

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

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Penny Mackison always knew that she was adopted.
There was no choice about that really.
Penny grew up in a small town in country Victoria
where everyone knew everything about everybody,
particularly her family.
Penny had been curious about her birth family as a child,
but it wasn't until she became a mother herself
that Penny felt the need to make connection
with the woman who had given birth to her.
Over the next 20 years they established a relationship.
Penny met her half-siblings and had a phone call
with her natural father before he passed away.
But Penny could never understand
why she didn't look like anyone in her natural family.
And then a DNA test that Penny did when she was 50
really confused her.
It turned out that Penny hadn't found her biological mother after all.
She had been accidentally swapped with another baby
in a Melbourne hospital in the 1960s.
Penny's incredible story is featured in this season
of the SBS program Every Family Has a Secret.
Hi Penny.
Hi Sarah.
Why was it that your adopted parents had no choice
but to be transparent with you
about how you came into their family?
Because that wasn't always the case in the 1960s.
No, it certainly wasn't.
And I think if they'd had a choice
they would have also been secretive about that.
But we lived in a very small community
in the Bucking District, Bucking South.
And my adoptive parents operated the local post office
and telephone exchange, which was a 24-hour service.
And people in the community were dropping in all the time.
So every day, multiple times, lots of people.
So people would have noticed.
So they couldn't actually conceal that they had adopted children.
How did your parents talk to you about your adoption
when you were young?
Well, we, well both my brother and I,
we can't remember not knowing that we were adopted.
We were told from such a young age.

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So it was talked about as a matter of fact thing.

Oh, you were adopted.

But there wasn't a lot more information forthcoming really because they said that they didn't really know much about our backgrounds. In my case, the social worker who handed me over at the hospital, at the Queen Victoria Hospital, simply said that my mother was very young, that she was at school when she got pregnant, that she had me and then went back to school to continue her education and that she came from the inner north of Melbourne.

Do you remember wanting to know more or was that just, that was enough at the time? Well, that was all I was going to get at the time.

But I never ruled out.

Mum would regularly, though not often, but regularly ask if I thought I might search in the future for my mother, my natural mother.

And I was very honest.

I said, I'm not sure.

I wouldn't rule it out because I was always curious.

So it was something that was always there.

I didn't have a burning passion to do it as a child, but I was always curious.

You moved from this little town to the big smoke to Melbourne to go to university and study social work.

Was the fact that you had this firsthand experience of being adopted part of what drew you to that path, do you think?

Yes, definitely.

And feeling, well, feeling a lot of gratitude for having such a good childhood and good parents and feeling because of the role modelling that my adoptive parents had shown that I would like to give back to the community, but was also an element of, hopefully, helping women who might find themselves in the situation that my natural mother did, offering options hoping so that she wouldn't have to feel forced to give up her child.

You got married when you were in your mid-20s and had your son.

Is that when you first looked into getting more information about your natural parents?

Yes, it was the year we got married in 1989.

I felt like I at least needed to have some medical information.

So, yes, I applied for my adoption records.

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And was that fairly straightforward, that process, Penny?

Yes, yes, it was although there was a wait at the time because the adoption act that allowed this access to records had only been passed in 1984.

It came into effect in 1986

and there was a long waiting list for people wanting to access their records.

And what did you do with that information at that point?

Well, when I got it, I, well, I obviously read it very closely and some of it was a bit surprising.

I wasn't surprised that there was no father on my original birth certificate,

but I'd always sort of thought that because mum and dad had said

all the social worker told them that my mum came from the inner north of Melbourne,

I sort of had a thought in my head,

well, maybe she's got some European background.

But when I saw that her name was very Anglo, Anglo Celtic,

I thought, oh, okay, I wasn't expecting that.

So then I focused on trying to get my medical records

and I contacted the hospital,

but the Queen Vic had not long merged with Monash Health

and they just sort of followed me off and said,

oh, your records from 1963 when you were born

would have been purged when the hospitals merged.

So, you know, you're not going to have them.

So I didn't even put in a formal application

because I was sort of, you know,

led to believe that there were no records from the hospital.

You didn't attempt to make contact with your natural mother at that point,

but what happened, Penny, that made you reach for those records again?

We had a second pregnancy.

