat?

Hm.

Does it tend to be one of the children who starts, or mummy and daddy who say something about the Czech Republic, or do you talk about what it used to be like when you were living there, or do some memories come up? Or anybody?

It's usually us, Teresia and Julia.

One of you children who says something?

Hm.

Are you interested in finding out something about the Czech Republic? Do you enjoy this information?

Hm... not really.

No, you're not really interested?

No.

No. And do you celebrate something that's connected to the Czech Republic, some special day, or do you prepare some Czech meal? Did you bring anything as a souvenir, something that reminds you of the Czech Republic?

No.

Nothing like that?

No.

Are you interested in the place where you were born, and would you like to find out something about it? Or are you not really that interested? Tell me what you think about all of this.

I'm not really that interested.

You don't really think about it?

No. But I think about what's happening in the Czech Republic.

Oh? For example...?

When mummy and daddy were there. So my family, mummy and daddy, the ones I have now.

Yes... so mostly the time when the adoption was going on, when they came to pick you up?

Hm.

There's one more thing that happens when a person is adopted, which is that maybe he or she looks different... you look a bit different than mummy and daddy, maybe you have darker hair and so on. Is this something you think about?

No.

No. Is it important to you in any way that you look different?

No.

No. When you talk to your friends at school, do you tell them that you are adopted? Do they know that you were born in the Czech Republic?

Yes, but I don't want them to know too much about it.

No. So what do you tell them?

Hm... I tell them that I used to live in the Czech Republic, that I lived in a children's home where there were other children... and stuff.

Do a lot of children ask you about it?

No.

No?

Mother: That was more at the beginning, when he started going to school. Now it's an old story. He's had the same classmates since he started school. Maybe when you meet new friends they will ask you about it?

Karel: But I met new friends, for example Martin...

Mother: Yes, they have a few Czech friends, thanks to the Czech meetings, it's great.

Hm.

Yes... I'm thinking about whether you've ever spoken at home about the fact that there was another mummy...? You were talking about your mummy and grandma in the Czech Republic and about how you have another family that you were with when you were little. Do you ever talk about it at home?

Yes.

Okay, and what do you say about it?

Hm... *(silence)*... I don't know now.

No. Do you talk about it often?

Not really that often, but ... sometimes it happens. When we eat.

Yes, when you eat. That's the same answer as for the previous question, when I was asking about what you can remember about the Czech Republic. So this is also a thing that you talk about when you're sitting at a table eating, is that right?

Hm.

Is there something you'd like to know about the time when you were living in the Czech Republic, and about your biological family, something other than what you already know?

Ehm... (*silence*)... no.

No. There's nothing you think about, what it was like then, what you were doing, where you were... how it happened that they put you into a children's home, and so on?

Yes, my mummy who was in the Czech Republic didn't manage to look after us... I knew that and even then I could understand it... hm. She was taking those ... drugs.

Mother: Hm, she was addicted, that's true.

Mm... would you like to know more about it, or is it okay like this?

Ehm... (*silence*)... no.

No. Do you have any photos, books, maps or anything else that reminds you of the time when you were living in the Czech Republic?

Yes, we have books and pictures. We don't have maps.

Do you have any photo albums or something like this that you look at?

Yes. We have photos on the computer, we have various books, a photo album...

Do you have any other things from the Czech Republic as souvenirs?

No, I don't think I do. We destroyed everything.

You destroyed everything?

Hm. Yes, when we were younger we destroyed it.

Aha, so it was being used so much that it fell apart?

Mother: It was broken or they... chewed it apart.

Also some pieces of clothes.

Mother: Yes, they've grown out of those a long time ago. When we were moving we found some shoes we bought in the Czech Republic. We took those with us.

Hm. So a few pieces of clothes and a few pairs of shoes are your souvenirs. The toys probably broke and had to be thrown away... Apart from that it's a photo album and pictures on a computer that you sometimes look at... ?

And also books.

And also books. Hm.

So I have one last question. Is there something you'd like to know about the Czech Republic, about the country you were born in?

Noo... I'm not really interested.

Sometimes it's possible that it comes later when you're older. And also maybe not. And that's completely fine. Karel, is there something you'd like to tell us yourself?

(*silence*)... no, I can't think of anything...(silence)

Okay, so thank you very much for being a part of this interview and answering my questions!

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents.

Okay, so you've already studied the questions. I'll go through them again and let's see where we end up.

Mother: Mmm.

Father: Yes.

As applicants

What were your expectations when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

Mother: For us it was, like for most others, simply, I just wanted a family, that was my expectation.

Father: Yes, that's how it was, we wanted to have a family and we expected to succeed.

Mother: Yes, to be parents.

Okay, and another question: Were those expectations fulfilled?

Father: Haha, well we became a big family. At first we were a bit shocked when we found out that we were going to have three children.

Mother: Yes, it wasn't exactly what we were expecting, nor what we applied for, so it was really a bit of a shock.

Father: But in the end it went well... well, it still is.

Mother: Exactly.

Exactly, you got used to the idea...

Father: Yes, that's right.

Mother: Yeah, well, we managed to get used to it in time but... we wanted siblings, so that it wouldn't be an only child, but then they were three!

Father: Hmm, and actually the entire process went so fast that we almost had no time to prepare for anything and it was time to go.

Mother: Yes, in April 2014 I found out that we would have a chance to apply and get a child, and then suddenly, after only a few weeks, we were chosen.

Father: Yeah it went... because we had some paperwork in the Czech Republic... the whole waiting period went, I mean we dedicated the entire time to putting together the paperwork, and suddenly we got the approval to make the trip, and it was just about getting over there.

Exactly, but you were describing it as a shock at first – what about it was shocking for you? That in this case it could be three children?

Father: Well, we'd first applied in a different country, and we met two children, and then the whole thing turned on its head and we ended up in a black hole.

Mother: Well, mentally we weren't exactly top-notch.

Father: ...and then we found out that there was a list of children with special needs. And we accepted that because we weren't expecting that they'd give them to us, we weren't even daring to hope.

Mother: Well, there were a lot of applicants from various countries who wanted these children, so we sent our application too, but we weren't expecting to be selected.

Father: No, we most definitely weren't.

If somebody was asking about intercountry adoptions, what to focus on... when you remember what your own expectations were, what it would be like, how many things were like what you had expected, and how many were not at all?

Mother: I have to say that at first I was really naïve. I'd never thought that I'd become a part of some political games, I wasn't at all ready for what would happen, so I guess I'd recommend... you'd want it to be only a positive experience for everybody...

Father: But Rut is now talking about Russia...

Mother: Well, about adopting in general, that you should be realistic a bit, because various things can happen, and it's good to be at least partially prepared, you never know. There can be various political situations and you're never ready for that, not even a little bit.

To get ready for these kinds of obstacles to appear?

Mother: Yes, when you finally decide to adopt, you should really research the conditions in each country. Sometimes people can really be a bit naïve, you only have big expectations when you begin, and you don't want to admit to yourself that there is any information like that.

Father: You think that you're standing in a line, and that when it's your turn, it'll be cool.

Mother: Yes, but there are no guarantees that you will become a parent, even though you've decided to adopt, there just isn't a 100% guarantee.

So the thing is, you shouldn't just blindly imagine a happy picture of a future family, without being aware of the risk?

Mother: Exactly, you can't... wear rose-tinted spectacles, because after all it is... it is what you have wanted for a long time and were looking forward to...

Father: You should have one foot firmly on the ground... but you can't stop dreaming.

Mother: Exactly. After my own experience I would recommend being more above it all, because it's not really like what you read about, because they only write about the happy endings.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

But if we go back to the adoption of your children and the time you spent in the Czech Republic, what can you say about the first meeting in Brno, about the staff? What were they like, what do you think about it?

Father: It was great, they were completely straightforward and explained to us why they'd chosen us, they told us everything about the children and the children's home and what it would look like when we got there...

Mother: Yes, we definitely got a very nice welcome there.

Father: One great thing was that when we had questions, they answered them right away and explained everything.

Mother: We also felt that it was respectable, they accompanied us at the first meeting, they had an interpreter with them, we were never left alone to deal with something, so...

Father: It was great.

And now let's move to when you actually met the children for the first time - give me an example: 'When we saw our child for the first time... When we saw our children for the first time we were...' What would you say about that, what are your experiences?

Mother: I remember that they took us to the second floor in a lift, to a room there. There at a small table were some children and some staff members, and they were having a snack together. We were trying to figure out which ones were ours. Haha.

Father: Then they took the other children out, and so we saw them, or actually we recognized them.

Mother: At first there were so many children that we just couldn't tell which ones were ours.

Father: And also all the children ran to us... it wasn't like we were just talking to our children, we were surrounded by lots of children.

And how did you feel when you understood that those were the ones?

Father: For myself, I can say that according to the medical report where it said that with our youngest there was suspicion of microcephaly, which is damage to the brain – that – I was a bit, because I work in health care, I was curious how she would look and how I would see her. But she looked like any other child, and that was amazing. After that it was fine.

