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## For Adoptees Interested in Searching for Roots

### Current Situation in Japan

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The Convention on the Rights of the Child ratified by Japan clearly provides for a child's right to know his/her parents to the maximum possible extent (Article 7). However, the right to be informed about one's adoption is not clearly recognized in Japan which has resulted in social service organizations adopting their own methods of support relating thereto.

For example, while there are child guidance centers that keep the records of children and their birth parents indefinitely after the children are adopted, there are others that discard all such records after a designated retention period. (The amended guidelines issued in 2013 stipulates long term preservation by child guidance centers of records relating to adopted children.)

Similarly in private support organizations, each entity has its own record retention policy, including what constitutes an appropriate retention period and which records should be kept in the first place. At ISSJ, we have always kept all adoption records since we started our adoption services in 1952. Saved records include interview notes of birth parents by the then-assigned social worker, photographs of the child, adoptive parents and birth parents, maternity record books issued by municipal government offices, etc.

### What Is Root Searching?

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Searching for roots is a process by which one tries to confront his/her own identity by asking life's fundamental questions such as, "Who am I? How should I live my life?" In addition to finding out about the background of their own births and upbringing, some people also desire to find out about their parents' and even grandparents' births and lives. A number of adoptees have a deep longing to search for their birth parents, siblings, and other blood kin. "Why was I adopted?" "Do I have any siblings?" "I want to meet my birth parents." Such are the questions from adoptees who come to consult ISSJ. What is important to keep in mind is that there is no preordained ending to the process of searching for one's roots. Even when the adoptee and the birth parents are able to meet again, that does not signify an end to this process. Rather, when one

considers the future interaction or relationship between the adoptee and his/her blood relatives, it is a process that lasts their lifetime.

### Things To Consider Beforehand.....

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Before embarking on the process of searching for roots, there are a few things one should think about. First is to question one's own reasons. It is also important to think about what one wants to do with the information about one's birth roots and what it is that one wants to know. Some people are motivated by wanting to reunite with their blood kin while others might simply want to know more about their adoption. Some also wish to find out their birth name, and others want to express gratitude to their blood kin. We believe it is important to ask one's motivation for root searching, and what it is that one wants to discover and why.

Another important factor to consider is timing. As a rule, ISSJ only makes contact with birth relatives after the adoptee has reached the age of adulthood. Typically adoptees contact us for root searching when they become an adult, get married, have a child, or when their adoptive parents have passed away. Some adoptees have held onto the idea of searching for their roots for a long time, waiting for an opportune moment to start. Even so, before you start searching for roots, you need to ask if the time is right for you. For example, if you have just lost your adoptive parents, you may be motivated by wanting to compensate for your loneliness by seeking blood kin. However, searching for roots does not always lead to a happy outcome. Given this reality, it is advisable to refrain from searching for roots in times of severe emotional or economic instability.

There is an inherent risk in searching for roots. Although we can make conjectures about the lives of adoptee's birth relatives during counseling, there is no way to gauge the current reality of their lives in advance. It is also possible that their situation is not conducive to reestablishing contact with the adoptee. For example, some birth parents might be remarried without having divulged the fact of having given up their child for adoption to their new partners, while others are not emotionally ready to meet their birth child. Thus the process of root searching requires much caution and consideration for the current living situation of one's relatives.

Regardless of the actual existence of any information relating to birth parents, many adoptees have the expectation of finding something out by asking the adoption agencies

that handled their adoption. It is no problem if the adoption agency has relevant records, but it may not always be the case. For example, one needs to consider the possibility of the records having become missing or destroyed in a fire or other force majeure event. Also, for adoptees who are Japanese citizens, the names of birth parents can typically be found in the family registry but some parents fail to properly register the birth of their child. If the parents' information is left unspecified at birth, it may not be possible to reach them. However, even in such a case, adoption agencies may have kept some valuable information such as the circumstances surrounding the adoption.

These factors could deepen the feelings of loss for the adoptees undertaking search for their roots. However, it is critical for adoptees to understand and accept these risks beforehand so they can be mentally prepared.

Moreover, it is important to think about the impact root searching may have on others. If the adoptive parents are still alive, one needs to think about the impact this process could have on them as well as on the husband currently married to your birth mother and your full or half-siblings, if any. With adoption, family relationships become more complicated, and one needs to consider potential emotional impact root searching might have on one's full and/or half-siblings. For example, one's full or half siblings may feel threatened by the sudden appearance of another child of their mother or father. These emotions can be observed even in adult siblings, who may be vulnerable to a great deal of confusion since they have lived all their lives without knowing the existence of another sibling. There are also other possible scenarios that could pose adverse impact. If more than one child had been given up for adoption by birth parents, there are many cases in which one adoptee is reunited with the birth family, but another adoptee is unable to do so even after trying. In such cases, the relationship between siblings can become severely challenged.

In all cases, it is critical to understand that root searching is an ongoing process without a predetermined end. Adoptees who might have always wanted to see their blood relations need to realize beforehand that the process does not simply end when they meet. They must understand that the initial meeting is only the beginning of their relationship: they need to be prepared to face the impact such reunion may have on other family members over time. Depending on the adoptee and his/her relatives, it is possible that they experience a sense of incompatibility or disappointment after the

reunion. While it is not unusual for the adoptees and their birth relatives to feel quite excited and emotional about their reunion, there are also cases where such intense feelings escalate into a sexual attraction. Thus, for any adoptees wishing to start root searching, it is necessary to keep in mind that the process rarely goes the way you hope and can often lead to unexpected consequences beyond your imagination.

