

# A War Baby's Welcome Home

By Andrea Barilla



Irene, center, with her cousin Gale and Gale's husband, John

**T**HIS PAST JUNE, Gale Court of Mercer and her husband donned American flag T-shirts, loaded the car with welcome balloons and signs, and headed for the airport. In less than an hour, Gale would meet her German cousin, Irene, for the first time. She had waited four years for this moment; Irene had waited more than 60.

When Gale's brother John called four years ago with news that their uncle Ray had a child in Germany named Irene, Gale was ecstatic.

"I thought it was the neatest thing that my kind, sweet uncle had a child to leave on this earth," Gale said. "It always saddened me that Uncle Ray didn't have any children."

Gale's earliest memory of her uncle was of a Father's Day when she and her brother acted as Ray's children, appointing him king for a day and giving him a crown and scepter.

Irene, of Germany, had waited her entire life to find her father. Up until her mother's death in 2004, she had asked about him, but her mother never revealed his identity. Upon his wife's pass-

ing, Irene's stepfather gave Irene the only information he knew: her birth father's name was Ray. She also learned from an aunt that he had served in the American military.

With her stepfather's blessing, Irene began her search. She found her answer in a tiny old suitcase of her mother's. In that suitcase were her mother's identification papers, stamped with what had to be her father's name: Raymond W. Douglass. She then contacted the German military and found that Raymond had been a military governor in Breslau, Germany, and that her mother, Gerda Stankovski, had worked for him from June 1945 until the Russian occupation in March 1946 when she was forced to flee Breslau. Irene was conceived in October 1945. Raymond is not a German name. This had to be her father.

Irene sought help from an organization in Germany that helps G.I. babies find their families. However, their search stalled when the American military revealed that Raymond Douglass was deceased and had no listed family contacts. Saddened, Irene wanted to give up. But

her stepfather, who had helped raise Irene since she was 9, urged her to continue trying to find her American family. He reassured her it would not hurt his feelings.

Finally, in 2006, Irene found a contact: John Raymond Douglass. For the past two years, John had been contacting the government for information regarding his uncle Ray's military history. Because Ray had no children, John wanted to document his uncle's life so it would not be forgotten.

Therefore, when John received a phone call from a government official telling him someone was inquiring about his uncle, John was excited. Perhaps it was an old war friend of his uncle's who fought with him in the Battle of the Bulge. John was not prepared for what came next: a German woman named Irene speaking in halting English, saying she was Ray's daughter.

When John called his sister Gale to share this news, Gale immediately went to work, gathering as much information on Ray as she could for her new cousin.

"Irene knew nothing about him," Gale said. "Can you imagine being 60 years old and knowing nothing about your dad? I thought that was the saddest thing. So I decided to fix it and give her every memory that I possibly could."

Gale and Ray's second wife Pat rounded up as much information on Ray as they could: memories, documents, and photos. Gale compiled these, along with pictures of Irene's other relatives, into an album to send to her.

It would take four years for Irene to come to America as her stepfather had become sick and needed daily care. However, Irene and Gale's friendship continued to grow, as they shared photos and stories of their husbands, children and childhoods, corresponding by phone and letter. When Irene's stepfather died in 2009, Irene called Gale, telling her "Now I will come see you."

Gale spent the next few months preparing for Irene's visit, rounding up as many Douglass family members as she could for a family reunion. She first talked to her brothers, telling them they all needed to come to her place to meet Irene. They informed her they were al-



Irene with her stepmother Pat

ready planning to come to Gale's house on July 2: her house was going to be the starting point for their annual cross-country motorcycle tour. Gale later found out this day was Irene's birthday.

"There are no coincidences in this life," she said.

The day of the reunion, Irene's birthday, dozens of family members found their way to Gale's house, coming from as far as Missouri, Utah, California, Washington, and Florida. A table was set up with pictures of relatives who could not make the reunion. The reunion was a day of three parties: a brunch; a midday German tea party, with seven different kinds of wedding cookies, prepared by Gale and a friend; and a dinner at the Tara since "Gone With the Wind" was Irene's favorite movie.