Can you name your feelings: 'When we met for the first time, I felt...?'

Mother: I felt just that a huge weight had been lifted and I could just exist, because I saw that she was healthy.

So you were surrounded by a kind of peacefulness?

Mother: Yes, exactly.

Father: Exactly. You were thinking about what it would be like if she had brain damage – I saw the life ahead of me, with us not bringing her up, but only looking after her.

Mother: Maybe it won't be very presentable for the Czech offices – because if we hadn't had this difficulty, we'd have definitely just said: 'Ooo, now we are parents!' But we were worried the whole time that it would all go wrong again.

Father: Yes, in a way we were worried that anybody could tell us: 'No, this won't work,' so we were a bit... well...

Yeah, but it's your experience that this is about, so it's an important piece of information...

Mother: Well, without it we would have definitely been much happier from the start.

Father: But for me it was happy, right after, we were there for ten days and looked after the children, and they were living with us... And then came a lawyer, a psychologist and that interpreter...

Mother: A social worker from OSPOD, and then somebody else...

Father: So they came and asked us if we wanted the children. And it was a bit... I didn't understand anything, I asked... 'We'll get them?' and they answered that it was clear from the start... which I didn't understand at all. That was the first time that I really felt a weight had been lifted...

Mother: They were our children.

Father: Yes, and then it was just a matter of time, when we'd be able to go home, so that's when the happiness came.

Were you afraid to believe that it would really work out?

Mother: Yes, exactly.

What are your memories of the children's home and your subsequent stay in the Czech Republic?

Mother: I was very surprised that the children's home was among apartment houses, I really didn't expect that there would be apartment houses around and they wouldn't have a lot of space around... like grass and so on. It looked more like a bunker from the seventies.

Father: I wasn't all that surprised, I'd seen some programs on TV, and during the parenting course, I'd also been looking online...

Mother: But I liked it there, the staff were nice, even though we had problems with communication... Luckily Henrik speaks a bit of German, so the older ones could tell us something about the children in German, because otherwise we wouldn't have been able to communicate with them... We were trying to ask them what they thought about it, and we wanted to get more information from those who worked with the children every day, but it was hard. We wish they could have given us more information about the children.

Yes, we're getting to that question now. What was it like when you were in the children's home and you could move out into that white house.

Mother: Yes, they helped us. On Friday afternoon we found out that we were going down there (*to the Czech Republic*), so we just booked our ticket for the ship and accommodation for a few nights...

Father: We were staying at a hotel and fairly quickly understood that we couldn't have the children in a hotel. So they helped us and we rented a small house in a village on the edge of the town where the children's home was. We rented a ground floor apartment. We had a kitchen and a bathroom, a bedroom and everything that was necessary.

Mother: We could do our laundry and things like that.

How long were you there for?

Father: About five and a half weeks.

And how was it working with you and the children, was it something between a normal day and a holiday, plus three children?

Mother: Yes, but it went very well. We were definitely prepared for that. Or at least, I felt prepared, we just entered right into a normal day... We went to a shop together with the children and did the shopping, then we cooked together, went outside to play, and so on... we were just together. On our walks we were feeding horses and doing all kinds of things.

Father: For me it was a bit of a shock that the children weren't used to doors being unlocked. For them the normal thing was that doors are locked. We had to adjust to them and open up their world slowly, so they could get used to it... For the children it was a completely new life, they weren't used to living with a family. Because I work in health care, I felt that the children were only used to a life in an institution, and that was something that shocked me a bit.

Mother: I am an economist, so I don't know anything about it, haha...

Father: I know about it and so I had something to work with. I think that, even so, it went very well, they were acting very peculiar, so were trying to show them a family life...

Mother: It was challenging, but it was nice that we had a big outside area available. The children could run around a lot, and we were also lucky with the weather, it probably wouldn't have been as nice in the winter...

Father: I don't know what winters look like over there...

Mother: We wouldn't have the same kind of freedom, they wouldn't have been able to run around outside so much and so on.

Father: It was also good that we went down there by car. It was really good to have a car with us.

Mother: Yes, definitely. We could go on trips and go shopping, do big shops...

What information did you get, and what information about the children's situation were you missing when you arrived down there (in the Czech Republic)?

Father: I feel like it was good information, especially about what the process would look like, but I would have liked to know more about the children, for example how they learned to use a potty, they weren't able to brush their teeth very well or eat nicely – in that respect they were quite a bit behind, and we had no idea.

Mother: No...

Father: They couldn't handle being alone, for example. They couldn't go to the toilet alone, they didn't know how to shower alone, they just couldn't do anything alone...

Mother: I wasn't ready for that, and there wasn't anybody there to help us if we needed it, since we had three children, maybe we needed a bit more support over there.

Father: It would have definitely been good to know in advance how far behind the children were in their development. For example, we went to a playground for the first time, and they didn't know how to swing, they'd never done it before. And Karel was already almost seven years old – that surprised us a bit.

Mother: We were also missing information about their routines... daily routines, what they could do on their own and what they couldn't.

Father: Yes, what we had was medical information.

Mother: Yes, it would have definitely helped us, and it wouldn't have been such a shock for the children – they were a bit older, and we would have been better at continuing the routines they were used to. While we were trying to create a home for them like the one they had in the children's home, we instead offered them something completely different. Everything was new for them. And then the most difficult thing for us both was that we had no idea when we would be able to finally go home. That was the worst thing.

Oh, that you didn't know how long you'd have to stay there?

Mother: Yes, because we couldn't prepare, we couldn't plan anything, because we didn't know if we'd be able to go home tomorrow or in five weeks or... we just had no idea when it would be.

Father: But again, it was more a question of expectations. At least for me... The most important thing was to learn more about the children.

Mother: Yes. These two big things were a bit more difficult.

And then there is the question whether the information you received before arriving was valuable, and later also useful?

Mother: It was all summed up quite briefly. We had... an idea about how they behaved.

Father: Yes, and then the medical report we received about their health condition.

Then there were a few lines about how they behaved in their section, but that was approached a little more clinically, e.g. this is negative, and this is positive, and so-and-so helps other children, but there was nothing about what their normal days looked like, how they were organized, what they could do on their own, and so on.

Okay, and when we look at the rest of the information... it sounds like you had a pretty good idea about all the things that were going to happen, except for not knowing how long you'd have to stay there, so it was actually quite good?

Father: Yes, it was great. It was really good for us to know what was going to happen. It will be like this and this, and at the end you will wait for a judge, etc. That was great. So basically it was... actually it was all great, we were just surprised because there were three children and so on...

Mother: Hm. But I was a little surprised that when we thanked them and agreed to accept the children, it was all up to us... they just cut the tape. I understand that it's not possible any other way, but still. And then we were alone in the Czech Republic, Henrik and me. We didn't have anybody who would come to us and ask us anything, after we'd moved – just no feedback from the children's home...

Oh, and you weren't in direct contact with anybody from the Office? You didn't have to submit a report about how you were doing...?

Mother: No, nothing like that. No psychologist that would come and look at the children or anything like that.

Father: But we did get something from that social worker from the Office. She told us to write something...

Mother: Yes, we were supposed to give her a report, if we were moving or something like that, actually just send her the address, but it was basically just like, 'that's it'...

Father: No, but she was sending something... weren't we sometimes supposed to answer some questions? How it was going, and stuff like that?

Mother: Oh, yes... what the children were doing. That did take place a little, but...

Father: Oh, but yes, we were supposed to do it, really.

Mother: But it was more like... it wasn't any help for us, it was more so that they'd know how we were doing... it was meant more like that.

Hm. Well, in any case, it was a big experience for you, because you were left completely alone...?

Mother: Yes, exactly. That's how it was... we didn't have anybody else....

Father: But on the other hand, given that we had the kind of accommodation we had, it was great. I can recommend this kind of accommodation. To rent a whole house where you can set up an ordinary everyday life. Because sitting with them in a hotel room would have been terrible.

Mother: Yes, we wouldn't have made it there for five weeks, that would have just been impossible. It was the same as... one of the children got sick, we didn't know what to do, so we contacted the children's home, they advised us to go to another children's home where they have a doctor, so we did. It was kind of strange, we didn't know what to do.

Hm, but... now I have a question that's kind of... what help and information did you get in the Czech Republic? Because now we spoke about what you didn't have, what could you say, about something that was important...?

Father: For example, that they gave us a detailed description of the whole process, that was great. Well and then, that it just took a long time. People in the children's home also helped us find accommodation, because we definitely wouldn't have been able to do that on our own.

Mother: We'd have never found it on our own. It was some employee that helped us.

Father: Yes, and also because the Czech Republic neighbours Germany, a lot of people speak German. Luckily I had German in grammar school a bit, so I could communicate. Over there almost nobody speaks English because they dub all the TV shows. That was great that they helped us with that, otherwise it would have been really difficult for us...

Mother: Yes, completely impossible, because we'd have never found it ourselves, it wasn't even advertised anywhere.

When you were back at home...

