The Story of Welcome House

by
Pearl S. Buck
(circa 1956)

"Once the door opens, it is never closed again, of course. That is true of hearts as well as houses... The doors that Christmas opens never close."
—Pearl S. Buck
from *No Room at the Inn*

Welcome House really began half a century ago in Asia. There I saw the children whom white men had left behind wherever they had gone as traders and colonial rulers. The numbers of half-white children were very large and the older the colony the more there were of them. Some of my childhood playmates had been mixed children, and I used to suffer with them even then, because they were unhappy and solitary, since neither white nor Asian accepted them and they had no place. Yet they were almost invariably children of superior beauty and intelligence.

Later in my teens I went to school in Shanghai and there had as my friends the family of a distinguished white American educator who had married an equally fine Chinese lady. Their children were far above average and yet as their close friend I knew how unhappy they were at heart, not because of their parentage but because of the injustice which their kind must suffer.

I did not expect to find the white-Asian children here in the United States and after I came here to live I did not see them anywhere. But seven years ago, I learned something I did not know. There ARE American-Asian children here in our country and while they do not exist in anything like the numbers that they did in the colonial countries, they are here. Although these children are American by birth, yet they have had a hard time and especially if they are abandoned by their natural parents. Why? Because the average child welfare and adoption agency feels that it is impossible to place them for adoption. Most agencies will not even accept them.

One reason, of course, that they could not place American-Asian children was because of the theory, now happily breaking down, that a child must be placed into a home exactly of his own religious and racial background. Many an American child remained an orphan because of this theory. Yet surely parents are born with child-loving hearts, whatever their race or religion, and the child should be placed according to the profound theories of love and understanding rather than of color and creed.

None of this was in my mind, however, seven years ago. It was forced on me in the least expected way—by a baby. A letter came to me one Christmas from a far-away agency, saying that they had a baby whom they could not get adopted . His natural mother was a young American white girl and his father an East Indian. Neither family wanted the baby, although he was of high intelligence. Indeed, the agency considered him the finest child they had ever had and they were reluctant to do what now seemed necessary—place him in a Negro orphanage because he was brown. They had no prejudice against Negroes, they hastened to say, but they did not feel it right to place a child into a situation of prejudices which he might escape for actually, he was Caucasian on both sides. Why had they come to me? They had tried in every state in the union to find people to adopt him, seeking the cooperation of as many agencies and all had said they could do nothing.

What did I do? I got on the telephone to every Indian I knew and to everyone interested in India to ask if anybody wanted a fine little half-Indian baby. Nobody did. I consulted my family and they were unanimous in agreeing with me—we would take him ourselves. Once we had him, we could solve his problem somehow. We were too old, my husband and I, to adopt a baby. This baby needed younger parents who would see him through. Besides, one baby would not be hard to place happily, we felt sure.

Within a few days the one baby was two. A half Chinese baby suddenly had nowhere to go. He was at a hospital deserted by both parents. Well, one might as well be two. No agency wanted him either. We went to

the hospital and brought him home.

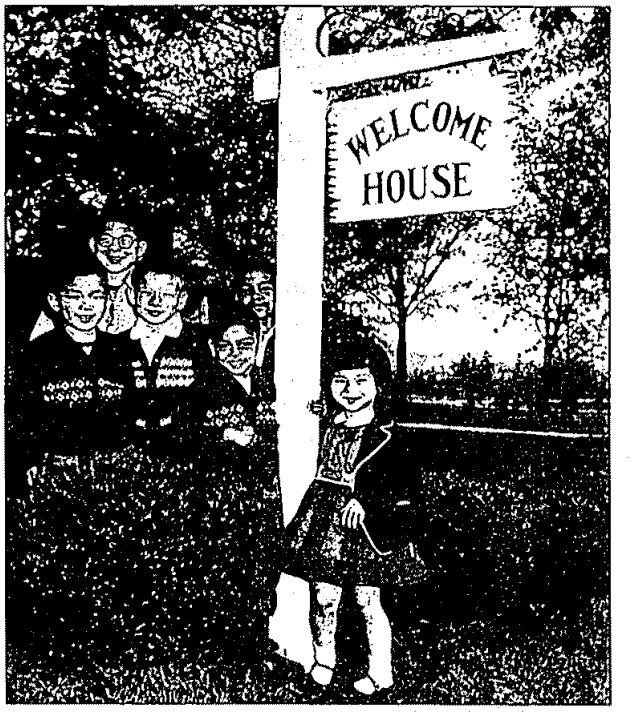
Now I had really to face the situation. So there were these children in my own country, too, and my country was just like all the others—they did not want them! I love my country with a fierce and jealous love. Nothing that is American is a matter of course to me. I put the Constitution and the Bill of Rights into my spiritual life. The inscription on the Statue of Liberty is sacred to me. I suffer when Americans are mean-spirited and prejudiced and deny their country by un-American traits.