So my first, our first son was born in 1995

and our second pregnancy was twins

and they were born very prematurely at 22 weeks and five days

at the beginning of 1997

and that was, you know, the most devastating thing that had ever happened to me.

And I got very depressed.

I felt like I'd lost my way,

didn't know who I was, what I was doing here

and just really felt the need to ground myself

and connect with my natural mother

and sort of rebuild my identity really.

So how did you go about getting in touch in that place of grief, I guess,

with the woman who was on your records from the hospital?

Well, Vanish, the organisation formerly known as the Victorian Adoption Network for Information and Self-Help,

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they were very skilled at assisting people
and searching and help provide support through groups, support groups
and I went to them knowing, well, as a social worker I knew about them
and I went to them and they found very quickly
that my mother was actually in the same house that she'd come from
when she came to Melbourne
to go to the mother's and baby's home before she had me.

So we identified where she was very quickly
and then they provided some guidance about how to write a very brief
and sort of neutral letter about who I was looking for
in case it got into the wrong hands
or to not give too much away to protect her privacy.

So I wrote a letter and she replied almost straight away
and we established correspondence, contact, exchange very quickly.

And did you meet face to face quickly too?

No, not quickly.

And that was because while in her letters she told me that
she'd told her husband, who wasn't my father,
about having given up a child before she was married
she hadn't told her other children, five other children
and felt she needed time to, probably to muster up the courage really,
but to tell them.

So it was at least six, probably seven months after we started letter contact
that we met after she'd told her children.

And what was that meeting like?

It was sort of strange.

There was huge relief for me that it was going to happen
because I knew then that she definitely wasn't rejecting me,
although I was worried that I wouldn't be accepted
and I was worried that if her children didn't accept me
that I wouldn't be accepted either.

So that first meeting was a big relief, a huge relief
and I remember walking up the drive in the first really big hug
and the overwhelming feeling for me was relief.

Once you were introduced to her other children
was there a feeling of immediate connection with this new family?

No, no.

And partly that was because of their reactions to me.

It was like, who is this older sibling
that they've never heard about coming into their life
and a lot of uncertainty for them about what does this mean
and they weren't embracing it.

I could tell from the very first time I met
that it wasn't going to be easy

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and I'd have to really focus on building trust
and building relationships with them.
I'm just struck by what a burden for the child or adult as you are
but the child who's seeking this connection
having to still kind of win people over or have that sense
that must feel like a really heavy burden
or an unjust burden in some way.
I think a lot of adoptees would say that
and feel like even though we've been the subject
of the decision to be relinquished
we often feel that we're intruding.
So yeah, it does feel like we have to take responsibility for that
and I have always taken responsibility for the decisions
I've made about when to search and not search
and at the time when I searched for example
I didn't tell my adoptive mother she was still alive then.
I didn't tell her until I'd established letter contact with my natural mum
and I then told my adoptive mum and she didn't like it.
She was very upset about it.
Really didn't want me to continue having contact with my natural mother
so I decided I would continue having contact
but to make mum feel secure in our relationship
her big fear was that I'd end the relationship with her
which to me was just astounding
that she could be so insecure about we were close
so it was hurtful but it was very real for her
so I could not only talk to her about having contact with my natural mum
but I couldn't talk to any of my other adoptive family either
in case they accidentally said something to my adoptive mum
so then I'm engaged in all this secrecy
to try and protect mum's feelings
so yeah it gets very complicated.
What about your natural father Penny
what could your birth mother tell you about him
or was there a chance to make contact there?
She did tell me about him almost in the first or maybe second letter
so she told me he was older than her
that he was separated at the time
that he didn't know she got pregnant
that it was a one night thing
and that he'd moved away
so she hadn't seen him since.
At the time she didn't know where he was living
but she thought it was interstate