Yes... and then suddenly you could go to Sweden? How do you remember the journey, and what was it like to get home? What were you looking forward to and what were you afraid of?

Father: We couldn't wait to go home, I remember that one Friday afternoon at 3, when we were supposed to meet the judge at the court in Brno... and when we did, we were standing by our car, Rut and I looked at each other and we said: 'It's four,' ... and then we headed out.

Mother: Hahaha, yes.

Father: We drove through the Czech Republic and Germany, called and booked a hotel from the car. We got there at about 1 at night.

Mother: And then straight to the ferry.

Father: We really couldn't wait to get home...

Mother: Yes, it was beautiful, we longed to be home, in our own... back in our life...

Father: We felt that we would have more opportunities to get closer to the children, we would have our people around us, and so on... so we went home, immediately, as soon as we could.

Mother: It was amazing to be able to go home.

How was the journey with the children?

Father: As Rut said, they helped us... The lady whose house it was explained to the children that they would travel by ship, that they would see the sea, etc., so that it wasn't such a shock for them, because they'd never in their lives travelled in such a ship and had never seen anything like that.²⁸ And everything went well. The highway is okay.

Yes, but I meant more like... a long journey by car with three children who aren't used to travelling, it could have been very... eh, kind of...

Mother: Yes, but luckily we set off... soon it was evening and night, and the children were sleeping, so it was easy.

Father: I was playing music... It was strange that the children were sitting in the back and talking to each other, and then as soon as I put on the music they fell asleep, all of them. So it went really well. We made stops, and ate, and did what was necessary. Then we showed them pictures of the dog as well as the house, their beds and toys and everything, also grandma and grandpa. The children were sitting and looking at the pictures and saying, that's where we're going right now.

Hm. Was there something you were worried might happen on the journey, or you were worried how it was going to go?

Mother: We weren't worried at all. We just wanted to go home. We thought that everything would be easier after that. On the contrary, just being at home.

Father: We went on a lot of trips and the children really liked it. It didn't seem like they minded. And they weren't sad either, when we said goodbye in the children's home, where we returned their clothes we'd borrowed. It looked like they were just looking forward to getting out. So it went very well. And the journey up...we went on a ferry from Rostock to Trelleborg, that was great too. We were really lucky.

Then you got home. What were the first few days and months like?

Father: Eh, well... at first it was nice. The children met Gibson, our dog, we were all looking forward to that, then they got their beds and that was huge. They also got a lot of toys and met a lot of people... they also wanted to be a part of everything, and everything was interesting to them. Then we had to try to set up normal life and teach them the language and so on, so it was great that we had a dog that didn't speak.

How do you mean?

Father: You just had to say, come here, sit, and food... so the children knew some words almost immediately. We also lived right by a school, so we used to take them out every time there was a break, so they could hear that other children speak a different language. They didn't understand that they went to Sweden, they thought that they had just gone far away, but that they were still in the Czech Republic. So we tried to make them interested.

Mother: Yes, as long as we were in the Czech Republic they had absolutely no interest in learning Swedish, but then in Sweden it became very interesting to them.

At first you had to raise their interest, so they'd understand, that...?

Mother: ... other children speak a different language... yes, that was very interesting.

Did the children have any wild reactions to these big changes in those first few days?

Father: The thing that was slightly difficult was that they didn't know how to be alone, even for a second. They immediately started to panic if we left, even just around the corner. And we were doing it a little bit, like you do with a dog. We went to the door and showed them that now we were walking out, but we immediately

²⁸ Currently the children are systematically prepared by their parents (under the supervision of a psychologist from the Office) for the journey to their new home. If they are mature enough (over 5 years of age, typically) they also meet in person with the psychologist from the Office, who tells them about the specifics of the journey and talks to them about any fears or needs they might have.

returned. Then we went around the house and looked into the windows, then we did the same outside. When we went to a playground, we walked around a couple of trees, then we returned, so they could see they could trust us, that we would come back, so they felt confident. Even when they couldn't see us, they knew that we existed, that we were aware. That took quite a long time, just like the process of connecting to one another.

Mother: I also think that it was good for them to have each other. They stayed in the group they were used to, they weren't separated, and that was good. That was a huge advantage.

Father: Then I was a bit worried about them having that strange institutional behaviour... they could eat anything – if they found something on the ground, they stuffed it into their mouths and ate it... so we had to watch out for that.

How long did it take before you thought, well, now it's hopefully beginning... when did you feel that you were settled and that you were a family, you five?

Father: I think that, because of how long we were staying in the Czech Republic, that it started there already. So it took... maybe half a year, a few months... before we... before the connection was functional, when they were attached to us.

Mother: Yes, and then it took maybe... you could say that after three months in Sweden, they started talking to each other in Swedish, and then of course it was much easier, because we could understand what they were saying to each other and they could understand us... and so the shift to Swedish began.

Do you think that even the things with the language were in some way important...?

Mother: Of course! They could express their wishes and feelings – they couldn't do that when we didn't speak the same language. It was much deeper... how can I say this... the relationships went much deeper when we could speak the same language.

Father: And also understanding... it's a bridge to self-confidence and connection. Not only to be here, but also to be able to explain that I am here. We were using all possible ways, the whole time, when we were outside and at home – we talked about things, we gave them names and were pointing... We used music, we played with words, we added lyrics to music so they could see and learn those words, it was fun.

Yes... Were there any special moments that you remember that were very important when you crossed the imaginary line... or how should I say it... just, that were connected to your relationship at that time?

Mother: There were so many moments... hahaha...

Father: Just as I said before, when we found out that the children were ours, that was...

Mother: Yes, exactly, when we understood...

Father: And also when we came home. When the children saw, when they understood that those were their beds... And then also partly down there... because at first they didn't call us mummy and daddy, they called us aunt and uncle because... that's how they wanted it in the children's home, at least until we made the decision, that's what they told us. And then, when they asked us if we want to keep the children, we said yes of course, so... then it was okay and they could call us mummy and daddy. So when they started that, that was a big... thing. To be called mummy and daddy.

Of course. And that was also connected to the fact that you understood that you would keep the children, that they could stay with you?

Father: Yes, that was after they told them they could call us that now. And they started immediately.

What made you happy at the beginning, what made you especially happy?

Father: For me it was that we got three children, that we were a family.

Mother: Yes...

Father: That our journey was complete, that we saw that the children were doing well and everything was okay. It's that simple.

Mother: And then also that in the Czech Republic they hadn't learned a lot of things, to see their development. As it moved forward... that at first they couldn't do almost anything... until... and now they've...

Father: ...caught up.

Mother: Yes, they've caught up, they are very good sportsmen, all three of them, and they were sort of... well just the whole development. It's really beautiful, even today, when I look at it.

Was there anything you were worried about at first, and if yes, what was it?

Mother: Well, as I said at the beginning, the crazy screaming in the shower, they were so scared of almost everything... they were afraid of water, all three of them. And when we came home... I have a friend who is active in a swimming school and she said... 'Jesus, I'll make a small group just for them.' We had three children, and then there was another family that had children the same age as ours, so together it was five children. So we started a small swimming society, or group, and after that it wasn't a problem at all. It actually went really fast – they got used to the water quickly and now they can all swim. Just even these things are totally amazing.

Were there any worries, like, for example, that you wouldn't be able to deal with this type of problem?

Mother: Well, there were a lot of problems... basically everything was difficult for them at first...

Father: They had trouble with constructive games, they were screaming and fighting and destroying things...

Mother: Yes, they destroyed everything...

Father: Actually, they were always screaming and running around and around... and... before they learned that you can play with things... they started using their own imagination and their inner life started to develop... to see that was also beautiful.

Mother: Then when they started going to school and preschool and found new friends... that was also beautiful... At first we were a bit worried about it, but it went very well.

Do you mean you were worried that the children wouldn't be able to become a part of a group...or...?

Mother: Yes, exactly. That they would be behind other children, so... they would have problems with certain things, but...

Father: Yes, and how they would integrate into a group of children.

Mother: Yes, with the other children. Maybe they weren't... it's so hard...maybe they lacked...how can I say it... you could say that the children are very sociable, they make friends easily, they are open...

Father: Yes, what they were missing in their development, they are very...

Mother: ...sociable, yes hahaha!

Father: ...yes, they are very sociable. They can talk to anybody – in any case that's how it was at first. I'd say they weren't shy at all.

Was there something that surprised you at first, something that wasn't at all as you'd imagined it?

Father: Do you mean when we got home?

Yes.

Father: Well... well that was about their biological mother... her addiction... because our youngest had a lot of problems with studying, we were a bit shocked by that, how hard it is for her. She still has problems today. We had to study with her a lot, it took a whole year. It's a fairly unpleasant feeling – we tried so hard, several hours a day, and then the next day it was all gone. That was a bit... frustrating.

You probably weren't completely ready for it to be like that?

Father: No, we didn't expect it to be like this... The other two grasp things normally...

