

■ Parental Child Abduction – A Personal Story

Konstanze Welz

“... belonging is biology, and disconnection destroys our health. Trauma is disconnecting, and that impacts every system in our body.”

(Winfrey & Perry, 2021)

Introduction

A few years ago, I had just finished my training as a mediator when I found myself googling ‘intercultural family mediation’. As a woman raised in a bi-cultural family with a painful early childhood history of parents dragging their children across the world in the aftermath of their separation, I wanted to specialize in this form of mediation. I could not believe my eyes when I came across the International Mediation Centre for Family Conflict and Child Abduction (MiKK). There was an organization specialized in parental child abduction in Germany? How could I possibly not have heard of them earlier? My Indian father had abducted my brother and me to India at a very young age and we were returned to Germany to stay with my German mother by an Indian court order a few years later. All my life I had lived with this dark family history thinking that what had happened in our family was such a unique experience that unless someone shared a similar one, it could not be understood by anyone. And here was this organization that had expertise in exactly this field. I knew immediately that I too wanted to become engaged in this kind of work and so reached out to them.

Since then, I have shared my personal experiences with child abduction professionals, have trained to be a mediator with MiKK, as well as a trauma recovery coach helping families in similar situations. This is the first time I am sharing my very personal experiences with a wider audience. I am doing this with the intention of giving abducted children a voice and to bolster the case that parental abduction is a cause of developmental trauma with severe long-term consequences for the abducted children. My hope is that by learning more about the effects of abduction for children, families in dispute will seek help and reach out to mediators, family therapists and coaches specialized in this field, not only in the best interest of their children, but as I strongly believe, in their best interest too.

Though my younger brother and I have always been very close, I intentionally leave him out in my reflections. As in all families, siblings experience the same childhood in different ways and his relationship and experiences with both our parents are very different from mine.

1. What Happened

1.1 The Events Surrounding the Abduction

My parents met at the beginning of their medical studies in Germany. They both had big dreams. My father had run away from home at the age of 18 because he saw no future for himself in his village in Kerala, in South India. His father wanted to keep him on the family farm, but he dreamed of one day going to America and becoming successful and wealthy there. My mother also had exotic dreams. She saw herself as a doctor working in a developing country like India or Africa, helping people in need. She met my father only a short time after he had arrived in Germany as a student from a developing country, and helped him get along with his studies. Later, I often thought that their dreams could not have been more incompatible. One dreamed of success and wealth, the other of social engagement in a poor country. And yet, the two quickly became friends and then a couple soon after. When my mother was pregnant with me towards the end of their studies, my parents got married and moved into the house of my German grandmother, who was to take care of the baby while the two of them worked.

Arguments between them apparently started very soon. Many of them were most likely due to cross-cultural misunderstandings. My father often said later that his upbringing in a very traditional family in rural India had not prepared him for this situation. He was now married to a woman who in no way corresponded to his understanding of marriage; who loved her job and had no intention of staying at home to care for child and husband. The arguments escalated and after an especially ugly fight he found himself kicked out of their home. My mother had changed the locks while he was at work. Soon after my mother found out that she was pregnant again. By this time, my father had already looked for another job in a different city. As he told me later, he was so ashamed that his marriage had failed and that he had been put out on the street by his wife. Much later both my parents told me about how my father doubted whether the child was really his and had secretly gone to the clinic after my mother had given birth to find out. But the baby looked very Indian and was clearly his son. My mother filed for

divorce, but he refused. However, an arrangement was made through the courts for a right of visitation. Every Tuesday afternoon he was allowed to pick up his little daughter and once a month his baby son.