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but then a few years after we connected
and my natural mum
he actually moved back to the town where she was living
and he visited her
and so she told him about me
and I'd passed on if she ever did see him
please let him know I'd like to have contact if he's up for it
so she told him that gave him my contact details
and after several months
maybe even a couple of years I can't remember now
he did phone me
so I had one phone call with him
which was just a few months before he passed away.
What was that conversation like?
It was kind of strange
because I was just something out of left field for him
and he had several other, at least half a dozen other children
and several different mums
so I was trying to get a handle on how many siblings have I got
and he sort of said I could phone you again
so it was really he wanting to phone me
not giving me an opportunity to phone him
I think he phoned from a public telephone booth
I even had them still then
and it was like oh okay
so I felt like he might have done it as a favour to my mum
my mother, my natural mother
rather than because he felt any real obligation as such
and then he passed away before you had the chance to meet one another in person
but you did have this relationship with your natural mother and her other children
did you look like anyone in that family, Penny?
Not really, I mean I didn't look so incredibly different
that it was like it jumped out
but I looked through all the photo albums
I spent time with everybody
and I kept trying to see if any of my features were reflected in them
and I couldn't see any real resemblance at any age
so looking through all the photo albums when they were little
I just couldn't see myself anywhere
and my natural mum said oh but you look more like your father's family
and I said well okay, like him
and she'd say no more like his sister
so it was like okay
but she had no photos of anybody

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and of course I didn't get to meet him
so I just felt like well I really need to see someone who I look like
but it was more than just even that
it was more I didn't have a personality like my natural mum and her family
like my interests
it was a struggle to find commonality
and whilst I loved them
and I felt they loved me
I just didn't feel that I was like them
and partly my head was saying
but you're a half sibling
you know you don't have to look like them
or there's going to be differences
but it was increasingly perturbing
and when I got to 15, I think birthdays with a zero on the end
we all tend to evaluate our lives at that point
and certainly at 50 I felt like well my life's at least half done now
and I didn't want to die wondering who I looked like
or who I was like
so that really spurred me to try and connect
with paternal family members to see if I was like them
So that's at the point that you decided to undertake a DNA test
and was that the aim to find people on your father's side of the family
through that test?
Yes, absolutely it was 2016
it was actually 53 by then
and I had been talking quite a bit with my friends
in the adoption community about what I could do
you know the commercial DNA test was starting to sort of get a bit of popularity by then
and look nothing ventured, nothing going
I felt like it was an investment in the future, planting a seed
So you did the test, you sent off your saliva
or whatever you needed to send to them
That's it
You got your results, what did they show?
Well they were just a big surprise
the first thing I did was you know rush to the page where it shows your DNA matches with your
relatives
and there just weren't any close matches which was sort of what I'd expected
but their names they were, there were so many Greek names
more than half were like full ball Greek names
and I didn't recognise any of them, not one name
and even the Anglo-Celtic type names
there was just no names with anybody who I knew might be in the family

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so that was like what is going on here
and then I went to the ethnic background page
the maps and the percentages of ethnic background
and I knew both my natural parents were their heritage was from the British Isles
so I had to you know fluff around and press some drop down boxes
and it just said 0% for English, Welsh, Irish, Scottish
all of that was just a big fat zero
and there was this huge amount of Greek
it was at the time it said 70% Greek
and I'm thinking well look I'm no geneticist
but I know that you get 50% of your DNA from each parent
you could only get 50% even if one's 100% Greek
and that's extraordinarily unlikely
so both my parents are Greek
I just thought this is a mistake
Yeah that swapped you saliva or something
or just sent you the wrong information
Exactly I thought they must have switched my sample in the lab
I emailed Ancestry Dana and said
look I do know I'm adopted
but I do know who my natural mother is
and I have all this information about my natural father
I've got a good idea what my background is
can you please check that you haven't switched my sample
accidentally and within really a couple of days
I got this quite long email back
sort of saying you know I was thinking
even then they must get this all the time
you know well people when they do DNA tests
they often get a surprise or surprises
and no we didn't switch a sample
blah blah blah blah blah
it was like oh okay
this is something so then I proceeded to try and talk
with my natural mum and half sister
about this strange result
What did you think might be the explanation
Well then it's funny how your mind thinks
I was thinking maybe my mum really doesn't know for sure
who her parents are
maybe she was adopted and doesn't know
and you know and maybe there is another potential father
that I've got who might have been Greek
so I was trying to talk through that with her