Mother: When the time came, it was clear that... or when they started learning the language, she wasn't as quick... that's when it started... we had no idea about this, because in the Czech Republic they didn't speak the same language.

And do you think... the differences between the children showed up only then, or what do you mean?

Mother: Yes, she has to fight more, she has to be a bigger fighter in life, to... she will need more help at school, and so on...

Father: That wasn't apparent until we spoke the same language.

Mother: Yes, because physically you cannot see anything.

What did you have to do, something special, some changes in behavior, or to adjust in some way?

Father: Oh... yes, we had to make over our entire life and adjust it to the children. We just had to turn everything upside down. From being the two of us and a dog, to having three children who need help with basically everything.

Mother: A lot of cooking and... hahaha. Doing laundry and so on...

Father: Yeah, yeah, you have to give it your all, all your knowledge. You are a parent, a teacher and...

Mother: Yes, everything in one person.

Father: ...and also a guard, you just have to be always ready. You have to sacrifice your time. But that was nothing new. We understood that.

Mother: And also, they were old enough... I don't know how long... maybe half a year. Karel was just supposed to start school, but we'd just moved, he was born before the end of the year, so he started after the new year as a preschooler, we didn't have a lot of time for it. We were on maternity leave for several years, about as long as people who have tiny babies.

Were you working part time... or did you cut your working hours compared to before you got the children?

Father: That was just at first, when I was home for four months, so that the children could learn the language and we could establish routines.

Mother: But you were working anyway... I guess you were working 75%... at first you were part time and then you worked from home a lot, because it's your own company... Karel was big enough, so he started as a preschooler, and then he was supposed to start first grade soon. The girls started kindergarten later and we saw that... they also needed it, they had fun, they wanted to be with other children. We tried to take them to an open kindergarten, so that they had friends. I don't know if we made some specific changes in our behaviour... not really.

Father: Well no, but we integrated.

Mother: That was more at the beginning when we were trying... eh... we found out that we aren't supposed to try to meet with others, we should try to keep... in order to form a connection... just be together more, as a family, and stay at home.

Yes, that's it. You should limit social situations...

Mother: Yes, exactly... so that there weren't too many people at home at first and so on. Grandma and grandpa obviously don't count... and we didn't have many people visiting at first.

Did the fact that you suddenly had three children in the family and didn't have as much time for each other have any effect on your partnership? What do you think?

Father: Well of course, just like all other parents. You go from a relationship of two people and suddenly you are a parent... it's a huge change.

Mother: At the same time, we had our habits, because we only had a dog and we liked to be outside in nature, so we just took the children with us, basically we kept doing the same things.

Father: But just Rut and I doing something together socially, that wasn't really possible at first.

Mother: Yes, that wasn't about the two of us, that happened once every half a year max.

Looking back from today's perspective...

Yes... but okay. I'm going to move on a bit. We spoke about this before, now it's been five years and maybe you already have some perspective. So my question now is, although I know I asked about this before, so you can answer briefly... How do you feel the process of adoption went, from your perspective? Was there something surprising or something that made you unsure?

Father: Do you mean in the Czech Republic?

Yes, in the Czech Republic. The time before you and the children moved, and you were visiting them in the children's home...? You can describe what it was like.

Father: Yes, the first three days we visited them in the children's home so they could get to know us, we played together and spent time together. After the first three days... we already had the accommodation set up, we took the children with us, we went by car the first time and looked at the house and the garden together...

Mother: Yes, that's what the first few days looked like... something that was a bit problematic... unfortunately we couldn't speak to the staff very well... we had the children on a small trip and when we were returning them to the home, the middle girl was crying. And we were thinking, Jesus, what's happening... but it was because she was scared that we were returning her.

Father: Yes, she thought that we didn't want her. That we were giving her back.

Mother: Yes, that was quite unpleasant...

Father: But after the three days... we took the children to live with us. And they'd explained that to them in the home and so they didn't have a problem with that.

And what do you think, could it have been done better somehow – the first time you spent together, when you were getting to know each other – could it have been organised differently?

Father: No, I think it was great, but as we said, we would have liked if they had explained to the children in the home what we were doing, and that they wouldn't just be left behind, that we would come back the next day, and so on. That was probably the most important thing – apart from that they organised it very well.

Mother: Yes, as we said, we would have liked to have more information about the children.

Yes, exactly, I can understand that – but I meant more the actual taking the children in. Was it like you thought: 'Jesus, so soon, it's too fast,' or 'It's taking such a long time before they give them to us,' or...?

Mother: No, three days were the right amount of time.

Father: They would definitely have made it longer if we'd asked, if we felt that we couldn't take them yet. They were very accommodating.

Mother: Yes, it was fine.

What do you think a person who wants to adopt a child and is going to pick them up should be prepared for?

Father: I'd say the language and accommodation. It's good to know some words, because they don't speak English over there. Because then you'd be reliant on an interpreter the whole time. It can't hurt to learn a few words. When we were outside with them and the children were running away, it was good to call for them to be careful, or to stop.

Mother: Yes, especially when it's a child who's a bit older. It's important. With a baby it doesn't matter.

Father: Yes.

And as far as accommodation is concerned, do you think it's necessary to find somewhere you can work together well, where you can live together?

Father: Yes, to find something similar to home. For me it made a huge difference. When they came to us at the hotel room where we were originally staying, it looked like they'd destroy it completely. It would never have worked there. It was a huge difference when we moved. It doesn't have to be anything too big, but just something that resembles a home. I can definitely recommend that.

And... now when you look back at the adoption, considering your experiences, would you do it again?

Mother: Yes, if we were given a child I would definitely do it again.

Father: Yes, and the whole process we went through was working very well. I think that they have it set up very well in the Czech Republic. For example, how to meet the child, and so on.

Mother: We didn't have to go back and forth, to travel there several times.

Now I have a very important question: Do you think that if it had been a very, very unpleasant experience, that you'd think for example: 'No, if I'd known about this, I would never have done it.' But you don't feel this way, you feel like...?

Father: We would, from our point of view, definitely do it again.

What was difficult or challenging, and how do you think you managed it? You've already mentioned the trouble the children had with daily routines, that they couldn't get used to an ordinary family life. And how do you think you managed this?

Father: I think we managed very well because Rut and I are different people. Rut has both her feet firmly on the ground and I am more kind of...

Mother: Well, I'm not sure I'd manage it as well... Henrik has spent all his life working in health care and looking after people similar to... I had huge support from him in every way, I felt very self-confident next to him...

Father: I would definitely not say that we are similar people. But I know how... people in crisis, people that need help... That's what I'd call it. I'd never worked with adopted children.

Mother: No... but... with similar needs, if I can say it like that.

Father: We really were a huge support for each other. That's what we're like. One compliments the other in everything, and that's an amazing feeling.

Is there something in the whole adoption process in the Czech Republic that you see as risky or unclear, that makes you feel unsure in some way?

Father: It was just as Rut said, you're sitting down waiting to be called to the judge and that makes you feel, as we've said before... and it can last several weeks. So I guess that. But other than that there's nothing dangerous in the whole process, just that you are frustrated, because you want...

Mother: It's difficult to be away from home. Primarily we wanted to be a family, but we were trying to make it happen in a completely foreign environment. It's hard.

Father: There is no set final date, not a day or week...

Mother: You long for your home, for your safe place, to... When it's a thing like that, of course.

Father: And then also your relatives and friends are asking, completely naturally, when are you coming back? and so on... but apart from that I think that it worked very well. Really.

Is there something you want to point out that would be better to do differently?

Father: No, I... we understand that you cannot set the date because the judge has to look at the case... we get that... So no, I think they're doing it very well. If we had had more information about the children, more kind of... yes, more personal, it would have been good, otherwise everything was fine.

Mother: It's always like that... the more information the better. But I don't have anything... I think it was done very professionally.

Father: Yes, and everybody was helping us, everybody from the interpreter to the lawyer and psychologist... everybody was really present as people. They weren't just professionals; they were also very capable.

Mother: We never felt that we were talking to office workers... we felt very good.

And then... what would you like to know if you were planning to adopt these children again?

Father: Well it's the same thing, we would like to know more about their personalities, their routines, about what they like, what they can do, and so on. Just so that we can take them in better, that's why. You tried to meet them halfway knowing nothing. If you had more information, it would be easier for everybody.

Do you have any recommendation for those in a situation similar to yours prior to adoption? Regardless of what we've already talked about, that you shouldn't be so naive... but is there any specific advice you think would be suitable...?

Father: Yes, as I've said, the language and the accommodation. Don't be surprised if your stay becomes several weeks longer than you were hoping for. That's the main thing. Other than that, it's just, go on that journey and 'enjoy the ride'. Go to some town and get to know each other. Don't just sit locked up in a room, take the child out. There are beautiful places there, it's a beautiful country.

Mother: Yes, definitely.

Try to use the time for something good?

Father: Yes, exactly! There is a lot to see. We were up in the mountains, it's called Beskydy, and we were hiking. It's fantastic.