Therefore I could not bear to see these wonderful American-Asian children without a chance for home and happiness. My love for my country could not accept this attitude and my faith in my fellow Americans denied it. Maybe not all Americans could appreciate these babies, but surely some could. I must find the ones who could.

Where better than in my own community? I live in a rural region where the farmers and small town folk are the population. Of late years others have come to belong to our community, too. Yet I went first to the people who have always lived here, the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Mennonites, new and old and the English-blooded Quakers. They are our farmers and our business men. I told them about the babies, I said, "I would like to find these children wherever they are in our country and help them to be adopted. I don't want to set up an institution or an orphanage for children belong in families. Maybe I can persuade families around here to take one or two. But I don't want to do this unless you want these children in our community."

Our good general storekeeper, a stout Pennsylvania Dutchman, and respected leader in our community, said, "We not only wandt them—we would be proudt to have them."

With such an endorsement, a fine Pennsylvania Dutch couple, twenty years younger than we were and much loved in the community, took our two babies. We helped them to move into a big farmhouse, and one by one they took nine American-Asian children varying in age from four months to fifteen years.



The Yoder children of Welcome House showed the world that mixed-race children could find homes in America. From left: Leon, Scott, Jack, Paul, David and Sumi.

It did not go as fast as that, of course. We could never have managed Welcome House, as we call it, so easily had not neighbors helped us. We helped to set up the enlarged household in the big house. Friends gave money, helped to get the house in shape, mended roofs and painted walls and put in the fire escape.

It now began to be evident to us that we had to face the problem whole. There were many more than these nine children. We were beginning to get letters asking if we could take more, most of them newborn babies, or babies soon to be born. We sat down, all of us, and decided that we must do a good job. We would set up a real adoption agency for these babies. By that time another of the babies was already in my house. I had been in Chicago on a business trip and while there had been importuned by an agency to take a tiny half-Japanese boy. Why not? By this time I was reckless. I met him at the station where the agency brought him to me and I was enchanted by his instant smile when he saw me. Evidently we had met before, so far as he was concerned. I took him in

Welcome House Social Services of The Pearl S. Buck Foundation is licensed to conduct adoptions in Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia and Washington, D.C.

Children currently are being adopted from the following countries:
Brazil
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Hong Kong
India
Korea
Peru
Philippines
Romania (in 1992)
Thailand
United States

For information on adoption, call (215) 249-0100.

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my arms, and he was my own grandson so far as I was concerned. I kept him for five months before I found his adoptive parents.

This baby was our first adopted baby. How did it happen? Here is the story: I had wondered how to get adoption started in our community. One night I had to make a speech and as I looked over the well-dressed, well-fed audience, I thought to myself, "Surely some young and loving couple here want our baby!" I told the people about our baby and how he was waiting for real parents. The next day a letter came from a young couple. In due time and after due process they adopted him. Somehow after that, it was not hard to find parents for the babies. Now we have a lengthening waiting list. My faith in Americans is renewed with every adoption.

> **"Yet surely parents are born with child-loving hearts, whatever their race or religion, and the child should be placed according to the profound theories of love and understanding rather than of color and creed."**
>
> ***—Pearl S. Buck***

But I am getting ahead of my story again.