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but it wasn't going down well
and they just really didn't want to talk about it
just sort of pooped at it
like I think the attitude was oh it's a spit test
you know it's not even accurate
but I sort of had to drop it
I mean I couldn't drop it
it was really rattling around in my head
but I was doing my PhD at the time
I thought I've got to focus on that
get that finished and then I can direct my energy
to this and try and sort this out
So what were the next steps
once you'd reached it sounds like a cul-de-sac
if you've got this surprising information
about your ethnic heritage
but your natural mother's not interested
in really having the conversation
I mean did you want her to have a DNA test
was that the next step
I would have loved if she or my half sister
had volunteered to have a test
but their attitude made me think
they're not going to do that
and not only will they not volunteer
but if I asked I reckon they'd say no
and it might be a really bad thing
in our relationship
so I really had that fear quite early on
that this was a pretty sensitive topic
and it's a risk it's a really big risk
so yeah I was pretty anxious about it
So what happened?
Well when the air started to clear with my PhD
and I thought right I was on track for that
I did another test myself with another company
just to check the results
and they were amazingly similar
to the ancestry DNA test result
and then I asked my husband and son
to also do tests
just to double check the accuracy
and of course it came back exactly as we expected
and then I thought well there's nothing for it now

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I have to pluck up the courage and ask my natural mother to take a DNA test
and to my surprise she agreed to do the test
And what did that test show Penny?
That we were not related
After 20 years of establishing a relationship
did it feel like a blow?
Yeah it was a blow to us all
and even though I intellectually had gotten to that point
where this was the only logical explanation
it was a blow
Yeah I think it hit everybody
it was probably a bigger blow for my natural
the person we thought was my natural mum
because she really hadn't got her head around it
it hadn't put any stock in my original test results
so I think it was a big shock
and I think when she agreed to do it
she thought well it's going to come back and show we're related
I really don't know
but I could see and feel that it was a big blow
What happened to your relationship after that revelation
that you were not the mother and daughter you had been told you were?
Well it went down pretty quickly
I tried to keep in contact with the person
who I thought was my natural mother
phoning and sending cards and things
and about a year later I got a reply
a card saying thank you for the flowers
but basically every time you have contact
it's painful and me and my family need to move on
so that meant without me and my husband and son
So really you were back at square one in a sense
what did you think or assume had happened
where was you thinking at that point?
My thinking was very much it was in the hospital
because it had to be before I was placed with my adoptive parents
my history from that point on was very well known
so you know I was in the hospital for three weeks
before I was handed over to them
and it had to be in that three weeks
So where did you go next to try and solve this mystery?
I went back to the Victorian Government's adoption information service
with all my genetic screenshots and the story

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and said please find my real background records
please find my real mother
Were they shocked by your story?
They were horrified that this could possibly have happened
How could this have happened that you had been swapped with another baby
at the hospital? I mean was it an accident?
Well we might never know that
whether it was deliberate or accidental
but through every family has a secret
they were able to find a medical historian
who was able to explain exactly the sorts of baby identification processes
that were happening at the time
and I mean I always knew that the babies for adoption were put in one nursery
and the babies not for adoption were put in another
you know there was separate care
so I felt it was very unlikely
how I'd been swapped with a baby that went home
but I figured well the babies in the nursery
that were going to be adopted
I would always worry that we didn't have as much care
I mean whether that's founded or not is irrelevant
but the medical historian explained that
there were multiple opportunities every day for babies to be misidentified
because when they were born
they would have had a little luggage tag
basically a little brown paper luggage tag
tied to their wrist with a piece of brown string like a package
just with a bow
and on that little luggage tag would have been written
the mother's surname, the baby's date of birth and the sex
pretty much that was it
and then before leaving that birthing suite
the baby would have been bathed
that tag would have come off
and another one would have been put on
it would have been a little cotton band
written in the same Indian ink with the same information
but we're talking about a baby's wrist
so it had to be stitched on
and if the writing wasn't clear
or it wasn't close enough in the middle
or many opportunities for illegible writing
but also for it to be covered
when the nurse stitched this tag on

