

'I'm part of German history many want to forget'

The product of a German prostitute and black US soldier, Rudi Richardson went through hell before he found God. Elizabeth Pears hears his incredible true life story.

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'Brown baby': Rudi Richardson, pictured as a child, is one of Germany's *mischlingskinder*, or 'mixed race' children who were outcast from society

AS POST-Second World War Germany picked up the pieces of its ruined cities and dented pride, its struggle to renegotiate its national identity was challenged by the birth of a 5,000-strong generation of *mischlingskinder* — mixed race children — fathered by black American soldiers.

Rejected by a racist society, the dirty laundry of the US military who refused to acknowledge them, Germany's 'brown babies' as they became known, were taken from their white mothers and dumped en masse in orphanages or foster care to live a life of hidden shame.

Others tried to fit into a society where their kinky hair and black skin was a constant reminder of their difference. Their plight sparked outrage and a plea from the NAACP and African American media, including *Ebony* and the *Chicago Defender*, for black families to reclaim the *mischlingskinder* as their own.

One of those babies was Rudi Richardson who took his first breath in 1955 as Udo Ackermann – the illegitimate child of a half-Jewish German prostitute serving time in a women's prison outside Munich. She knew nothing of his father beyond his first name – George – and that he was a US soldier.

From being sexually abused as a toddler to being deported from the US to a birthplace that had spurned him, his is a life that would have had to be lived to be believed.

In 2005, Rudi arrived in London: a homeless, penniless drug addict looking for his next score. Fast forward five years, the smiling, articulate and handsome 55-year-old is completely clean, engaged to his fiancée, Karen, who he met in recovery, and runs a registered homeless charity Streetlytes, in west London. His polished look gives away not a hint of his traumatic and drug-addicted past. His teeth are all there. His weight is healthy.

In a London cafe, he told me his mind-boggling story.

After being separated from his mother, Liesolette Ackermann, Rudi was immediately taken into care where he suffered routine sexual abuse. In what seemed like a stroke of luck, aged three, he and fellow outcast brown baby, Pamela, were adopted by an African American military couple and moved to the US. But family life in San Pedro, California, presented a new nightmare. Their mother, Alva, suffered with mental illness and was hooked on prescription medication. Rudi began smoking cannabis – kickstarting a destructive 32-year drug addiction.

His mother, now a widow living in the US, is the only part of his haphazard life he struggles to talk about. I ask him whether, looking back, he would have preferred to stay in Germany. “I have wondered that question so many times. I do love my mother, I just wish she had shown us some love”, he said quietly looking down at the table. “I am not sure why she even adopted us.”



An angry 17-year-old Rudi went off the rails and found himself facing charges for joyriding. It was then his parents told him he was adopted. Within weeks his parents pushed him to join the army as a quickie solution to his situation - even giving special written permission for him to enlist as a minor.

Then came the next bombshell. Despite having a green card, Rudi was not a naturalised citizen. He claims the army assured him that if he completed his term and was honourably discharged, he would be entitled to full citizenship. The promise never materialised.

Years passed in a haze of highs, a failed marriage which produced two daughters he dotes on, and stints in jail. While in prison, a charity called Friends Outside helped him track down his birth mother and the pair were able to talk on the phone for the first time. “When she said my German name, Udo, I could feel a connection. She died before we could meet but I was so grateful to have had the opportunity to hear her voice”, said Rudi.

But it was in 2003 when the bottom finally dropped out of Rudi's world. After being caught stealing a coffeemaker to pay for his fix, he was deported under strict immigration laws and sent back to Germany. While in exile, his father died of cancer and Rudi is heartbroken he was robbed of a chance to say goodbye.

Struggling, to fit in with Germany life because of language barriers and racial prejudices he says still exist, Rudi decided to take his chance on England. After pulling into Victoria Station by coach, he “did what he had to do” to survive, sleeping rough, shoplifting, and prostituting himself.

One night walking over Millenium Bridge, after taking a hit of crack in a nearby phonebox, Rudi looked up at the sky and called out to God. He said: “I was crying. I was angry. Why had I been given this life? I really wanted to tell God he needed to step in and do something because I was just so tired.” Not long after, Rudy, who wears a star of David around his neck in a nod to his Jewish heritage, believes he had an out-of-body experience. “I don’t know what it was. It could have been a hallucination. A religious experience. A side-effect of all the drugs. I don’t know, and I don’t care. It is the reason I am here today and I give God credit it for it. It was hard to get clean and there are days I still want to get high, but in the last four years I have a lived a life that has been so full and rich, I refuse to give that up.”



The joy in his life has come through his volunteering with Streetlytes which runs a winter night shelter in Kensington and Chelsea and feeds hundreds of homeless people at its soup kitchen each month. His work, he explains, is his church. He said: "Many people who call themselves Christians are sitting in buildings who just take your money. What they need to be doing is getting off their butts, rolling up their sleeves and doing something to help someone." The charity makes no money and Rudi, diagnosed with Hepatitis C he contracted via a dirty needle, survives on income support paid by the German social state.

After a ten-year ban, Rudy will be able to visit the US in 2012 to be reunited with his family including his mother - if she is still alive. He said: "I miss America because that's where I grew up, but, to be honest, I don't want anything to do with the US or Germany – they both let me down.

"I am a man without a home. A man without a country. I think I have earned the right to call myself a citizen of the world. It's no surprise I feel most at home with the homeless, the rejected, the dispossessed. That's who I am."

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