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Mother and child reunion



Jim Sherry / SUN STAFF

Maria Nicholas holds her children, Annamaria, 6, and David, 5. Annamaria recently returned after a search that ended when she was found in Germany. Annamaria had never met David until her return.

Ocean can't divide mother, daughter

Michael S. Higgins
SUN STAFF

As Maria Nicholas flew over the Atlantic Ocean earlier this month with her 6-year-old daughter asleep next to her, she said she finally felt complete again.

Just hours before, Nicholas and three burly men from the American Association for Lost Children had walked into a house in Bielefeld, Germany, and gathered the sleeping body of dark-haired Annamaria from her bedroom. They took Annamaria despite protests by her father, Paul Silvera, Nicholas' ex-husband.

Just following a judge's orders, said Broward County resident Maria Nicholas, who keeps her home city confidential in case Silvera retaliates.

"We obeyed the legal process," said Nicholas. Dade County Judge Phillip L. Knight's divorce order of August 1986 authorized Nicholas' snatching of Annamaria.

The mother and child reunion came more than five years after Silvera fled the U.S. for Jamaica and then Germany, taking his daughter with him. Silvera had told Nicholas he was taking Annamaria only for the weekend.

The outcome closed Cooper City's

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Susan Cohen
attorney for Maria Nicholas

oldest child abduction case, which was opened July 31, 1986, when the estranged couple met near the intersection of Stirling Road and Southwest 90th Avenue. It marked the last time mother saw daughter until Nov. 6.

To make matters worse, Nicholas was pregnant with the couple's second child when Silvera took Annamaria.

"He left me with nothing. He took everything. You talk about spite," she said.

Her son, David, heard stories about his missing older sister as he grew up to a current age of five. Annamaria's fascination about meeting her brother was just as strong, Nicholas said.

"The plane couldn't get her fast enough. She wanted to see her brother. He was my connection to her hap-

piness here," she said.

So was a baby doll the child used to hug which Nicholas gave Annamaria as they boarded the flight. The doll worked on a number of levels: reconnecting whatever foggy memories the girl had of her toddler days in South Florida and symbolizing the ties between a mother and her daughter.

"This is your baby doll, I told her," said Nicholas.

Silvera, son of a wealthy family, apparently did not mistreat his daughter as he shielded her from the public view in Jamaica and Germany. Nicholas said Silvera arranged for a 24-hour guard at times.

Susan Cohen, a Miami lawyer who handled Nicholas' case for free, said Silvera faces extradition after a long-running case that is now a big German news story. He also owes years of child support payments for his son, David, whom he has never seen.

"Let's see what kind of a father he is," said Cohen.

Cohen and Cooper City police detective Michael Graham said the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) is investigating Silvera, an electrical engineer.

Nicholas said Silvera might have made a tense situation at his home even worse if it wasn't for the large physical presence of Mark Miller and the two men who accompanied him from the American Association of Lost Children, a Houston-based organization Miller founded five years ago.

Miller is 6-feet-5 and weighs 210 pounds, 30 pounds less than one of the men who accompanied him.

"He was physically intimidated by our presence," said Nicholas.

Normally, the association locates the missing children and then informs the local authorities. In Germany, that was not the case because a foreign nation might bring more red tape — and cause Silvera to flee with Annamaria as soon as he heard of the attempt.

"All situations are tough," said Miller.

The American Association of Lost Children, which is supported by donations, has recovered 52 children thus far. Annamaria and another boy recovered at the same time in Germany marked the

first overseas retrievals.

Meanwhile, Nicholas and her two children live and play together in Broward. Annamaria and David resemble each other and are approximately the same size.

They understand each other's English without difficulty, although Annamaria speaks German and Dutch as well. Hide-and-seek, the gymnastic tricks Annamaria is trying to teach her new brother using the couch as a horse, and Sesame Street's "Uno" are their favorite games.

Annamaria now calls Nicholas "mother." The child, who eats as many olives as her new family proffers, said she misses the horses she frequently saw in Germany.

Cohen said Judge Knight's custody decrees should ensure that Maria Nicholas should have Annamaria and David permanently. Cohen attributed that to Nicholas' not giving up the fight to find her daughter, whatever country she was in.

"Maria was persistent," said Cohen. "That is the love of a mother for her child."

(The toll-free number of the American Association for Lost Children is 800-375-5683.)