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and of course babies notoriously lose weight
after they're born
and certainly babies separated from their mothers for adoption
did and I know why I did
so of course these little tags that have been stitched on
might not have been stitched very well
or the baby might have lost a lot of weight
and with their own hands and waving around
they would have been put off
so every day apparently multiple tags falling off
multiple opportunities for misidentification
so I guess the odds are it was a mistake
however the medical historian also
told me that all the records for my year of birth
all the medical records at the Queen Vic were destroyed
when they probably shouldn't have been
even according to the hospital's own records destruction policies
so that's a very strange thing
So Penny the adoption information service
who were helping you try to find your real natural mother
where did they start?
They went to the government archives
and found a register
that identified mothers
who had sought social work assistance
or who the social workers had visited
whose babies were being born were identified for adoption
so before we were even born
and I said to the AIS
you need to look for a Greek mother
not one with an Anglo name
because my mother is Greek
it's a fact we know this from the DNA
so they did and they found
a mother who'd had a baby girl
on the same day that I was born
and so very quickly they were able to
identify the name of the person they believed was my mother
so this was in the first five weeks of me
applying to them for my real records as I saw them
and they identified very quickly
that there was a Greek woman who had had a baby girl
and that it was probably me, they were very sure it was me
What could they tell you? Where was she now?

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Well they could tell me a lot
but they couldn't tell me anything identifying
so because it was actually someone else's
the person I was swapped with, her adoption records legally
so it was quite complicated
so they couldn't tell me her name
they couldn't tell me her date of birth
they couldn't tell me anything like that
but they could tell me that she got married
later the same year I was born
to a Greek man here in Melbourne
that she'd had other children here in Melbourne
and then the family had gone back to Greece in the early 70s
and that she was still alive and living in Greece
Oh Penny, how did you receive that information?
Well that was like, as I say, five weeks after I went to them
so it was like I just wasn't expecting to have anything like that
I was expecting them to say, oh look we're searching
and it's going on but we're doing this now and we're doing that
I stupidly went to the interview by myself
and even though I worked in adoption for 12 years
and we always would recommend bringing a support person
I stupidly didn't take anybody to that interview
and I just remember literally feeling like I was going to float away
I was bouncing off the walls
and I remember getting down onto Burke Street
out of the office and thinking
I've got to go home
I'm not sure which direction to go in
I was floating, it was ridiculous
but then of course
I needed one of the identifying information
but oh, they were worried that
because this was such an unusual situation
it never happened before
that County Court might want DNA proof of the person in Greece
that they'd identified as my mother
before they made a finding that I could have the identifying information
it was all very convoluted
so I asked them to reach out to her in Greece
with a view to forming a relationship
trying to persuade her to do a DNA test
to confirm that we were mother and daughter
And what was her response?

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It wasn't so good
she only spoke Greek
there was the issue of the language
so they used an interpreter
but that was very clunky
and it ended up that the manager of adoption information service
who's Greek-Australian herself ended up deciding
that the best way was for her to speak directly with my mother
so there were several conversations
over a period of time
and my mother confirmed that she had a baby
on the day I was born in Melbourne
and gave quite a bit of the story
but did not want to have contact with me
did not want to do a DNA test
just was really worried that other people would find out
that she'd kept this secret all her life
it was so shameful
so it was this mixture of it was the first time
she'd ever been able to talk to anybody about it
to the manager of adoption information service
but she just did not want to go any further
and did not want any contact
any more contact from the AIS or me
Oh Penny it must have felt like you were both so close
and so far at the one time
I mean did you consider just ending the search then
thinking well this is all that I'll know
or this is where this relationship ends
I couldn't
I had to respect that she wanted no contact
you know I didn't want to traumatise her anymore
and clearly it had been a very traumatic experience for her
but I needed to know if she was definitely my mother
and also knowing there were other children
half siblings
I felt they had a right to know about me
as I had a right to know about them
and I felt like I needed to pursue
trying to establish contact with them
so I asked the AIS to reach out to my siblings
and I guess they couldn't do with your mother's consent
did they do it with her knowledge
Yes they did tell her

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her consent was irrelevant because
I'm an adult, they're adults
they also told her because I had by then decided to apply
because she wouldn't do a DNA test
I had decided to apply to the County Court
to get her identifying information
which was really the adoption records
of the person I was sworn with
so of course they had to be contacted as well
and my mother in Greece
so the court was writing to them anyway
pointing all this stuff out and what I was trying to do
How tricky was it to get in contact with those siblings
though if it couldn't come through your natural mother
what was that process like of getting in touch with them?
Well yes the AIS tried to reach out through Facebook
and via phone
it's not easy to get in contact with people who only have mobile phones
if then you know there's no sort of central register
so there was basically no response
it was unclear whether they received the messages
whether they got them and ignored them
because they didn't know who they were coming from
it was just very unclear
and this had gone on for months and months
so it was at that point
when I decided to try another avenue
which was every family has a secret
when we just had this hit this brick wall
and there was nothing coming back from my siblings
then I thought right time to bring in the extra troops
and see if we can get any further
And you've taken things into your own hands in another sense
and actually gone off to Greece yourself
Well when it was confirmed that my mother was in Greece
and even at the point where it was clear she didn't want to have contact
I again respected that
I wasn't going to go to Greece and try and chase her up
unless she wanted that
but I felt a very strong need to visit Greece
and the places that were significant to her
the place where she grew up
which was an even smaller town than the one in which I grew up in Victoria
and the place where she lived