Mother: Yes, I think you almost can't ask for a better country, for everything. Everybody was nice, even if they couldn't... when you couldn't communicate with them, but the locals and all those tiny villages, shops... everybody was trying to help us, when we couldn't find socks... haha... we didn't know what it's called...

Father: And it's also good to have a car there, you can maybe fly and then rent one...

Mother: Yes, it gives you amazing freedom.

Father: Yes, definitely. You can go anywhere, browse in malls, buy food at McDonald's, maybe just a drive through... it's up to you...

Mother: Yes, be mentally prepared, it's better to prepare for a longer waiting period and then be pleasantly surprised, than to hope you'll go back home tomorrow, which won't happen. It's just good to enjoy the moment. Don't be stressed out.

Father: It also doesn't hurt to pack a first aid kit. Because down there you can't communicate, and their things are called something else. They have totally different names for medication... Alvedon... hehe... that's good to take with you. Now I've gone off topic a bit...

Yes, but we have no limits!

Father: Well, it's good to have, just in case... the children can hurt themselves, they can get ill, you can get ill yourself, or injure yourself somehow...

Yes, these things happen.

Mother: Exactly.

How do you talk to your children about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

And now I'd like to ask how you talk about the adoption, the children's origin and the Czech Republic at home? Eh... we spoke about it a bit with Karel, but do you have something that would help explain to the children what they went through, why they are here... well, you know what I mean?

Father: Well, Karel doesn't talk about it much... he just says that he doesn't remember anything, but he does! We often watch the things we filmed on our iPad, we look at photos and so on... for example when we were in the mountains, or in that house... all of us together. We often look at it together...

Mother: All the children were old enough to remember... they know they don't come from Sweden, that they used to live in the Czech Republic and all that... that's all completely natural for us. It's not a shock to them that they are adopted, they've known about it the whole time, they know how they used to live. They were really interested in talking about the Czech Republic and explaining things, but mainly at the beginning...

Father: We haven't tried to suppress or deny it, it's not a secret. If they have questions, we answer them truthfully, as truthfully as we can. It's completely natural.

If I asked about some specific materials, so there's a film on the computer and photos, and then Karel was talking about some book...?

Father: Yes, exactly. They didn't have anything of their own. They didn't own anything. They could each take one toy they gave them in the children's home.

Mother: But it wasn't in their children's home, it was somewhere completely different. So they didn't have any personal belongings they could bring... from that home where they lived... for several years.

Father: Well those were toys that we bought them. As Rut said, one of the children got sick and we went to another children's home which is by a hospital, to see a doctor. There was somebody there who recognized the children and gave each of them a toy they could bring with them.

Mother: Well we don't have a lot of things... but there's the film we made.

Father: And then we also have the photos of the children when they were small, which we were given...

Mother: Yes, from the time they lived in the children's home, they took pictures of them, we have those. Nothing else.

And you've made them some diaries... for each child, a photo book...?

Mother: Yes, exactly. We made a collection of photos... a photo album, and each has their own...

Father: It's theirs.

Mother: So they each have their own memories. Julia, the youngest, has the most, because she's never lived with a family, she was in the children's home the whole time. They put her there right after birth so she has the most documentation, since she was a baby. The other two are missing the first few years of life...

Father: She was in the children's home for four years.

Mother: It was a long time.

Do you maintain any traditions, or something you found in the Czech Republic that you have at home, and it's a part of your lives, that you maybe celebrate... something special or...?

Father: No, not really. We celebrate the day we met for the first time, that time of year, and then the day we came home from the Czech Republic. And then only their birthday. But we don't have any dish or anything – we were cooking our own dishes there.

Mother: Sometimes when we are in Lidl, it often happens that they say: 'Wow, we used to eat this when we were in the Czech Republic!' and so we buy it. They remember it a bit, some specific biscuits and so on. But we don't celebrate any Czech holidays or anything.

How do you celebrate the day you came home?

Father: It varies. We do something special... we cook some good meal, and then we just celebrate the time we are together, so that everybody knows that it's been a year, two years, three years, four years, and now in September it will be five years since we all came home.

You do it simply, but you do it in various ways?

Father: Yes.

Mother: Yes, we talk about all those things, it's much more natural... on the day.

Father: And then, as Rut said, we are in the Czech families group on Facebook, and sometimes we meet up. We can talk about our experiences with the others there. And the children meet with other children adopted from the Czech Republic, and so they can remember their heritage in this way...

Exactly. How often do you meet?

Father: It's usually once a year.

Mother: Yes.

Father: And then there is also a BFA meeting once a year.

Do you as a family maintain contact with the biological roots of the children, in some way...?

Father: No, the father is unknown, and the mother lives on the edge of society. She doesn't have an ID, she doesn't work, she doesn't have a place of residence, nothing is known about her. And in the Czech Republic, a psychologist and also a lawyer from the Office told us that they don't recommend any contact with the family, that we should always first contact them, the Office. They told us that it would be dangerous for us, that they would try to blackmail us. They told us to be careful.

Has any of the children said they'd like to be in contact with somebody, or to find out more?

Father: No, unfortunately they don't show any interest in the Czech Republic, but we said that we would go back there in the near future. We'll go there, maybe look at the children's home and the village where we spent our time... and so on. That is interesting to them. Karel doesn't want to see the children's home, it's uncomfortable for him. Well, and we'll see... what it'll be like. They forgot the whole thing quite quickly, they immediately adapted to the current situation.

Mother: The youngest, she never met her mother, she doesn't remember anything...

Do you have a photo or anything...?

Father: No. We don't have anything like that. Karel remembers the most out of the children, he saw mummy and grandma. Although now he says that grandma has brown hair, but she had white hair the whole time.

Mother: Well, I don't know...

Father: That's it, and I don't know what is the truth.

Mother: I don't know... well, it looks like she wasn't interested at all... I think the mum visited them there once, in that whole time...that wasn't very much... they just weren't in contact with her. But I guess it's easier this way, they just don't remember anything and don't have any memories to think about.

What do you think about the fact that your children are of a different ethnicity than you? It's clear that they are different, and I think it's clear that they are of Romani origin...?

Father: Yes, that's true. But I never think about it.

Mother: No, me neither.

Father: They are my children, my family. I don't think about that at all.

It has no meaning to you?

Father: I know that in the moment they called me 'daddy' I erased everything else.

Mother: Yes, and it's nothing we ever think about. We think they are really beautiful.

Father: Yes, they are really beautiful! I don't think about it.

Mother: It's not something we think about.

Is there anything else you think I haven't asked you about? Something you'd like to add or...?

Father: No, we've already said everything. We've said too many things...

Ok, so thank you very much.

An interview with Aneta (16 years old)



Biological siblings Aneta (now sixteen) and Lucas (now ten), were adopted in 2005 and 2010, respectively. Both were one year old when they were adopted.

A long time ago you were born and lived in the Czech Republic. Can we talk about that for a while?

Do you have any information about your biological parents, or do you remember them?

Well not really.

You don't remember anything?

I know that I have several siblings, and I know mummy's name.

Do you remember anything from the time when you lived in the Czech Republic?

No, I was little.

How old were you when you came to Sweden?

I think I was one year old.

Then I understand that you don't remember anything. And how do you imagine your life when you were in the Czech Republic and in the children's home?

I don't think it was very good, I heard it was all really small there. Actually, I'm wrong, it was more of a big home maybe, but there weren't a lot of staff members, so I didn't have as much love as my little brother who lived in a small home.

Do you remember the first meeting with your parents?

No.

There are many questions here that you won't be able to answer, but I'll ask them anyway. If you don't remember, you can tell me how you imagine it when you think about it. So how do you imagine the first meeting?

I definitely didn't understand what was going to happen.

I understand, the next question is the same: Did you know that they were coming to see you?

No.

Do you think they told you that mummy and daddy were coming, even though you were so small? What do you think, how did they do it?

I think they probably told me they were coming.

The next is similar again: How was the time you spent together in the Czech Republic?

Oh, well, I don't remember that at all.

No, of course not, but do you imagine what it was like, when your parents came for you and you were together in the Czech Republic?

No.

You don't have to feel bad that you can't answer these questions, or that you don't imagine these things.

No, I guess if I was five or six then I'd remember.

Yes, that's it, you were very little, so it's totally normal.

And when you were in your new home...

The next question is also similar. How was the journey to Sweden, to your new home?

I think that I understood that something was going on, but I don't remember.

Do you maybe have any photos that you know from that journey?

Yes, I do, but they're not very good, dad had a bad camera.

Oh, but at least you have some idea about what it was like. Do you remember or do you think that you were afraid of anything?

Maybe I thought it was weird that I was leaving the children's home where I'd been since birth.

You think so.

We're also interested: what was the new home like?

I don't know, I guess I got used to it pretty quickly.

The next question is, how long was everything strange and new for you? I guess it was like that at the very beginning.

I don't know.

Same with the new language – you were so little so you didn't speak Czech, and Swedish was a new language for you. Do you remember anything?

I didn't talk at all, so I think it wasn't important.