On one of these Tuesdays, the day after Christmas 1966, he did not bring the children back to my mother in the evening. She immediately notified the police and the next day learned from Lufthansa that her husband had been on board one of their flights from Frankfurt to New Delhi with two small children. At the time I was 2 ½ years old, my brother 10 months. It was not difficult for my father to leave the country with us. We children were Indian citizens and registered in his passport. In India, my father flew on with us to Cochin in Kerala, and from there by taxi to his parents' house. He had not informed them in advance, but just showed up unannounced at the door with a toddler at his hand and a baby in his arms. From then on, we lived with my Indian grandparents and the extended Indian family. When I asked my father many years later how he explained to me that my mother had been left behind, he told me that he did not remember, but that to his biggest surprise I had not asked about my mother once. He added that he did not remember noticing any signs of sadness or distress in me and concluded that I did not miss my mother at all. There are only a few photos from that time. They show my brother and I with family members and children from the neighborhood. When I saw them many years later, I could not recognize myself at all in that little, very Indian-looking girl. I knew too little about that time in India. Those early childhood years lay too much in the dark.

My mother came to Kerala a year later accompanied by her brother. She hired a local lawyer, tracked down my father's whereabouts, and one day stood before him unannounced: in a hospital room, as it happened, because he had broken his leg shortly before. We children were with the grandparents. Just a few days later, my father was served with a writ of habeas corpus through the Kerala High Court and was ordered to appear with us children. His broken leg was no excuse. This was the first time we had seen my mother again since leaving Germany. My uncle captured this situation on camera and in these photos I see my brother, not yet two years old, on the arm of my Indian grandmother. And I am in those images from the courthouse too: shy, and probably therefore clowning around a bit. Later my mother often broke out in tears when she recalled that moment of seeing her children again for the first time in more than a year. She was heartbroken that we did not recognize her and did not speak a word of German anymore. As an adult, I often reacted to these recollections of hers with anger and asked her what she had expected after leaving her children alone for more than a year. I asked her reproachfully why she had not come earlier. After one year we had of course become Indian children and

the only language we spoke and understood was Malayalam, the national language of Kerala.

In an effort to build support for my mother's court case, her Indian lawyer sought to disconnect my brother and I from our father and grandparents. This lawyer used his good contacts to arrange our admission to a private boarding school called St Teresa's Convent in Ernakulam, which was run by Catholic Sisters. The court ordered that we were to be taken to this convent the same day and my father was allowed to visit us only once a week. This time it took place on Thursdays and only under the supervision of the Sisters. My grandparent's house was several hours drive from Ernakulam. We were able to see them only very rarely.

We settled in at St Teresa's Convent. I still have memories of that time. Mostly of the visits from my father which I enjoyed a lot. He always brought us candies or ice cream. The sisters were very kind to us and as the children from Germany we enjoyed a special status. During that time I attended the convent's preschool and we both learned English.

In the spring of 1969, my mother came back to India to try and take us with her. By this time, my parents had been divorced through the German court system which had granted her custody of the children upon our return to Germany. The court in Kerala did take account of this ruling, noting that the welfare of the children would be best served within the education system of a highly developed country like Germany. But under Indian law, the father ultimately had custody. A few years ago, I happened to find the court's ruling online in its entirety, without names redacted. At no point is the term abduction found.

1.2 Back in Germany

Nonetheless, within days my mother had left India with her children and flown back to Germany.

I once asked my father to describe to me how we said goodbye to each other, and he told me that there had been no goodbye and no explaining from his side. The trial had received a lot of press attention in Kerala: an Indian doctor kidnapping his children from Germany and a German mother demanding their return. Nothing like this had happened in Kerala before. Photos of us were on the front pages of local and also national newspapers. Having lost this high profile court battle, my father feared being seen as a loser in front of the media gathered outside. So he stayed in the car, only rolling down the window to wave at us as we drove away in the cab with my mother. Later I often felt that the return to Germany was the real

abduction. At two years old, I was too small to grasp what was happening to us. At almost five, I was a girl who felt at home in India and had a very close bond with her father. I was never asked. If I had been, I probably would have pleaded to stay. Even as an adult, I often wondered how my life would have turned out if the court had decided differently and we had grown up in India. It was not until many years later, when I found the court's decision online, that I learned it was only preliminary, and stipulated that my mother appear in court with us every two years for a follow-up. The court wanted to check if we were really doing well in Germany so it could revise the decision if necessary. My mother traveled with us to India for the first appointment after two years. My father excused himself by telegram at very short notice and did not come. This is what turned the preliminary order into a final one. There were no further trips to India.