The next week, Gale and her husband John drove Irene to Ohio to meet her stepmother Pat and stepsister Tracy. When Pat saw Irene, she immediately reached out her arms, enveloping her in a tight hug and saying "You are my daughter and I love you so much. I don't want to ever let go of you." Pat had prepared a table for Irene, full of pictures of Ray and patriotic treats.

Irene's visit was not complete, however, without a trip to Arlington National Cemetery, where her father was buried. Upon finding Ray's grave, Irene, Gale, Gale's husband, and their niece Laura

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Irene at Arlington National Cemetery, where her father was buried.

held hands and said a prayer. After the prayer, Irene said quietly, "My work is done."

The next day John and Gale drove Irene to the Baltimore airport. "My husband and I were sitting in the front, and Irene was sitting in the back. I looked back at her and I looked at my husband, and then I crawled through the divider to sit next to my cousin. I grasped her arm and said 'I cannot let go of you. I'm going to hold you as long as I've got you.' I felt such a love for her ... We had two weeks to love this woman, and I didn't even want to let the car ride go. I wanted to use every second I had to give her whatever love she hadn't had for 64 years."

Irene now knows why her mother kept her father's name from her: it was an act of love for Ray. Soon after Gerda had her daughter, she discovered Raymond was married. It broke her heart, but she did not want to hurt his life in any way. Therefore, she never told him about his daughter.

Raymond came home after four years in Germany to his wife Margie and was honest with her about his affair. She forgave him, and they had twenty wonderful years together. Gale remembers visits to their home with fondness. When Margie passed away, Ray married Pat. This pair were married 28 years until Ray's death in 1994.

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Gale believes her uncle Ray would have been so happy to know he had a child.

"He was a wonderful man who left a wonderful daughter on this earth, a woman deeply loved by so many," she said. "Meeting Irene and helping to give her the love she's wanted all her life is an opportunity I'm so thankful to have had. You only pass through this life once, and love is the most important gift you can give or receive from somebody." ▼



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Photos Contributed

job to lift the family out of abject poverty and avoid Child Protective Services, but her manic depression and egocentric personality eventually lost those paychecks, too.

Jeannette and her siblings grew up fast and held the family together working odd jobs to buy groceries. Eventually, the children decide to break the cycle of poverty and after high school, they escaped one by one to New York City and established careers.

"The Glass Castle" is a humorous, sad and exquisite memoir. Despite neglecting their children, Jeanette writes of her parents with bittersweet empathy, stark disappointment, and dark humor and in the book's acknowledgements, she thanks Rose Mary for "believing in art and the truth," and Rex for "dreaming all those big dreams." ▼

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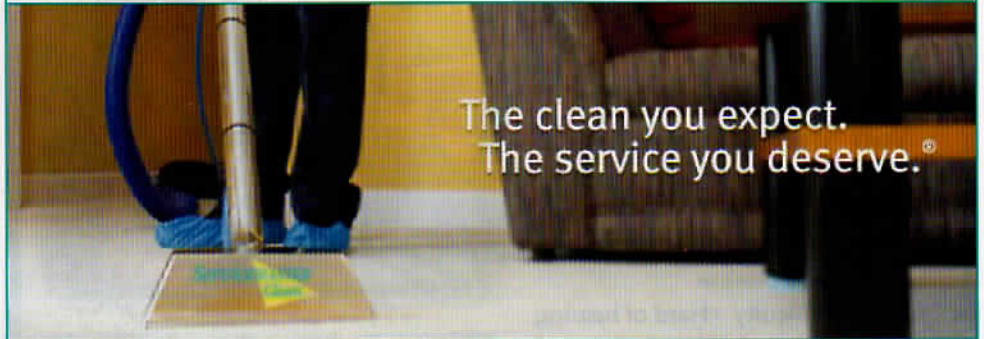
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