

The gap in his life

For decades, thousands of foreign adopted children have been placed with new parents in Europe using shady methods. Like Robbert Blokland, who came to the Netherlands from Haiti at the age of three and never stopped missing his birth mother.

Sometimes, when he felt lonely and his twin brother Steven was already asleep, Robbert would stand at the skylight of their shared nursery, look up at the night sky and wonder how his biological mother was doing in Haiti. He imagined her face and wished for nothing more than to meet her in person. He hoped that all the negative thoughts and the constant feeling that he didn't quite fit into Dutch society would then fade away.

Robbert Blokland is now 36 years old. He has no memory of his biological mother. He was three when he and his brother boarded a plane in Port-au-Prince, accompanied by staff from a Belgian mediation organization. The Pan Am flight from the Haitian capital took the twins via Miami to Brussels. There, Hilda and Dick Blokland were waiting for the two children. Robbert and his brother grew up believing they had been abandoned by their biological parents. The women from the placement organization told their Dutch adoptive parents that the children had been found on the street. Malnourished and abandoned.

Robbert is one of 40,000 children who have been placed with Dutch couples from abroad since the 1960s. They came from countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Haiti. Many couples were looking for foreign adoptive children, because hardly any Dutch children were still available for adoption. The situation was similar in other European countries. A global system was created. With foreign adoption, childless couples could fulfill their dream of having their own family and at the same time, they believed, free orphans from poverty. But for some time now there have been doubts about this beautiful narrative. Over the past two years, a commission of experts has been investigating the role of the Dutch government in intercountry adoption. It found that the process was riddled with structural abuse. Falsified birth certificates, human trafficking, children taken away from their birth parents under false promises: there is much to suggest that such illegal practices have long been commonplace in the international intercountry adoption system. Sometimes it was probably a case of misunderstood charity, sometimes simply greed. Two years ago, an investigation by the Zurich University of Applied Sciences revealed that children from "baby farms" in Sri Lanka were being transferred to Switzerland. In Sweden, too, a commission is to question the role of the government. According to official figures, slightly more than 20,000 children have been adopted from abroad in Germany since the 1960s. The number of unreported cases is probably higher, since it was permitted until recently to adopt children privately, without a placement organization, without control by the youth welfare offices.

Robbert Blokland is sitting at the dining table of a nondescript row house in the small Dutch town of Zwijndrecht, a few kilometers south of Rotterdam, where he grew up. He has tied his black dreadlocks into a braid. He points to a picture that shows him and his brother a few days after their arrival in the Netherlands. They are wearing green and blue sweaters and laughing. "We were doing really well at first," Robbert says. The twins shared a nursery and a close circle of friends. Robbert was in third grade when his lightheartedness began to fade. Together with his mother, he had made a booklet about Haiti for a presentation. When he gave his presentation to his classmates, he felt ashamed: "It was the first time I realized I was different," he says. His life story had gaps, but his classmates' did not.

In the conservative Christian neighborhood where Bloklands lived, Robbert and his brother were the target of racial hostility. "You're black because you eat shit," the neighborhood kids

would shout after them, the adoptive mother recalls. Robbert's twin Steven gained respect with his fists. "My brother was my protector," Robbert says. And Steven was his confidant. When they lay in bed at night, they talked a lot about their birth mother. Robbert's mood began to fluctuate more and more. During the day, he would laugh and play tag on the nearby dike; in the evening, he would crouch unhappily in his room. At night, he was tormented by nightmares. He told his parents nothing about all this. "Only once, his mother Hilda remembers, Robbert burst out: "I didn't choose to come here," he accused her, "it was your decision!"

The establishment of the investigation commission was preceded by decades of struggle in the Netherlands. As early as the 1980s and 1990s, there were newspaper articles, documentaries and experts pointing out problems in the international adoption system. They were ignored. The report states: The commission investigated the period from 1967 to 1998, talking to more than 190 victims, experts and former officials. Then it reached a clear verdict: the interests of the Dutch adoptive parents had taken precedence over the welfare of the foreign children. The government looked the other way when placement organizations falsified documents and pressured poor parents to relinquish their children.