I have very few memories of the time after our return to Germany. One of my oldest is having to take a bath every evening. We were not used to bathtubs in India, and I did not enjoy my mother washing me in it. My grandmother once said that it felt to her as if my mother wanted to wash off not only the dirt of the day, but everything Indian. That was a good way of describing how I felt in the first years in Germany. It seemed as if my mother wanted to have her children back the way we were before the abduction. I was no longer allowed to be an Indian girl, but was to become a German child as quickly as possible. Soon we attended a German kindergarten, then a German elementary school, after a year's delay since my German language skills still showed gaps in the school enrolment test. By second grade, our Indian surname was changed to my mother's maiden name and we became German citizens. We had no contact with my father or my Indian grandparents. And no photos or stories kept their memories alive. With no one to share my recollections of childhood in India with except my little brother, they gradually disappeared from my conscious memory. In the beginning, my brother and I still spoke Malayalam to each other, but after some time we forgot the language. And at some point, the childhood years in India felt unreal, as if they had never existed. What remained was a big black hole, the feeling of being disconnected not only from India, my father, and my Indian grandparents, but also from a part of me. It was a feeling of not being whole.

The fact that I had no contact with my father intensified a feeling of foreignness and a lack of belonging. I did not look German nor was I socialized as such. I tried very hard to fit in by learning everything as quickly as possible. When someone asked me about my Indian heritage, I felt very uncomfortable. Not only had I lost touch with my Indian heritage, but I was also unsure of what I was allowed or not allowed to say. At home, I learned early to avoid any mention of that part of my history to my mother

who always reacted extremely emotionally, bursting into tears. From that I knew my father must have done something bad that did not happen in other families. I was very ashamed of it. And at the same time, I missed my father very much and had a deep longing for him that I knew I had to hide. If my Indian past was ever mentioned, it was only to my grandmother.

The situation at home remained difficult. My mother seemed very unhappy and frustrated. There was a lot of tension between my grandmother and her. But we children also lived in constant fear of her unpredictable emotional outbursts. One wrong word was enough to cause a tantrum. We were constantly on our guard, trying to do everything right so as not to incur her anger. Today it is difficult for me to assess the extent to which my mother's psychological state was a consequence of the abduction, or old unresolved issues from her own childhood. At the time, however, I was convinced that it was all due to the fact that my father had taken us to India. Again and again I heard the story of how painful everything had been for her, how much she had missed her children and fought for us. My mother's unhappiness took up a lot of space in our family. There was no room for recognising my pain and my needs. I desperately tried to make my mother happy by fulfilling her expectations as best I could. I had good grades in school, played an instrument, took ballet and riding lessons. I was kind and polite, an easy and compliant child. I did everything I could to be as inconspicuous as possible and not offer any surface for attack. On the outside, my life looked good. We seemed to have everything and I seemed to be a happy girl. But my inner world looked very different. I felt sad, alone and above all very helpless, at the mercy of a situation I could not change. No one followed up on us and asked if we were really okay. And who could I have approached and talked to? Who would have understood this difficult situation? A father who kidnapped his children and a mother who had fought for us, but with whom we were very unhappy. Moreover, I was much too ashamed to confide in anyone. I had confidence only in my diary, whose pages I regularly tore up and destroyed out of caution.

Many years later, my mother told me that she too had a big black hole. She too had felt abandoned as a child by her mother in the aftermath of World War II, but never sought therapeutic help. As a child I have always sensed her black hole but believed that it had been caused by her children being taken away from her and that my father was the culprit. With my mother being unhappy I felt even more guilty for missing my father.

Once, my father's second wife, who's family happened to be from the same town in Germany, came to visit them. When this news reached my mother, she made sure that there was always someone right there to pick us up from school each day, obviously still fearful that we could be abducted again.

This fear also haunted me in my dreams. I remember a recurring one in which we were walking with my grandmother on a dyke, a slight precipice on either side. I noticed that she kept looking around. In the dream, I held her hand tightly and also paid attention to my little brother doing the same. It was the fear that someone could take us away. In many dreams I saw myself next to a precipice, balancing carefully so as not to fall. Actually, that was how I felt about life. The security in my life felt very fragile, the abyss always being right next to me.

