

TRANSPLANTED ROOTS

The Jerusalem Post's CHARLES HOFFMAN learns something about 'what it's really like to be adopted.'

THE CONTRADICTIONS of pain and joy, love and rejection, mystery and normalcy that stalk adopted children and their families throughout their lives are indelibly stamped on them at the beginning of their relationship. There would be no children to bring joy and love to adoptive families if they had not been abandoned in desperation and sorrow by others. Hide this truth and it will reveal itself with a vengeance that neither the child nor his family expects or wants. Silence it and it will foster anxiety and deceit instead of love and trust. Participants at the International Congress on Adoption held recently in Eilat had a rare opportunity to communicate their own experiences and to hear others who have worked professionally or lived with adoption.

About 150 people from Israel and more than a dozen other countries took part in the six-day meeting. It was rare not only because it was the second event of its kind ever held, but mainly because of the professional and human barriers that were crossed in the deliberations, lectures and casual conversations that often continued late into the night.

In a surprising number of cases the professionals could speak also as adoptive parents, and the adoptees, ranging in age from 18 to 38, as people trained in psychology or social work. And there was a young Israeli who spoke as social worker, adoptee and adoptive father.

MOST OF THE social workers, gynecologists, academics and therapists at the congress aban-



doned professional jargon to grapple with the paradoxes of adoption in human terms: "Do you feel different from other children?" Sarah, an adoptee in her late 20s, was asked. "Yes we do," she replied.

"At times in our lives we are preoccupied with the great mystery of that faceless, female figure who looms in our fantasies: the woman

who bore us. Who is she, what is she? Why did she abandon me? When I was young I thought, 'What did I do to her to make her leave me? Will she ever come to get me?' When I grew older, I asked, 'What did she do to me?'" Several other adoptees also recalled such fantasies—but always of the biological mother, never the father. Asked

about their feelings towards their biological father, they merely shrugged to show indifference.

The biological mother can become the object of a real search in countries like Israel and Britain which allow access to files on natural parents and the circumstances of the adoption. Most adopted adults need to know about their biological origins, said a Scottish social worker, Alexina McWhinnie, but relatively few insist on actually tracking down their parents.

"I both wanted and didn't want to know about my biological parents," said Michal, who is in her late 30s. "I finally decided that I had to know when I was about to have children of my own. I had to have some idea of what their physical characteristics and medical problems might be. I have dealt with doctors, though, who have got quite annoyed and impatient with me when I couldn't produce a family medical history for their records."

"It's important," added Sarah, "to know who you are and what you are biologically. But my identity, my roots? These are with my family."

Adopted children often imagine their biological mother as a prostitute, alcoholic, or some other type of sociopath, and dread discovering the truth. Many open the file anyway, but few find what one man in his late 20s found. He is still attempting to cope with the shock that he was a foundling, and that nothing whatsoever is known about his natural parents.

The bonds between adoptive parents and their children are tested

early and often due to the paradoxical circumstances of their shared fate. There is a tendency to blame many problems that arise between children and parents on the adoptive bond, when they actually may have little to do with it.

THE MOST basic test, though, is keeping the bond strong despite the strains and misunderstandings caused by opening Pandora's box and telling the child that he is adopted.

Everyone — professionals, parents and adoptees — agreed that children must be told, preferably at an early age. Most adoptees said they could not remember exactly when they were told. "It's something I always knew," said one, "but I do remember that it made me feel special because no one else I knew was adopted."

One young man was still visibly upset by the fact that he had learned of his adopted origins only two years before, by chance. "Why didn't they tell me? Maybe they didn't know when to tell, or let it slip by until it was too late. Maybe they were afraid to hurt me."

"Was it wrong not to tell?" he was asked. He hesitated and equivocated, resenting the trauma caused him but still unable to blame them. At the time, the strain was too much, and he ran away from home. Now he is more or less reconciled with his parents.

WHY ARE PARENTS afraid to tell?

"They, too, fear abandonment," said David Kirk, a Canadian sociologist who has four adopted children. "Telling the child makes

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the parents vulnerable. The child may accuse them of having stolen them from their 'real' parents; the parents fear that the child will transfer its affection to the birth parents that they imagine in their fantasies.

"Some parents think they can say something about it once and that's it. No. Learning that he was abandoned by his parents creates a hurt in the child, and over the years he learns more about what it means to be an unwed mother, or a prostitute. Adoptees have to cope with the realization of many unpleasant facts. Parents must be constantly ready to listen, to explain, to risk repeatedly bringing difficult issues to the surface."