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but I was really paranoid about not hanging around
and not being seen
because what if I did look like family
what if I did you know
and so yeah last year my husband and son
and I did go to Greece
and we did travel those places
we visited, we drove around and visited those places
and it was amazing
Greek people would start talking to me as if I was Greek
and one man actually said to me
after I'd said you know excuse me or something
he said oh and I said oh no that's all I've got sorry
and he said oh for some reason I thought you were Greek
and I thought oh that is just the best thing anyone has ever said to me
it made me feel very connected
and visiting those places
I picked up some pebbles off the place where my mum was living
and brought them back to Australia
because I thought well that's proof that I've been there
and I know where she's spent a lot of her life
even if I never get to meet her
at least I've got this
what about your siblings
did you find any sign of them when you were in Greece
well when we were
we thought we knew where one of my half brothers worked
that he had a business
so we actually went there very briefly
and thought we saw him
and his son
but we were very careful not to
but we also could hear that
they were only speaking Greek and no English
and so I sort of was not going to reach out at that point
well for many reasons
A. they didn't even know existed
he didn't know existed
B. we didn't have common language
C. would have been inappropriate at his workplace
but it was so tangible
I could almost touch that person
I could have almost touched him
so I came back

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and met with the AIS and said
please try one more time
please try and reach out to this brother
at his workplace
I know you wouldn't normally do that
but if you send a letter to him
do your usual thing
be very careful about what you say and stuff
this might be the way to go
so they did that
later they hadn't had a response
the letter hadn't even arrived
things in Greece don't always
well it's not quite like here
in terms of things happening quickly
so they followed up with a phone call
and again very carefully
feeling this person out
I didn't say anything about adoption
I just said is your name so-and-so
oh yes that's my name and is your mother so-and-so
and this person goes oh no
that's my auntie
so at that point
I've got you want you know blah blah
the same name my cousin
that's his mother I can give you his phone number
so then
the manager of AIS phoned that person
and yes
he got a big shock
but was really open
to you know didn't sort of
at any point say oh go away
or this isn't believable
or just said oh my goodness
I need to talk to my siblings about this
and two weeks later
when the manager phoned back
they said yep yep we'll do a DNA test
to confirm
so that was like
just the best news
that I would know for sure

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

if this was my family
if that was my mother
and yes so of course
it was quite complicated
and every family has a secret and ancestral DNA
we're very helpful in getting the tests
to my siblings and
expediting all that as best they could
it took months before we actually
had the test results
they were saying oh you know you can contact us now
and here's our details and I just said
no I can't go through this again
I need to know for sure
through DNA before
I have contact
and the DNA results
confirmed that you had found
your family?
yeah I got the results
it was just amazing
it was just such a relief
it was fantastic
and then you know and immediately
it was like okay now we can organise contact
with these siblings so
it was knowing what was to come
as well as the confirmation
it was like
this is just bigger than Ben her now
this is we're off and racing
did you speak on the phone with them then
what was your first contact
with your siblings?
the first couple of contacts were a phone call
with the AIS manager
translating and then
because one of my siblings has
good English we then had
some calls by Viber you know
like FaceTime and of course
we'd already booked our second trip to Greece
so I was
actually going to be arriving