1.3 Contact With the Father

When I was 11 or 12 years old, my father came to visit. We had not seen him since we returned from India about 7 years earlier. He had left soon after the trial and moved to Kenya. In the many years since we had last seen him, we had only received a few letters and very rarely. I remember only one, which included a package with presents from Africa. To the best of my recollection, we had not spoken on the phone in all those years. Looking back, I had once asked my father why he had broken off contact with us and never visited us in Germany. He explained to me that after the Keralan court verdict he had been so devastated and desperate at having lost his children that he had to suppress the thought of us and cut us off in order to build a new life for himself.

In the meantime, he was living in Texas in the US where he had remarried and had a little daughter. Before he flew back to America, he and my mother agreed that we would visit him in the summer.

After that, we spent almost every summer in Texas. Over the years, I developed a very close relationship with my father. After I graduated from high school, he wrote me a long letter asking me to go to college in the US, so that we could spend more time together. I did not want to study in America, but I still have the letter today. In all those years we never talked about our childhood, the abduction, and our time together in India. But I never asked any questions either. I did not have any questions then. I was still in survival mode with everything related to the abduction firmly encapsulated in my black hole.

In my mid-twenties, during a break between studies, we traveled through India together with my father and also spent some time with the Indian family in Kerala. We had not seen each other for twenty years. Everything felt foreign. The country, the language, the house that had been my early childhood home, and also the family itself. My grandmother cried when she realized that we no longer spoke a single word of Malayalam. She would often hold my hand affectionately as if to let me know how many warm

memories she had of us. But we no longer shared a common language to talk about the time we spent together. This journey to India brought no light to the early years of my childhood.

1.4 Life Goes On

I completed my studies, started working, got married and became a mother. When my marriage fell apart, I did not take it as a disaster. Life went on. I had an interesting job, traveled a lot, and had additional support on offer for my son when I was away or busy with my work. It was exhausting, but I functioned perfectly well, as I always had, demanding of myself that I manage everything. It was one of my son's kindergarten teachers who observed that he often became impatient and angry when he did not get something right the first time. She asked me if perhaps I was a perfectionist. I remember this situation well because it was the first time I was confronted with this behavior in myself. The teacher opened my eyes for me to see in my son what I had never seen in myself. The child who had to be perfect to avoid conflict at home had become a perfectionist as an adult, passing on her perfectionism to the next generation.

The black hole had never disappeared. On the contrary. Unlike in my childhood, I now perceived it consciously and could also name it. It sucked in a lot of energy, which I then lacked in other parts of my life. I was constantly exhausted, yet at night I could not sleep. As that sleeplessness became more permanent, I started therapy. It was helpful in many ways, but we did not talk about my childhood. Years later I learned from the same therapist that she had been aware that I had experienced trauma as a child, but was afraid to touch it and open Pandora's box. Except for my insomnia-inducing black hole, I was continuing to function well.

1.5 Illness

Until the day my body stopped me. I had been feeling numbness in my legs for quite some time, but had successfully ignored it because life was particularly demanding on me at the time. When the numbness developed into paralysis, I was hospitalized. The MRI showed an acute and extensive inflammation of the nerves in the spinal cord. My legs were by then almost completely numb and paralyzed. The diagnosis was serious – a myelitis transversa, a neuro-degenerative, non-curable disease. After excluding that it may have been caused by a virus, my doctors diagnosed it as an autoimmune disease. At the time I did not know anything about autoimmune diseases. But just the notion of 'auto', meaning that my own

immune system was turning against me, shocked me. While I was given high doses of cortisol as a team of neurologists consulted at my bedside to explore which therapy might slow the spread of paralysis, I leaned back into the pillow, exhausted. Wasn't this feeling of being paralyzed all too familiar to me? Had I not, deep down, always felt a sense of paralysis? Could it be that this inner feeling had manifested in my body for me to become aware of it? These were the questions that ran through my mind during those days. My doctors were not very optimistic, fearing that even regular doses of cortisol might not keep the disease under control. But I knew that I would not spend the rest of my life in a wheelchair. I knew that there was more to heal than this disease. I knew that these were just the physical symptoms of something much deeper that traced back to the events of my early childhood. I continued the steroid treatment but looked into alternative ways of healing at the same time.