It is no wonder that most parents do not want to know about their child's natural parents. When a child is old enough to open the file, the adoptees stressed, the parents must realize that he is not rejecting them, only searching for a few missing pieces of the puzzle that is his self.

THE PARENTS' deepest wish is to have a normal family life based on trust, love and openness. But to tell means to release all the hurts and fears that may turn out to be too difficult to handle.

"When does this labelling of my child as 'adopted' stop?" asked an anguished Israeli parent. "When will he be simply 'my child'? And why on earth would I want to con-

stantly rub it in his face by joining adoptive families' groups?"

A social worker replied coolly that it is unrealistic to expect or want the relationship to be normal.

"You professionals are removed from reality," shot back another adoptive parent. "You're always dealing with problems, so you always see things as problems."

"We're not usually like this, dredging up our fantasies and preoccupied with our being different," said an adoptee who had kept quiet until she felt she had to assert her own and the others' normalcy.

Protestations of normalcy aside, they were there with those who had never shared the mystery but were none the less just as absorbed by it.

SOME OF THE foreign participants, particularly those from the U.S., Canada and Britain, brought into the open what Israeli adoption statistics have indicated for some time. It is the end of the era of "white babies for nice, middle-class couples," as British expert Tony Hall put it. There are fewer babies for adoption because abortion is more readily available and because more young women, even teenagers, feel that to give up their babies is a "cop-out."

In Israel today, there are 1,500 couples waiting to adopt a child; only 140 infants and 40 older children were adopted last year. Ten years ago, about 80 per cent of

the couples who applied to the Adoption Service received a child, while today only about 40 per cent do so. Most are not rejected, but give up because of the long wait, which is about five years.

At the same time, some 12,000 children remain in foster care or institutions because their parents have neglected or abandoned them, but resist suggestions or pressures to let the children be adopted. Only last year the law was changed to enable the courts to declare a child adoptable despite the opposition of the parents. But only 300 of the couples now waiting are willing to accept an older child.

THE HEAD OF the Adoption Service, Aviva Lion, is concerned about the fate of the thousands of children destined to grow up in institutions, many of which can't give them the love or even the attention they need to become full human beings. But so far, she says, the courts don't even have guidelines to determine when a child is neglected, hence adoptable.

There is hardly any waiting time in Israel for couples who want to adopt an older child, or one euphemistically tagged as having "special needs" — that is, handicapped, retarded, or emotionally disturbed.

Taking an older child, though, means taking a partially formed human being, with a distinct appearance, a personality and a

memory.

An American family therapist, Claudia Jewett, cautioned that with older children, both parents and children must find a way to bridge their fantasies about the "ideal parent who will come for me," or "the ideal child that awaits us." Adoption counsellors, said Jewett, have to watch out for parents with the "Shirley Temple syndrome," who expect a beautiful, well-behaved four-year-old girl. Much counselling and screening is necessary with both parents and adoptees when dealing with older children.

Jewett is something of an "expert" — she herself has 10 children, seven of them adopted as older children, and one of whom is Jewish.

How does she manage?

"The older children take care of the younger ones, and all the children take care of my husband," is her pert reply.

THE TREND towards adopting older children and those "with special needs" has led professionals abroad to reassess their notion of what "good adoptive parents" are. The smiling, middle-class couple with no visible defects or blemishes may be too normal for some cases. The best parents to cope with a handicapped child may be those who have the same disability, or who already have a child with the same problem.

A couple in Canada who had

three biological children, decided to adopt three others, two of them without arms and legs. And last year they applied to adopt a "sibling group" of five. Did that make them "suitable parents" or candidates for the nut house? The social worker took the risk, approved the application, and today they are considered an exemplary family.

ONE OF THE aspects of the conference which struck some of the foreign experts and local critic Eliezer Jaffe, was the extent to which adoption workers here were moved by the depth of feeling expressed by adoptees and adoptive parents. In one session they sat on the edge of their chairs for two hours in a crowded, stuffy room while the adoptees tried to tell them "what it's really like" to be adopted.

If we try to analyze the professionals' reaction, we come up with the critical conclusion that the adoption service in this country deals mainly with finding the right parents for infants and children. What happens after the court seals the relationship — how parents and children grow together and face the paradoxes of their shared fate — is largely beyond their experience.

But if we take off our analytic blinkers, we see professionals earnestly trying to penetrate some of the human mysteries that usually come to them as case-histories in textbooks. And who can cavil about that?