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in like six weeks time and
they really
wanted
I wanted them to speak with our mother
and they wanted to speak
with her because she didn't
know that they now knew and that we had
DNA confirmation
so it was quite
tricky for them
they wanted to do it in a respectful
way as they could
well I told her they were now in contact
with me etc etc
had DNA confirmation and
she really got a shock
so they couldn't then say oh and by the way
she's now coming in three or four weeks time
they had to wait a bit longer
and then tell her that
so it was a lot for her to take in
in a pretty short space of time but of course
I was going there we were going to meet
my siblings and they were going to meet me
that was fine but they also
wanted me to meet her
and I wanted to meet her so
there was a fair bit of pressure on
to get the word out
so if you headed
off to Greece just a few weeks after
receiving this information
what happened once
you arrived in Greece but this time
with the names and
phone numbers of family
well more than that this time
I was going on a new passport
with my new name and my name
is now hyphenated with
my mum's Greek name
so yeah I travelled not only
to meet my family
but with my name

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that integrates my mother's maiden name
and what was that reunion
in person like with these
siblings
it really was
very
it was very emotional
I didn't cry
my emotion was just
full bore excitement
I really felt connected to them
even though in some ways
they're small
we look quite different in some ways
I'm tall but when they looked at me
they saw
their mother and their mother's family
so it was almost that
they were sort of the reverse
mirroring they saw in me
their family
but they were so warm they were just
so embracing and the first
day was just with two of my siblings
and we just had oh I don't know
five hours sitting on the couch beside each other
just talk talk talk talk talk talk talk talk
which was sort of complex
because my brother
who was there doesn't speak much English
but he just smiled all the time
like we were just so happy
to be in each other's company
what could they tell you about how
the conversation with your mother
had gone were they
able to assure you that you'd get
to meet her or was that still unknown
still unknown
they just kept saying in the very
great way it'll be fine it'll be fine
we're gonna have a family lunch tomorrow
it'll be fine it'll be fine so I really
wasn't sure right up until I arrived

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at the aunt's
place where we were having this lunch
it was gonna be there
as you're looking around that crowd of faces
was your mother there
yes yes
that's when I lost it I gave her
you know we had a big hug
it was sort of strange I walked in I'm going
oh okay so it was almost like a panic
which one's my mum I was like oh don't be
silly in my head my head's going
don't be silly it's the one in the dark
clothing she's a widow don't be
how could you have not you know
why would you be looking at the other one
but it was like oh I was
also trying to take in who do I look like
you know I'm standing in the doorway
looking around you know where's my mum
where's my mum and the
looks that I got it was like they'd seen a
ghost my mum and my aunt
they just like
happy but like whoa
and then my aunt found
this photo
very quickly she just pulled out this
photo of my ya ya
you know their mother and
I could I just was the spit
of her in the face
and here gosh my
hair I wear it long
it was actually about the same length as hers was
in this photo and
I like I just it would just hit me in the face
but it hit them in the face too
there was just no question I was a part
of this family and what sort of state
was she in Penny you know this had been
such a shock for her and
how old was she
early 83, 83

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

look it was a shock I think
she was really
working hard to try and keep it together
herself you know at one point she walked
out of the room came back
and you know I could see she was
working very hard to keep it together
and of course I had blub started blubbing
by then which
was it took me a while to get myself back together
I think I'd even the excitement
of the day before meeting two of my siblings
it was um
you know I was just so excited already had phone calls
with them I'd already seen their faces they'd seen mine
that was exciting
but yes
meeting my mum and not even knowing until
I got there if she was going to be there it was
pretty big it was um
well it was as big as it gets
did she want to
talk about the circumstances of your
birth with you
I'm sure she did but she couldn't
cause she speaks greek and I
didn't I speak a bit more now
but not enough
because I have that conversation yet
I'm working hard on it but um
yes I know
we both want to have that conversation
what could she tell you about
those years that you'd been separated
did she thought she'd never see
you or ever hear from you again
hmm yeah
I mean she was very concerned to know
that I had a good upbringing
and
that I was placed with good people
and she thought she had met my
mother
she really thought she had met her

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around the time she signed
the consent
I said I really
this is through family members who are
translating for us I said no
I really don't think you did I think
you might have met the adoptive mother
of the person I was swapped with
and that was a really hard thing for everyone
to deal with it was like it was one thing
to be adopted
as a newborn but it was another thing to
be swapped in the hospital and to have gone through
all this other stuff so
she said no no I met her
I met your other mother
so I happened to have a photo on my
phone of probably the first photo
of me
in my adoptive mother's arms and so
I got it up on the phone and I handed
it over and said did you meet this woman
and she looked at it really really
carefully and said
no
and she was just so disappointed
like
the whole body language
she had thought she had met the woman
who was taking care of her child
it was just so disappointing to her
so then I worked really hard to reassure her
that I had a good life and
that you know my adoptive mum and dad
were great people
but yeah it was a big blow to her
but she also said that
every time she went into a church
ever since I was born the first candle
she lit was for me
so
that was
very very powerful
was she happy to be found