"Please stand up, close your eyes, and put yourself back in the moment when your father walked into his parent's house with you and you met your Indian family for the first time. Imagine yourself being taken away from everything familiar into a world where everything was unknown and different. Where people looked different and spoke a language that you did not understand. How do you think a young child reacts in that moment?". This was the question my homeopathic therapist asked me in one of our first sessions. I stood up, froze in shock, and held my breath. According to the therapist, this moment of shock and the holding of breath associated with it revealed unresolved issues that were the cause of this paralysis. Something to work on.

We worked intensively together, alongside sessions with a breath therapist and some Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR). After one year there were no more signs of inflammation in the MRI. My treating neurologists spoke of a medical miracle. But I knew that my healing was not a miracle.

2. Parental Child Abduction as Developmental Trauma

Over the last few years, I have dived deep into the research on developmental trauma, especially in the field of neuroscience. I was fascinated by what I learned from the books and trainings with some of the leading trauma experts, like Bessel van der Kolk, Peter Levine, Daniel Siegel, and Bruce Perry. It felt like finding the missing pieces of a huge jigsaw puzzle. Piece by piece, many of my behaviors and physical symptoms started to make sense and I became increasingly aware that I was not alone, that this was in fact a common experience for many childhood trauma survivors.

Neuroscience looks at the body-mind connection and gives explanations for how psychological trauma can indeed cause physical disease later in life.

In the following section I would like to broaden out from my personal experiences and look at some of the long-term consequences of parental abduction through the lens of developmental trauma, defined as trauma that occurs in early childhood.

Trauma can come in many forms. Here, I will work with a very general definition as often used by Bessel van der Kolk's and Daniel Siegel. According to them, trauma is an experience that overwhelms our nervous system's capacity to cope. Being taken away from a parent and all that has been familiar is certainly a situation a young child cannot cope with.

2.1 Freeze – A Child's Response to Inescapable Threat

Along with the better-known FIGHT and FLIGHT responses, the FREEZE response is one of our nervous system's pre-programmed responses to a threatening situation.

In a fraction of a second, the brain reacts to the perception of threat and sets processes in motion that prepare the body to fight or flight from a danger. If the threat is inescapable, the body will freeze. A child facing a threatening situation from a parent usually has no way to escape. In a situation of shock, just as my homeopath so skillfully observed, their acute bodily reactions will be to hold their breath and go into freeze.

If the threatening situation lasts and the child feels trapped and helpless, without parents offering emotional support and protection, she has no choice but to give up all resistance. The acute freeze response becomes then a long-term freeze response, which is referred to as the FAWN or COLLAPSE response.

“Trauma occurs when we are intensely frightened and are either physically restrained or perceive that we are trapped. We freeze in paralysis and/or collapse in overwhelming helplessness” (Levine & Maté, 2010).

Over time an unresolved freeze response often manifests in the body with physical symptoms such as shallow breathing, muscle tension, numbness, and an inner sense of paralysis.

2.2 The Fawn Response

The need for attachment is inherent in all of us and for a young child attachment to her parents is a matter of survival that she will preserve

at any cost. It is not difficult to imagine the immense inner conflict an abduction creates for a child. She finds herself in the hands, and at the mercy, of a parent who has taken her away from her other parent and the life she has been familiar with. Without any contact to the left behind parent, she will most likely feel abandoned to survive this frightening situation on her own. The child has to find survival strategies to save the attachment with the sole parent who abducted her.