When you came to your new home, with new parents, what was the best thing about it for you?

I don't remember.

What was the most difficult thing, what do you think, what might have been difficult?

Maybe the understanding and grasping where I was.

What do you think surprised you the most, do you think something surprised you?

No, I don't think so.

And then the next question: what was it like when you got a sibling?

Oh, you mean my little brother?

Yes, do you remember what it was like when he came to you?

I was happy, I was older and knew that he had the same mummy as me.

What was it like?

Well, I was only six, so I was happy.

I understand. And now the next question: did your parents' behavior towards you change when your brother came?

What do you mean?

Well, if their behaviour changed?

When I was very little, they were maybe more worried about me.

What is it like now, do they let you out more?

Yes.

And if you look back on it today...

When you think about your family now and how it used to be before, is there something you'd like to mention? Something like: 'It would have been cool if it was like this back then...?'

No, I don't think so.

Do you have any advice for someone who has new parents and is getting ready to go to a new home with them?

To accept everything and trust them, because they will be much better with a family and not like in the Czech Republic when they were living in a children's home.

Is there anything else you think the child should know?

A tough question.

If you remember anything, you can add it later.

Your parents have certainly talked to you about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic. Can we talk about this for a moment?

I'd like to ask you when and how you and your parents spoke about the fact that you come from the Czech Republic?

When?

Well, if you asked first, or if they told you?

No, when I asked.

Are you interested in the Czech Republic?

Yes.

How many times have you been in the Czech Republic since you were adopted?

Twice.

The last time was quite recently, in the summer?

Yes, I think so.

And the first time?

When we went for my little brother.

Would you like to go there again?

Yes.

Are you already planning a trip?

When I'm 18, I'll go there, I'll go to where the children's home is and where I was born, and also to Prague and Brno.

That's nice. Do you maintain any customs or celebrate any holidays from the Czech Republic at home?

We celebrate the day they picked me up and we call it Aneta Day and then we also have Lucas Day. We celebrate that every year.

Then there's the question if you're interested in the place you were born. You said you'd like to go there. Is it close to the children's home?

I think it's in the same town.

Is it important to you that you look different than your parents?

I look really similar to mummy, everybody says so, but mummy is Finnish and very pale and I'm quite dark. But even so everybody thinks that we even have the same hair colour. Daddy is a bit ginger and has freckles, and me too, so everybody thinks we're related.

That's nice, I also want to say that these are questions they sent us from the Czech Republic, so that's why I'm asking you. It often happens that adopted children are very similar to their parents.

Yes, me, when I was little, I was really similar to mummy. Everybody said that I was her girl.

So it doesn't matter. You never felt like you were different.

It was hard at kindergarten, when the children didn't understand – the boys were sometimes mean and told me mean things, when I couldn't speak Swedish well yet. The children thought I came from Syria and that I was an Arab, and that was annoying.

It was difficult when they thought that you were somebody different than who you really are.

But now I have a boyfriend from Syria and he looks a lot like me.

Do you talk to your friends about being adopted?

My teachers know about it, and so do the people in my life.

And how do you feel about it, is it unpleasant?

When I'm supposed to talk about it, it's fun, but then it becomes sensitive. There aren't many adopted people in my life, and sometimes they start asking me about the details and it's uncomfortable.

I get that. What kinds of questions do they ask?

Strange questions. Like, 'Can you feel it in your body that you're adopted?'

Very sensitive and personal.

Yes.

Do you talk to your parents about your biological parents?

No, they themselves don't know a lot either. They know I have a lot of siblings and they know mummy's name.

And you, do you think about it a lot, do you think about the siblings, and about mummy and daddy?

No. I'd like to find them, I've wanted that since I was a child.

Have you spoken about it with your parents?

Yes, and they think it's good, they accept it.

What would you like to know about your origin?

Well, for example, why did they give me up. Because I am of a Romani origin, in my original passport it says I am Roma, and I know that the Roma are poor, so I think that she's probably poor, and she gave up more children, she's very young. And she definitely has more children and older and younger children, and also in the ages between me and Lucas. Lucas and I are very similar.

Do you have any photos, books, or anything that reminds you of your origin? You said you have photos from the time they came for you. Is that right? Do you have anything to remind you of the children's home, or that reminds you where you used to live?

Yes, we have a few photos of me and a nanny from the children's home.

But you don't have any clothes or memorabilia?

No.

Is there something you'd like to know about the Czech Republic?

No, not about the country, but about the family.

Have you visited your children's home?

Yes, when we went for my little brother we visited there. And the lady who was showing us the rooms remembered me, but the lady who's in the photos with me didn't. She was really sorry about it at the time, when I was leaving.

And you remember this visit?

Yes.

Do you remember how you felt?

It was cool.

Is there something you'd like to say that's important for you?

No.

We are asking you these questions because we want to understand how an adopted person feels, to make things easier for them. It's interesting to find some things out. If you want to add anything, don't hesitate to call me. Thank you for the interview!

An interview with the parents

The interview was conducted with both parents. Unless stated otherwise, the mother was answering and the father agreed.

As applicants

What were you expecting when you applied for an intercountry adoption?

Firstly, we just wanted a child. We'd been trying for a long time. We tried artificial insemination, but nothing worked. We just really wanted a child.

Nils, do you have anything to add?

Father: No, I think the same thing, essentially. It's been fifteen, maybe sixteen years.

Mother: Yes, that's true, time flies.

What do you think, were your wishes fulfilled?

The most basic ones were fulfilled. We got a child and that was what we wanted. The fact that it was an intercountry adoption was because a national adoption, Swedish, essentially doesn't exist. So all adoptions are intercountry. We wanted a child and we got a child.

Maybe it will be the same answer as the previous one, but I'd like to ask, which expectations were appropriate, and which were incorrect? If somebody wants to apply for an intercountry adoption, what would you recommend?

Well, we spoke about the adoption a lot at home. We wished, since we were trying so hard to have a baby, that this alternative had occurred to us sooner. So that we wouldn't have had to undergo so many difficult medical procedures, just that there is another alternative. We could have skipped a lot of that. We could have adopted sooner. But our expectations and ideas as far as the adoption is concerned were all positive. We never thought that it was a mistake.

Were you worried that it might be difficult or hard?

We attended a preparation course where they focused on problems a lot, they told us about all kinds of things that can go wrong, what it looks like in different countries with health problems, or about difficult adoption cases, about problems with connecting, and then different problems as the children are growing up. Problems with a different skin color – well you know, all the other problems. So we of course felt weird, we were afraid that these problems would come. I was a bit afraid, we were thinking, what problems are we going to get? And then I thought, when we got Lucas five years ago, that it actually wasn't like that – he was healthy and the process went smoothly. Even making the connection went well.

That's good to hear. What was it like when you learned that you were chosen for that specific child?

It was an indescribable feeling. We'd been waiting for so long, so we were really happy. I locked myself at the toilet and cried.

Do you remember, Nils, how you felt when you found out you were chosen for a child?

Father: It was unbelievable. I was just dealing with an unpleasant customer and lots of people around when they called from the BFA, so I almost had a heart attack. They told me that in one town in the Czech Republic there is a small girl. I was looking out of the window, with 60 people around me who had no idea what was going on.

Travelling to visit the child and staying in the Czech Republic

What was the journey to the Czech Republic and the arrival at the Office in Brno like, if you still remember after all this time?

Our first journey wasn't to Brno. We went straight to the children's home. It was in May. We didn't have an interpreter, we got to the children's home on our own and were trying to communicate with some guy at the reception who didn't speak English. That was hard, we stayed there for three days and then went home, and we were supposed to come back in a month. At that point we had very little contact with the Office. Then when we went for Lucas, it was all very different. We went to Brno first, and it worked very well. Because we'd met the lawyer from the Office before at a summer meeting in Karlstad, we knew who we'd be dealing with. It was nice, they looked after us so well, it was different than with Aneta. They had also changed the whole process.

So when you came for your daughter it was a different process than when you went for your boy.

Yes, the second time was more pleasant, we had someone who was looking after us. The first time it was our personal thing and it was like an adventure, we didn't know anything at all, but now we had people who helped us and we had an interpreter. It was completely different.

How would you describe your feelings when you first saw your child?

Mother: It was beautiful, we were sitting at first and talking with the representatives of the children's home. Then Aneta came in, and it was a strange and amazing feeling, that this little girl was ours. It was unbelievable, and that's when I understood that it was true, she was beautiful, and I was swept by this amazing feeling of warmth.

Father: The first time we met I didn't really feel much. That came later, when I understood that it was her. All those feelings came when we were alone together.

And then after a few days you went home. And how long did you have to wait before you could return for the child?

About a month. It was terrible, not because we thought that she was not doing well in the children's home, but the feeling that we had to leave her. We felt it wasn't right, it was a mistake.

I can understand that - you'd already met and you felt it was your child. That it was a mistake that you had left her.

Mother: Yes, exactly.

Father: When we went for Lucas, the process was totally different. We went there and stayed for about 10 days.