Although there is now an international convention for the placement of children, abuse cannot be ruled out even now, the commission emphasizes. In response to the report, the Dutch government apologized to the victims and put a stop to foreign adoptions for the time being.

At the age of ten, Robbert suddenly started acting strangely. At night, he bit the edges of his blanket and pushed his classmates. The class teacher recommended that the parents seek professional help. Robbert was treated by a psychotherapist for three years. What their son was struggling with, the Bloklands did not learn. "If I told you, you wouldn't be able to sleep at night," the therapist told her at the time, the mother recalls. Robbert finds it difficult to explain exactly what was bothering him. At one point, he describes it this way, "I felt like I didn't have a real foundation." Everywhere he went, he had to explain himself and explain his family situation. Sometimes at soccer games, he would deliberately not listen to his parents' calls so that the opposing players would not see that he had white parents. And then there was the constant longing to meet his birth mother.

Researchers in Germany are also looking into the well-being of adopted children. In the meantime, studies have shown that they have an increased risk of developing psychological problems. "The loss of their biological parents fills young people with deep pain and can have a traumatizing effect," explains psychologist Irmela Wiemann from Weinbach near Giessen. She is a proven expert on adoption issues. Additional stress is caused by the fear of not being loved enough by the adoptive parents as a non-birth child and not being able to meet their expectations. International adoptions are particularly challenging because the children also have to cope with the change of worlds.

Unlike in the Netherlands, in Germany only organizations that were licensed by the state were allowed to place children from abroad. Melanie Kleintz from Wesel on the northern edge of the Ruhr region was herself adopted from Peru as a supposed orphan. She later found out that her biological parents were still alive and gave her up for adoption in exchange for money. Today, the 42-year-old social worker counsels foreign adoptees. In 2014, Kleintz founded the Facebook group "Adoptees from around the world. Many German adoptees, unlike Dutch adoptees, are not aware of how the adoption came about," says Kleintz. They are afraid of a possible break with the adoptive parents and are therefore

reluctant to talk about the past. The public is also not as aware of the issue in Germany as in the Netherlands.

When Robbert and Steven were 14 years old, they and their adoptive sister Nadia, who had also come to the Blokland family from Haiti two years after the twins, learned that their parents wanted to separate. From then on, their Dutch family ties were also broken. They lived alternately one week with their father and one week with their mother. On Sundays, they ate dinner together. "I hated that fake family happiness," Robbert says. After graduating from school, he had a hard time finding his way in life. He drank and partied a lot. He quickly dropped out of a tourism training program. He briefly considered joining the army, but after a year he switched back to a vocational college.

When Robbert gestures with his arms while speaking, you can see tattoos on his right upper arm. Just below the shoulder, he has had the names of his biological parents engraved: Dieula Laguerre and Dieumes Belony. They were on the adoption certificate Robbert got from his parents when he was an adult. On the inside of his arm is written: "L'union fait la force- Unity is strength". Since 1990, the very successful program "Sporloos" has been running on Dutch television, in which the presenters try to track down missing family members. Although he was plagued by feelings of guilt toward his adoptive parents, Robbert approached the editors twice in the hope that they could help him find his birth mother. But he received negative responses. "I gave up after that," he says. He found new hope at the end of 2018 when his sister sent him a link to a documentary. In it, a team of reporters accompanies Dutchman Judy Aubrain on a visit to a Port-au-Prince children's home from which he was adopted many years ago.