These strategies can be multifaceted depending on the particular circumstances, from being an easy child who does not want to burden a preoccupied parent, to a premature one who takes care of her parent's emotional needs, or becomes compliant and submissive in an attempt to pacify a parent she is afraid of and maintain a sense of safety. What all the coping mechanisms in the fawn response have in common is that the child's focus is on the parent, which means that she is disconnecting from her authentic self and her needs for the sake of the attachment. Constantly walking on eggshells and being on guard creates chronic emotional stress that results in an over-sensitized nervous system. Hidden underneath the compliant behavior lies all the loneliness, sadness and anger of the helpless child, and often a deep sense of shame and unworthiness. Those around her may not be aware of this dark side in a seemingly easy child. Our brain has an interesting way of helping us survive threatening situations and chronic emotional stress. We dissociate by numbing out and splitting off the frightening experiences from our awareness. This is a protective survival mechanism. Dissociation is on a spectrum. It can range from extensive daydreaming to escape difficult circumstances to pathological levels about which we will talk later. Without being aware of it, the child will carry whichever coping mechanisms she developed to survive her childhood challenges into adulthood. Over time they have become like a default setting for her life. But what was once adaptive and essential for survival often becomes maladaptive later in life.

The compliant and easy child might become an adult who suppresses her needs to please others. The premature, parentified adult child might later continue to neglect her own needs to help others. The child whose boundaries were not respected by her parents might have a hard time saying no and have others respect her boundaries. A child who had to repress her emotions to please her parents might be susceptible to abusive relationships in adulthood. The helpless child who has internalized helplessness might stay trapped in difficult situations later in life, not realizing that there is escape. And the child who tried hard to earn her parent's love by being a perfect child might later become a perfectionist. These are just a few scenarios that I am sure many emotionally abused children can relate to.

Many of these children and adults continue to function quite well in their everyday lives, but it takes a lot of strength to keep the inner conflicts in check. That strength and energy is then less present in everyday life. Peter Levine describes this as ‘functional freeze’.

“While traumatized humans don’t actually remain physically paralyzed, they do get lost in a kind of anxious fog, a chronic partial shutdown, dissociation, lingering depression, and numbness. Many are able to earn a living and/or raise a family in a kind of “FUNCTIONAL FREEZE”... They carry their burden with diminished energy in an uphill struggle to survive, despite their symptoms“ (Levine & Maté, 2010).

It is important to point out here that childhood trauma can have far more severe effects and depending on the circumstances these children may later be vulnerable to a host of unhealthy behaviours, like substance addiction, addictive behaviors, depression, or even suicidal ideation.

Something that all children who faced chronic emotional stress carry into adulthood is an over sensitized nervous system. Constantly being on guard and walking on eggshells to comply to a parent’s moods or to detect danger overstimulates the brain and body’s threat response. Later in life, small evocative cues that the person’s nervous system relates to the past trauma can reactivate the stress response. This can be an emotional memory, a smell or a sound and it usually happens without awareness.

Our brain’s threat response system is located in the lower sub-cortical, which includes sub-conscious parts of the brain. When the stress response is activated, the pre-frontal cortex which is the cognitive part of our brain, is shut down. This immediate overriding of the thinking part of the brain might have ensured our ancestors’ survival in a world where the threat came from a saber-toothed tiger. Today, the source of danger is more often an emotional one requiring different cognitive tools. Evolution has not yet caught up.

2.3 Developmental Attachment

A child develops a secure attachment when it feels seen, soothed and safe with her primary caregivers. Daniel Siegel calls these the four S’s of secure attachment (Siegel, 2010). Children with secure attachment will develop an inner sense of security that will carry them through life. But even with suboptimal attachment experiences where parents are dismissive, inconsistent, or intrusive in their caregiving – often because of leftover issues from their own childhood –, good enough parenting can still mean children will adapt in an organized way, that allows them to be functional later in life.