Mother: I think that we went home on the eleventh day.

So you didn't have to leave him, you just took him home straight away.

Father: And also we had all the workers from Brno coming with us. There was a lawyer and a psychologist, an interpreter and everybody, because they wanted to see the children's home too.

Mother: When we saw Lucas for the first time, it was a kind of, 'Ooooooh, it's him,' it was just a completely different feeling, we just knew that he'd be coming home with us. We had Aneta with us, and so we had to look after her feelings too.

What do you remember from the children's home and from your stay in the Czech Republic? Is it something you talk about, you remember?

Mother: Just what it looked like in the children's homes, what kinds of toys the children had there, what they were eating. Aneta's children's home was more like an institution. The one Lucas was in was more pleasant, more homey. There was also a size difference. Aneta's home was huge, Lucas's was much smaller. What I remember is that there were lots of members of staff there and the children were doing well. They were focused on the topics of nutrition and activities, development and routines, everything was built on routines. And also the possibility for us to stay in the children's home, where they also looked after us. They were giving us food and everything was very carefully planned out. It was also well planned out the first time.

Father: Yes. The first time we didn't have an interpreter. We were staying in a flat and we could visit Aneta and play with her, and that was great.

What did you know before travelling to the Czech Republic, or was there something you didn't know - especially concerning the child?

We didn't know much. We knew when she'd been born, that she'd turned one just before we went to see her for the first time. All the information was basically just about the fact that she was healthy, and had slight problems with a cold, and often had a sore throat.

With Lucas it was similar, but he's Aneta's biological brother. So we had the same information about his origin and information about his health one year prior. And that he was healthy.

How did you make use of your previous experience? What was the most important piece of information that you'd received before the trip to the Czech Republic - about the child, but also other information?

Of course everything that you know about the child is important. Mostly it's about practical things. What size clothes and shoes they have, and all the rest, but also a bit about what you need to keep in mind from a medical perspective. We already had an idea of what the process would look like, so we could ignore that, we knew a lot about that in both cases. In both cases it was very valuable information.

What support and information did you get in the Czech Republic when you went there to pick up the children?

The first time it was an interview with the staff of the children's home, the director and a child psychologist, they helped us with all the practical things. They talked to us about Aneta and we could ask about everything, even her routines. They were telling us what it would all look like. We also wrote everything down, as far as I can remember. We were also supposed to write down questions, and a few days later they answered them. And we could ask the nurse. Then they told us what it would all look like. Well, and with Lucas, they actually told us everything beforehand in Brno, before we even went to the children's home. They told us we would go there, meet Lucas, then we might be able to take him the next day, if the staff think it's acceptable and sees that the process of making a connection has started, and that Lucas feels confident with us. Then there would be the

law side of things to take care of, and the Office in Brno would take care of all of that before letting us go home.

So you had good information.

Yes, we also got a phone number for the people from the Office in case we needed help with anything during our stay in the Czech Republic. Oh, and also a contact for the interpreter, the second time it was really well organised.

That sounds good. Then when you went home, how was the journey and the actual arrival home? What were you looking forward to, and what were you afraid of? I mean if there was anything.

Mother: First there was the flight, we were worried she'd be crying the whole time. But it was totally fine, she fell asleep and everything went well.

Father: Yes, that's it, what would be the reaction of a child who's never travelled anywhere far, and now has to just go on a journey with strangers. Then the plane and everything, she'll lose all her routines she was used to.

Mother: What will Aneta's reaction be like, and then the second time, Lucas's reactions. But both trips were very nice. It went very well with both children.

Did you fly there and back with both children?

Yes, and then we also drove a fair amount from Arlanda (*the airport*) home. We weren't really afraid of anything, just about how the children would take it.

When you were at home...

What were the first days after your arrival like?

With the first child it was about finding some routines. We were trying to stick very strictly to the routines she was used to in the children's home. Because we wrote everything down, for example, what kind of food she eats and then the times. After some time we relaxed a bit, when we could see it was working. She was a curious little girl, interested in everything. She wanted to do everything with us. So it was easy. With Lucas we were really looking forward to going home, we wanted to be a family of four and in peace. With a second child it's much easier.

I can understand that, that's completely natural. You know a bit about what it will look like. Do you remember when you felt settled as a family, when you knew that you belonged together?

With Aneta we were already a family during our second trip, when we picked her up. I knew that now it was all alright. With Lucas, it was like we already were a complete family and we just got a new member. He basically joined the family immediately.

More specifically, after being back home for a while, did you feel that you'd been a family right from the start, or do you remember that it happened after some time, when you were living together? When did you feel that you were firmly connected? Or did you feel like that right from the start?

For me it was right from the start, maybe because Aneta bonded with me right away. She was a bit careful around men. She was my little girl right from the start, but later she was more of a daddy's little girl, when she relaxed a bit. We were a family, but something was missing and she was that puzzle piece.

Nils, you said that with you it took a bit longer...

What happened was that I didn't feel it immediately, it took a bit of time, but all you had to do was relax a bit and then you see that yes, everything is as it should be. And also, right from the start, Aneta was very reliant on mummy, that also played a part. She wasn't accepting me at all, she always just wanted her mummy. With Lucas it was the same, he wanted his mummy. When mummy went to lie down with Lucas, I lay down next to her and she insisted on me staying. When mummy was not there, it was difficult before we settled into it...

Now the process of getting closer and getting to know each other. How important was language and what role did it play?

For us it wasn't important at all, our children weren't speaking yet. They understood language the way one-year-olds do, so it wasn't important. We entertained them with simple nursery rhymes and fairy tales and we

were singing with them a lot. So language was important. I think language is important for those who adopt older children. With our children their language developed quickly, they were calling us mum and dad after a few weeks.

Do you remember a key moment in the development of your relationship?

I can't say exactly when this happened, but an important moment was when the situation relaxed and they spontaneously came to us to cuddle. I think it happened very soon, it all settled down quickly and they understood who we were. With Aneta, she was our first child, and we were unsure and preoccupied about making her life with us good. There was a problem that lasted two or three years – she had this behavior that when she was falling asleep on her own, she was rocking herself back and forth to stay calm. Then when she stopped, when she couldn't fall asleep, instead of rocking she came to us. We thought that was amazing, we saw it was going in the right direction.

I can understand that. What made you happy at first?

Father: Well, almost everything. It was everything, and then also the fact that there was Lucas, that he was really with us now.

Was there something you were worried about at first, I mean problems in the relationship with the children?

Father: That was, I guess, with the rocking, and also comforting each other that Aneta hadn't said what she needed yet. We were working with that a lot.

Was there something you remember that surprised you?

Aneta was very outgoing and brave. We understood the reason and origin of this behaviour many years later, when we found out she has ADHD. We understood her personality, she wasn't timid or careful at all, she just jumped into everything head first. And we were also surprised that we were expecting some problems that never came. The ones we spoke about at the beginning.

Was there something you had to change, something you had to sacrifice?

No – no sacrifice, we just had to change our lifestyle when we became parents. I don't feel like I sacrificed anything at all; on the contrary, I was given much more. Everything just took its time.

How was your partnership affected when you got the children?

I think that it was happier, and we were certain that the terrible time when we couldn't have children was behind us. Suddenly we had children, and that was relaxing and pleasant. We got rid of that stress. It was stronger than that, everything clicked.

Another question: Did Aneta help you in some way when you were getting closer to Lucas? Was there a difference between Aneta and Lucas in the process of getting closer?

Yes, Aneta was the one seeking the first contact, and Lucas was very reserved with it. They have different personalities, but with Lucas, Aneta was the connecting bridge.

How old was Aneta when you went to get Lucas?

She was six.

Looking back from today's perspective...

Talking about the process of taking the child in, was there something surprising or unsettling for you? Please look at it from today's perspective.

Nothing like that. The children were very little. Aneta and Lucas were both one, and so there wasn't much to know, they were both healthy and we weren't surprised by anything. We weren't missing anything.

What would have been good to know before taking the child, before you traveled for the child? What would you have liked to be prepared for, and what information would you have liked to receive?

When you think about it in general, I guess it's that they sent us very little information from the Czech Republic. Often there was a medical report, that there was no drug abuse from the mother, otherwise nothing strange. Sometimes it may not be entirely true, but that's not the Office's fault, they can't know everything. But as we've heard from other families, there might be some drug abuse, and of course that can influence the children and their development. We also spoke to our Czech adoption group about alcoholism – in Romani culture there isn't a lot of alcohol drinking, it's more about using sedatives to stop, for example, feeling hungry and so on. We spoke about using medication, and these are sensitive questions. It's important to realise that this information might not be completely accurate. There are definitely some things that maybe the Office doesn't want to talk about, and the medical staff see the potential risk, but they don't inform you about it to make the child's adoption easier.²⁹ It's a difficult question.

The next question is whether you'd adopt again? Although you've actually already done it again.

You should never say never. We feel like we've done our bit, but maybe, if there is another biological sibling... Well, we are old now, I'm 43 and he's 45, we didn't want to get any more children, we're very happy with what we've got, but if it happens... you never know.