Finally, the process of root searching is like being on a roller coaster for one's emotions, replete with unpredictable ups and downs with an uncertain end. Because of this, we cannot emphasize enough the importance of having someone close by who can support you. No matter how close you are with your adoptive parents, it might be difficult to openly discuss root searching matters with them. Please carefully consider who, among your friends and/or your partner or spouse, could provide you the emotional support through this arduous process.

## How Root Searching Works

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How can an adoptee search for his/her roots? Asking one's adoptive parents for information is one way. Some adoptive parents may be open to sharing information about what they know. Even so, it is possible that they simply have very little or no information. In such case, one could find out the names and birthdays of the birth parents through the family registry before the adoption or from the adoption decree from family court. Furthermore, investigative reports prepared by adoption agencies in support of the adoption could provide some useful information as well.

Even if you find out the address of your birth parents at the time of the adoption through the adoption decree, we cannot recommend that you simply show up. We don't know if they still live at the same address or how they will react to your sudden visit especially when you don't know anything about their current living conditions. One needs to think about the real possibilities of significant changes in the lives of one's birth parents since the adoption, such as divorce, remarriage, or birth of other children. Particularly when the birth parent is remarried, often the history of adoption has not been disclosed to the new spouse or to the children born into the new marriage.

If you know the name of the child guidance center or the adoption agency that handled your adoption, you could start your search by contacting them. As mentioned above, child guidance centers or adoption agencies may well have kept records of information

pertaining to your adoption and even subsequent communications with the birth parents. While how such information will be shared with an adoptee is generally decided on a case-by-case basis by relevant institutions, we highly recommended that you meet with the staff in person to obtain the information you seek.

For adoptions handled by ISSJ, we provide initial consultation by phone or e-mail. We will confirm the information sought by the adoptees and what, if any, information they already possess. Thereafter, for adoptees living far away, we conduct interviews either by Skype or in person in our office if there is an appropriate occasion to do so. Since ISSJ keeps all adoption-related records indefinitely, our social workers use such records to answer adoptees' questions relevant to their root searching.

If an adoptee wishes to meet his/her birth parents, we locate their current address by checking the family registry and one of our staff social workers will send a letter to them at such address. Thereafter reunions can sometimes occur, but there are also cases where birth parents need some time to mentally prepare for such reunion, or even cases where reunions fail to materialize.

These days, some adoptees may think about locating their birth relatives through social media such as Facebook. However, we do not recommended this method of contacting one's relatives on social media. This method does not take into consideration whether those relatives are mentally ready for such reunion. Instead, we encourage getting assistance from a third party such as a social worker to act as an intermediary and send a letter first. Although corresponding by letter takes time, it has the advantage of allowing time and space for the relatives to digest the contents of the letter.

### Need for an Intermediary

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In searching for roots, it is desirable for the adoptee to get a third party involved such as a social worker. Rather than asking a personal acquaintance or friend, it is better to involve an objective third party who can relate to the perspectives of both the adoptee and the relatives. Moreover, given this process entails highly sensitive and emotional issues, it is prudent to be guided by the expertise of a social worker who can navigate through the myriad of perspectives and priorities on both sides.

Right at the outset of the root searching process, there are a number of things an intermediary specialist needs to undertake. An example is providing counseling support for the adoptee as well as his/her birth relatives. The reunion itself and subsequent contacts are life-changing events for everyone involved. Having a chance to speak with an intermediary about potential risks and pitfalls in advance allows both the adoptee and his/her birth relatives to mentally prepare for the reunion.

## Support Available at ISSJ

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ISSJ accepts consultation by e-mail or telephone directly from the adoptees themselves. If the adoptee is asking for past records or information about an adoption handled by ISSJ, we will first confirm the identity of the inquirer and then share necessary information.

Since each case of root searching is unique, our method of support varies accordingly. We will first conduct a careful and thorough intake of the consultation with the adoptee before offering counseling support. There are many questions that need to be addressed during counseling such as where to start root searching, how birth parents might now feel about the adoptee, and concerns for potential adverse impact on the adoptee's relationship with the adoptive parents.

At ISSJ, if the birth parents' address of original domicile is known, we can use it to look up the family registry and find out their current address. Typically the family registry also contains information about whether birth parents are still living, their marital status, and existence of any other children between them. Some adoptees are satisfied with such information alone while others want to exchange letters and meet them in person. In the latter case, ISSJ social worker will first write a letter to the birth parents and convey a message from the adoptee. If there is a language barrier between the adoptee and the birth parents, we also provide translation of letters. Even when the adoptee unequivocally wishes to be reunited with his/her birth parents, we will initiate contact with them by letter. Once contact is established with the birth parents, ISSJ will provide counseling services to them as well. Thereafter, we will focus our efforts on arranging the reunion, providing interpretation at the time of the reunion, and making support available to the adoptee and the birth parents afterwards.

Moreover, ISSJ understands the role of intermediaries and can provide consultation

services on root searching even for adoptees whose adoptions were handled by different agencies. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions about root searching.