But a child that has been abducted by a parent is unlikely to develop an organized form of attachment, especially if the child is afraid of the abducting parent and feels abandoned by the left behind parent. These children are likely to develop what is called disorganized attachment. If a parent's behavior is frightening the child, the child experiences a biological paradox. Her brain's threat response system tells her to run away from the danger, while at the same time her brain's attachment circuits tell her to run to her parent for protection. The child is facing an inescapable dilemma which Daniel Siegel calls "fear without solution" (Siegel, 2010). The very person who is supposed to protect a child is her source of terror. For a young and dependent child not to lose her attachment figure is a matter of survival. In conflict between safety and attachment, the attachment circuit will overrun the threat response. The brain's protective mechanism of dissociation will help the child survive this acute or chronic threat. To preserve the attachment the child's brain will split off the frightening experiences with the parent. But adapting to a frightening parent comes with a high cost for the developing mind of the child. The dissociated traumatic experiences are there and will be stored as subconscious memories that go on to affect the nervous system. Later in life they will intrude and trouble that person's life without her being able to make sense of them and relate them to her traumatizing past experiences.

Disorganized attachment often leads to pathological degrees of dissociation and a fragmented sense of self. It can cause feelings of depersonalization, of things being unreal in one's life, of blockages of memory and numbness to feelings of one's body. If the abuse has been severe and happened at a young age, the child may later develop dissociative identity disorder, a rare but very severe mental health condition where a person has two or more separate identities.

We are wired for connection and the attachment behavior we have developed with our early caregivers form the neural pathways that act as a blueprint for our close attachments later in life. We subconsciously choose what matches our early attachment experiences and if we were not lucky to have had a secure attachment with our primary caregivers, we will most likely have attachment issues in our romantic relationships later in life and pass on our attachment difficulties to our children. But the good news is that attachment difficulties, including disorganized attachment, are very susceptible to therapy and change. With therapeutic help we can become aware of our attachment patterns, make sense of our past, change and outgrow our old patterns to develop what Daniel Siegel calls an 'earned secure attachment' (Siegel, 2010).

2.4 Childhood Trauma and Auto-immune Disease

Apart from the many behavioral long-term consequences of early abuse, neglect, or loss there are also physical consequences. There is fascinating ongoing research about a connection between childhood trauma and physical disease, often auto-immune, later in life. Autoimmune diseases occur when the immune system mistakenly attacks healthy cells and tissues in the body, leading to chronic inflammation and damage. Chronic inflammation is also associated with neurodegenerative diseases. In a person with an over-sensitized stress response the slightest evocative cues can activate the brain's threat response and prepare the body for fight or flight by releasing neurotransmitters. The resulting constant flooding of the body with stress hormones, like cortisol and adrenaline, can alter the immune functioning of the immune system. There is growing evidence to suggest that childhood trauma can increase the risk of developing autoimmune diseases later in life.

2.5 Why Did Homeopathy, Breathing, EMDR Help?

The connection between emotional stress and the body's threat response explains why therapies like homeopathy, breathing or EMDR are so effective in trauma healing. When I asked my homeopath about her therapeutic approach to auto-immune disease she explained that "in homeopathic treatment the patient is led through the totality of his complaints on a physical and mental level into his INNER EXPERIENCE of the disease."

Breath practice can help us to regulate an over sensitized nervous system. Breathing is one of the few body functions under both conscious and autonomic control. By slowing down our breath, we can access and alter the functioning of the Autonomous Nervous System (ANS).

EMDR is a very effective method to recall old subconsciously held memories in a protected space and under the supervision of a therapist. Recalling these memories provides the opportunity to process them and their associated feelings in the present so that they do not overwhelm our nervous system as implicit memories. EMDR has allowed me to go back to the implicit emotional memories of the little girl who was sent back to Germany and feel all the anger and powerlessness of not having been asked and involved in this decision.

3. Making Sense of the Past

“Why did you do what you did?”, I asked my father after I had recovered from my illness. He was visiting from Texas, and we were sitting across the table in a seaside restaurant in Italy. His eyes filled with tears, and it took him a few minutes before he said that he had been waiting for this question all his life. Now that I had finally asked, he did not know what to say. I assured him that my question was not meant to be an accusation, but motivated by the need to understand what had happened to us in those early years. He could not speak, but before he returned to the US, he promised me that I would get an answer. About a year later he sent me a thick manuscript in which he answered many of my questions. The images and stories of my childhood years in India began to come flooding back. His manuscript also gave me very valuable insight into his emotional state before the abduction, his despair about his broken marriage, his fear of losing his children, his helplessness as a foreigner and his immense anger at my mother.