So when you look back on your adoption, there wasn't anything that scared you off, and you weren't afraid to do it again.

No, that's true, everything went well. The Office in the Czech Republic and all the people there are nice and friendly. Every time we meet, we hug, it's very informal and sweet.

Looking back, what challenges did you have to face, and how do you think you managed it?

The first thing was just becoming parents and getting a child, and also that they left us to our own devices, we had very little time, with Aneta it was just a couple of days. That was a challenge. Otherwise everything went well. When you finally decide to adopt, you know everything will be different. Even just getting a child and having to try a lot harder and think about connecting to each other, which you don't have to do with your own children.

Is there anything in the whole process that seemed risky or unclear to you? You've said before that you didn't have enough information.

Yes, especially about her origin, but nothing risky or unclear, no.

Is there anything else that should have been done differently?

When we were at that conference in May³⁰, we were very pleasantly surprised how they look at it. They informed us how to work with biological roots and what you have to think about. Especially that the children being adopted abroad need extra support. For in-country adoptions there is a completely different programme, the children can be in contact with their biological family.³¹ I don't mean to say we'd like to be in contact with the biological family, but at a certain age a child starts being interested in more information, and we don't know much. The offices know or can find out more, so I'd really like it if they provided this to the children. For example, some photos, because questions are coming up like, 'Am I similar to them or am I not similar to them? Why did they put me away?' and so on. These are difficult questions, and we, when we don't know anything, we can only speculate.

²⁹ The Office provides the applicants with all available information from the child's documentation - their medical, psychological and social reports, etc.

³⁰ The 'ÚMPOD JOURNEY TO THE FAMILY – Stories of intercountry adoption' conference took place in Brno on 15-16 May 2019. As a part of the conference, there was a panel discussion with adopted children and young adults, and a workshop with their parents.

³¹ In some countries there is the option of a so-called open adoption, when the adoptive family is in contact with the biological family.

What would you like to know if you were adopting a child again?

Maybe a little more about their origin and more about what options the children will have in the future, when they want to find out about their origin. When they are ready. Now I know that I can contact the Office and ask for help.

Do you have any recommendations for those in a situation similar to yours prior to adoption?

Firstly, don't be afraid to ask. There are new families joining all the time, it's good to join some shared communication channel. There are people you can trust, and there is always someone who can answer your questions. But also don't be afraid to ask in the Czech Republic, they are very helpful and will happily explain everything. I also recommend not thinking of the stay in the country as something unpleasant – just enjoy it, get to know the country, travel. It's very nice. When we were waiting for Lucas, we had a great time together, and we did lots of things with Aneta, she was six at the time. We rented a car, it wasn't cheap, but it was worth it. You can also use public transport, but it depends on where the children's home is. After the adoption, when you're home, keep coming back, make shorter trips. The Czech Republic isn't far, it's easy to get around, it's a very nice country, go and explore it. You don't have to make a big deal out of the trip.

How do you talk to your child about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

That sounds positive and makes sense. Now there is a question about talking to the child about being adopted from the Czech Republic. How do you talk to your children about being adopted from the Czech Republic?

These days we don't talk about it much anymore. We used to talk about it before. Now, for example, when there is an ice hockey match and the Czechs are there, we say it's their country. We also watch a lot of films and look at photos from the children's home and from the Czech Republic, and talk about it a lot. About the adoption, and why we adopted and so on – we want them to know that it's a part of them and they shouldn't feel uncomfortable. We talk about it with the children when they show interest in it. It's a very open and kind conversation. They find out from us what we know.

Do you have any materials that show that the children are adopted, like, for example, films and photos? Do you have anything else that reminds the children that they are from the Czech Republic?

We don't have anything like that. They both have their adoption box, they know it's from the Czech Republic. But we don't have anything that would mark the children as being from the Czech Republic, no flags or anything. They are our children, and they know they come from the Czech Republic, it's not necessary to mark them in some way because of that.

Did you research any information about Czech history or culture? Do you maintain any Czech traditions or do you celebrate any of their holidays? Do you go to the Czech Republic on holiday?

We don't know much about Czech culture, we were mainly looking up things about the Romani culture. It's difficult to find it all, we know more about the Romani history. In this way we aren't really very Czech, we don't celebrate any holidays, and we don't have any flags. In our defence I'll say that we also don't have any Swedish or Finnish flag at home either. We just do it our way.

We're only interested in how you do it, there is no good or bad answer. And we're also interested in whether you've been on holiday in the Czech Republic.

Well, actually, partly yes, when we went for Lucas, Aneta was six, and we approached it as a holiday. And then, when we were there in May for that conference, we stopped over in Prague. So now we're thinking that we have to go back. So far we haven't managed to. For us a holiday means the sun, swimming, and stuff like that... you can't really do that in the Czech Republic, but there are many other interesting and pretty things.

Do your children have any contact with their biological roots?

No, we don't know anything about them. They're not in any contact.

And would they like to be?

I think they would, partly maybe on Facebook. Lucas is only ten, he's not at that age yet. Sometimes he has some questions, but Aneta, who is 16, has a bigger need. She has questions, and she'd like to know how her mummy and siblings are doing.

What is or was the significance of your child having a different ethnicity?

None whatsoever. It's natural for us, but of course we are a bit worried that they'll meet somebody who will reproach them for it. So far it has worked fine. We haven't had any problems with appearances.

Is there anything else you'd like to add, or to say about your adoption and the whole process?

No, only maybe about the journey back, that you should have more information, about the fact that the parents are there and to learn something about them, maybe get their photo. When we came back because of Aneta, it was terrible, they didn't even want to let us into her section. We could only look through the window. In some children's homes it's wonderful, we've heard from other families who came back and had a fantastic welcome. We went there with Aneta and it wasn't pleasant at all. It's all very uneven, maybe it could be unified a bit more. The Office could help and give the families the possibility to come back. It would also be great to get more information about the cultural roots and origin of the children, but it's difficult to look it up.

Do you mean anything specific?

Well I don't know, maybe some advice, who you should ask for help. The Roma are all around the world, but I'd appreciate some Romani contact, where I could turn to with questions and get a complex idea. My children are of this origin, and I'd like to highlight the positive stuff. In the world all you hear about all the time is the negative stuff, and people have a negative attitude towards the Roma people, that's bad.

Yes, that's important, I get it.

And then I'd say that the conference which the Office organised was absolutely fantastic. Maybe I was expecting or hoping that there would be some contribution from the BFA, because they also have a lot to say about this. We don't go to the summer meetings anymore because our children are quite big. But even there, you could look at the questions of identity. More specifically.

Yes, that sounds good, it's important. Is there anything else or do you feel you've said everything you wanted to?

I'm good.

I'd just like to add what I've already told Aneta too, that if you remember anything or you want to add anything, get in touch, we'll be happy.

Okay.

Thank you!

Conclusion

Every book should have a conclusion – but in this publication we have tried to give as much space as possible to the people who have had personal experience with intercountry adoption. And that's why we'd like the last word to belong to them too. In addition to the interview we conducted with Rozárie in Italy, we received a letter from her. We're sharing it here exactly as she wrote it - in English. She would especially like to share it with the children who are going into intercountry adoption.

An authentic letter from Rozárie in Italy

Hi, I'm Rozarka, but my nickname is Ruggy, I'm 16. I was born in 2002, in the Czech Republic. I lived for three and a half years in a fantastic institution, always in Czech Republic. Then I was adopted by a fantastic family. Now I live in a city that is located in Italy. Here I have had many amazing experiences. I have practiced many sports including: swimming, beach tennis, and basketball. In this moment I don't practice any sport.

I discovered a beautiful world... my world, that of music. I love music. I have been taking singing lessons for two years. I did a lot of performances and recorded a song whose name is "Let Her Go". I attend the second year of the linguistic high school. I study French, English, Spanish and I studied Chinese for two years. I have many friends. I love going out with my friends, going to the cinema, going to sea and much more. I like it a lot and above all I am not afraid, I am not ashamed, to tell my friends that I come from another country. Adoption is a beautiful thing. It is an act of love. It is the most beautiful act of love a parent can make.

DO NOT BE AFRAID. DON'T BE ASHAMED. WE ARE SPECIAL IN OUR DIVERSITY!!!!

On the road to a new family – Stories of intercountry adoption

Editors: Ondřej Bouša, Alice Trávníková, Zuzana Senciová, Michaela Zdráhalová

Translation and proofreading: Radka Weberová, Joe Lennon

Graphic design and illustrations: Tomáš Smot Svoboda

Published in Brno

Publisher: The Office for International Legal Protection of Children

Published in March, 2020

Published within the project Rights and Participation of the Child at the Office for International Legal Protection of Children co-funded by the European Social Fund. Registration number: CZ.03.2.63/0.0/0.0/15_017/0003544.

ISBN 978-80-270-7623-9



On the road to a new family – Stories of intercountry adoption
Office for International Legal Protection of Children ©2020