Later in the film, Judy goes to the village of Jacmel. There he takes DNA samples from the villagers. In interviews, they tell how their children were taken away from them. Robbert was shocked. He was born in that village, according to his birth certificate. He immediately got Judy's number and called him. A few weeks later, Robbert received a DNA kit. If his birth mother had also given a swab as part of Judy's operation, they could indeed find each other again. Robbert also showed the video to his adoptive parents. For the first time, he told them about his identity problems. When Robbert's mother watched the documentary, she cried. She lay awake for nights. "I kept thinking about the mother who didn't see her children grow up," Hilda says. Even as a young woman, she knew she wanted to adopt a child from abroad, Robbert's mother says. Regardless of whether it would work out with her own children. "We wanted to help an orphan, give him a better education, all that sort of thing," says Hilda. But like this? She didn't think it was possible. The organization made a trustworthy impression. The placement fee for the twins was only about 5,400 guilders, the equivalent of about 2,500 euros, far less than comparable organizations. The fact that she and her husband didn't even travel to Haiti at the time to meet the children didn't seem strange to her. Today, Hilda would advise families against adopting a child from abroad. She thinks it's good that the government has put a freeze on adoption.

Three weeks after Robbert sent in his DNA swab, he got an email: A match had been found for him. Robbert immediately went to the website, a kind of social network for people looking for their relatives. The match was one of Robbert's biological sisters. He clicked on her profile and saw his birth mother's name: Dieula Laguerre. "I almost had a heart attack because, yes, I have it tattooed on my arm," Robbert says hope was building in him. Perhaps he would soon be able to talk to his mother. Judy Aubrain, together with the village head of Jacmel, organized a video phone call between Robbert and his family. Just before the call, Robbert's cell phone rang. It was Judy. He wanted to tell him something: "Your mother died

15 years ago, you won't be able to call her. Robbert was sitting at work when he received the message. He slumped and began to cry. Twenty years of desperate searching burst out of him. "My biggest dream was to meet my birth mother," he says, "that was my mission in life. "During their first phone call, Robbert and his sister waved their hands and made faces. Robbert speaks only rudimentary school French, his sister mainly the Haitian national language, Creole. "Still, we were both very happy," Robbert recalls. Two hours later, his sister called again. Now Robbert also saw his father, his other siblings and his grandfather on his cell phone. Only his mother was missing. In the days that followed, Robbert's family told him their version of the adoption story. In the time after his birth, nuns regularly came to Jacmel. They offered families living in great poverty to take care of their children for a certain period of time. Robbert's parents accepted the offer. They hoped that they would soon be able to take the children back. In the meantime, they were promised, they could visit their sons. However, the staff at the orphanage kept coming up with new reasons why exactly that was not possible. One day, their twins were suddenly gone, his father told him.

However, they would never have given their sons up for adoption. But his family did not answer all the questions that were burning on Robbert's mind. He wanted to know how his mother died 15 years ago and where she was buried. Only after repeated inquiries did he get answers. Dieula Laguerre died of abdominal cramps. Apparently there is also a grave. A week and a half after the first contact, his sisters asked him for money. This was another reason why Robbert found it difficult to establish real trust with his Haitian family. A planned trip to Haiti has so far failed due to the Corona pandemic. In 1993, an international set of rules for intercountry adoptions was created for the first time, in the Netherlands of all places: the Hague Convention. While the Netherlands transposed the treaty into national law as early as 1998, Germany needed until 2002. But the Hague Convention relies on trust. It provides for the creation of central adoption offices in the countries of origin and in the receiving countries, which provide each other with information about the child to be adopted and the adoptive parents. The problem is that even European authorities continue to have only a limited insight into the work in the country of origin. Robbert Blokland is still struggling with the consequences of his adoption. He recently had himself put on a psychotherapist's waiting list and had to interrupt the conversation for a moment. His wife has come home with their two children, the boys are two and three years old. They are tiredly toddling towards their father. One of them has a slight cold. Robbert lifts him up, places him on the kitchen counter and dribbles cough syrup onto a spoon. He has always wanted children of his own, he says, people who are inseparable from him in the flesh. Unlike his adoptive parents. He does not want to be misunderstood, he loves his children very much, but he does not feel the sense of security that he had hoped for from them. And yet he is happy that his children will know where they come from.