For my mother, too, I had an uncomfortable question. I wanted to know why she had waited a whole year before she came to India. Had she not missed her children, imagined how abandoned we must have felt? Like my father, she too became very emotional and told me that she had felt very helpless, that she had of course missed us tremendously and had written many letters to us while we were away. Unfortunately, she had never mailed them and instead destroyed them once we had been returned. I wish she had kept them.

3.1 Healing the Wounds

The long-term effects of parental child abduction are very complex and multi-faceted. At the core is disconnection. An abducted child becomes disconnected from a parent, her left behind family, her home, friends, culture, language and ultimately from her inner self. It is her strategy to survive. My personal journey to heal the physical and emotional wounds of the past has taken me years. But on this journey, I have met wonderful therapists who have taught me that trauma can be healed. I have developed more of an understanding of both my parents, and become part of a small support group of women with whom I share the experience of abduction. I have also met very engaged professionals working in the field of parental child abduction. All this has filled the black hole, given me a sense of wholeness that I have never had before and released a considerable amount of blocked energy in me. That is energy that I am now dedicating to the cause of parental child abduction.

4. Concluding Thoughts

Our abduction happened many years before the 1980 Hague Convention was implemented and a lot has changed since then. Parents in dispute now have the possibility to involve specially trained mediators to find the best solution for their children.

But from my own experiences I believe that a lot more could be done both to prevent child abductions and support children and their families that have been through them.

1. There should be more awareness about the severe long-term consequences of parental child abduction for both the children and the whole family. This alone might prevent an abduction.
2. Abducted children should be empowered by giving them a voice during the legal proceedings and in mediation. Not being involved in a decision that again changes their lives in a fundamental way can deepen the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that they have already experienced after the abduction. The chapter: The Voice of the Child in International Family Mediation in this book offers further detailed information on this topic.
3. After reunification, abducted children and their families need professional support to adjust to a situation that is new for all of them. This support should be institutionalized by building a team of mediators, therapists, and family coaches with special training in this field. And the service should be easily accessible to both the children and parents.
4. There should be an institutionalized monitoring system to make sure that abducted children feel safe and well in their reunified families. Supporting children to stay in touch with the other parent, their culture and language prevents children from losing this part of their identity. Without proper support, the trauma of abduction may just be reinforced by feeling left to themselves again.

When my father was given the opportunity to speak at a MiKK training a few years ago, it was with a choked voice and tears in his eyes that he expressed his deepest sorrow for the harm he had done to his children. He also pondered on whether knowledge of a cross-border-family-mediation service, perhaps with the presence of one Indian practitioner aware of his culture, could have helped prevent him from abducting his children. It had never been his plan to return to India. But without any professional support, his anger, frustration, and feelings of helplessness as a foreigner found no other outlet.

In her 2014 study on the long-term effects of parental child abduction Professor Marilyn Freeman states that “parents involved in family law disputes need to know about the legal and socio-legal aspects of child abduction. Most parents want to do the right thing for their children and, although that is a subjective determination, knowledge about the effects of abduction may well affect the decisions parents make. They are decision makers. They have a choice” (Freeman, 2014).

I am concluding this article with the hope that sharing my personal experiences and thoughts might be a small contribution to raise more awareness for the trauma of parental child abduction and help parents make good choices for their children.

5. References

- Freeman, M. (2014). *International Child Abduction: The Long-term Effects* (p. 37). International Centre for Family Law, Policy and Practice.
- Levine, P. A., & Maté, G. (2010). In *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (1st edition, pp. 48, 52). North Atlantic Books.
- Siegel, D. J. (2010). In *Mindsight: The New Science of Personal Transformation* (p. 166 ff., 185, 188). Bantam.
- van der Kolk, B. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (1st edition). Viking.
- Winfrey, O., & Perry, B. D. (2021). In *What Happened to You?: Conversations on Trauma, Resilience, and Healing* (1st edition, p. 137). Flatiron Books: An Oprah Book.