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I think so
yes I do think so
I was able to have
two visits with her while I was in Greece
this last time
we met in the first week when I was there
but I was there for a month and you know
I went away with friends
visited a few places and then went back
at the end I left a few days free
in case I could visit again
and that time she was
so much more relaxed and warmer
not that she wasn't warm the first time
but it was just
you could tell that she had
gotten more comfortable with the idea
and you know it was
relieved that her children had embraced me
and they weren't judging her at all
these things happen
etc and I was
trying to explain that I've reclaimed my regional identity
and I said you know look
my passport, my driver's license
and I just pulled it out because it's in my phone case
and
handed it to her
and she really studied it
and then she said to
one of my relatives to tell me
tell Penny I'm really pleased
that she reclaimed
my family name because
there aren't many of that
name left anymore
so she was really proud of that
and really proud that I had such a good education
and
there was pride
I think it was very hard and she was very on edge
the first meeting
but I could even see by that second visit
that it was sitting much better with her

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

and she
for me over the years it took time
to digest the information
about who my family was supposed to be
let alone who it really is
it takes time to really chew it over
and go through the emotions
so she had really
a lot of time in the end to do that
before meeting me
so I think she's done an amazing job
I think she's amazing
amazingly resilient and
yeah I'm just
so pleased that
she's accepted me
so does this mean the end of secrets
about
who you are in the world
well it is complicated
nothing's ever straightforward in these stories
so
her maternal family
well
the ones who know
that's all fine
but
her husband's family
don't know, haven't been told
won't be told
it's not
that straightforward so for example
I can't just go and stay in the village
because questions would be asked
nearby is fine
and whilst she's very happy to see me
so I am embraced
but I'm not living there
I have to respect
that not everybody will know
and if I'm ever introduced
we're going back next year
I'm going back twice actually
but if I'm introduced to somebody

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

I need to be very careful about
if I'm asked questions I might just be
the distant relation from Melbourne
so it's great
but it's also not
simple either
you say that you're learning Greek
Penny how tough is that
at this point
it is tough
I haven't got an ear for languages
and yeah I'm finding it hard
I started back in
2019
I think I did two terms
I've now into my third or fourth again
so up to five terms
and I'm using two apps as well
and I've now got a cousin here
who is helping me
with my conversation
I think you've shown that you're a woman
of determination Penny
so if anyone can crack it I reckon it's going to be you
why is it so important to you
to speak the language
well I really want
to have those conversations with my mother in Greek
not through anybody
I don't think she wants
anybody else there I think we need to have
some conversations privately
and the only way to do it is
if I learn Greek or enough Greek
that we can at least have a
basic conversation so
you know mum's not young
and she hasn't been well
and I just
feel the need to a very
strong need to do that and
yeah so I am
I'm committed I'm finding it tough
but you know I've just got a press on

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

it has been
such a journey of
highs and lows of
disappointments of fresh hopes
has it been worth it
for you? Oh absolutely
well
if you value the truth
at all it has to be
but for me
as a person who grew up knowing I wasn't
the biological child of
the people who raised me
it was always going to be a journey
I mean as a child you don't know for sure
but you know I was
open enough to not ever rule it out
and of course things happened
that drove me to do it which is very
common in people who are adopted
there's a life event that
sort of feels like the rug's been pulled
out from under you and you feel this huge
need to build yourself
back together and rebuild your identity
and I mean that's a thing that people do
over their lifetime anyway whether or not
they're adopted but for me
there were these important events
that drove me to find
the truth and absolutely
I don't regret the decisions
I've made to pursue that
and I'm so pleased I did it
and you know I was never going to die
wondering. I really hope
you get to have those conversations
with your mum in Greek
and thank you so much for sharing
this extraordinary story
with us on conversations.
Thank you very much Sarah.
Penny's story is featured in the
SBS TV series

[Transcript] Conversations / Penny's odyssey to Greece and family

Every Family Has a Secret
and she's also about to release her own
book called Greek actually.
Thank you.