If we were going to be an adoptive agency for the placing of American-Asian [children], we must do it properly. We went to Harrisburg to talk to the Department of Child Welfare and tell them what we wanted to do. They were sympathetic, a fine group of people, but doubtful. Were there really these children? They wanted to look into the reality of the need. They would write to all the State agencies in the United States and find out.

For we were asking for a big job. We wanted a charter which would give us the right to receive children, American-Asian children, from all over the United States and to place them equally widely. Agencies are usually very local, or at best regional. And that is another fault in our child adoption laws. Many babies do not get adopted because agencies place only in a county or a State and they do not often cooperate, so that if one agency cannot place a child he may stay in a foster home or an orphanage for the rest of his childhood days. He is usually put out into the world, half-educated and ill prepared, at sixteen or eighteen often to become a lost person, a juvenile delinquent. I would like to see research done on the relation between juvenile delinquency and the child put out at sixteen or eighteen by orphanages and agencies.

The reply from the agencies everywhere was overwhelming. They could do little or nothing for the American-Asian child and certainly the need was great in terms of such children. They do not exist in extremely large numbers but they are our most needy American children when abandoned by their natural parents. We got our charter.

The next job was to set up a Board of good citizens, able and willing to work. We have had such a Board from the first. Our people are generous and cooperative, a loyal stouthearted group. Our Board is made up of couples, husbands and wives. Our judges, both in the county and in other places where we have placed children, are wonderful men. My estimation of American local and State courts has risen sky high as a result of working with them. They have been unfaithfully just and sympathetic with our children.

Our community is wonderful at heart, the schools are wonderful, too. The superintendents and teachers give their time and their encouragement and their personal interest to children who come to us neglected and far behind in their school work. I give my unalloyed appreciation and gratitude to our public schools.

We have had fourteen children in our two permanent families. These are for the most part our older children,

who came to us too late for adoption, or too early before our agency was begun.

How do we support Welcome House? We just ask people for money, by mail and face-to-face. The community chest helps. The wonderful women in our community run an excellent thrift shop and turn in a monthly sum which is precious beyond its weight in money, because it represents hours that busy mothers and professional women somehow spare to help in what has become a community adventure. Others help in the office with the mailings.

Our children, with their American blood, have also in their ancestry, Siamese, Guamanian, Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino blood. They are lovely to look at and nearly always above average in intelligence and the blood of Asia has put into their natures a gentleness which is very lovable indeed.

How are they received in the communities into which they go? Kindly and with love as other children are received! Three times only have we had any report of prejudice, even on a small scale, and we like to have parents tell us when there is prejudice, for it is our duty to help them meet any such problem.

Part of our job too, is to have our children meet fine people from Asia in order that they may be proud of their ancestry from that part of the globe, and visitors from Asia are frequent and very welcome.

One of the valuable by-products of Welcome House is something that I never thought of when we began the work. It is the effect that the story is having in Asia. Somehow or other news about Welcome House has gone all over Asia. We have visitors from various countries who want to see the children because they have heard about it. Communist propaganda tell them that Americans hate Asians and they want to see if we do treat the children with Asian blood as our own. They go away heartened and encouraged.

Our hope, of course, is that Welcome House will not need to exist forever. We hope that all adoption agencies will believe that American-Asian children can be adopted because there are people who want them. Agencies must of course, be willing to place children with people who want them whether those people "match" in race and religion. Certainly all care must be taken in placing any child, and our agency has social workers who exercise skill. But their criteria are from human sources of experience and common sense to which text books knowledge is helpful but secondary. Older social workers of sense and heart will know what I mean. Already we see the change.

Pearl S. Buck entertains two Welcome House children.

I look forward then to the day when there will be no more need for a special agency to place American-Asian children for adoption, or perhaps we will just exist to be a reference agency, having lists of approved couples who want American-Asian children.

It will be wonderful to see the job finished and no longer needed. It may be a long way off, yet Americans are surprising folk. Once we see the light we can move with amazing speed.

Meanwhile Welcome House carries on.