

BRITAIN'S ABDUCTION EPIDEMIC



TORN

When Ken Thompson's ex fled with their son, it took three years to find him. He hopes they'll spend Christmas together, but not all parents will be as lucky

APART

REPORT ELIZABETH DAY

THE FIRST THING Ken Thompson looked for when he was reunited with his son Andrew after three long years, was the gap between his teeth. "When Andrew walked through the door I said, 'Hey, you've turned into a big boy'. This huge smile came over his face and he had that same gap in his teeth," says Ken. "I thought: 'It's him. It's my boy Andrew.'"

Ken's normally calm voice falters slightly as he recalls the moment: he had spent a long time waiting for that smile. The last time he saw Andrew, he was a three-year-old toddler, obsessed with bicycles and insects, who used to jump into bed with his parents each morning to be tickled and told stories. Then, on 22 April 2008, Andrew was abducted by his

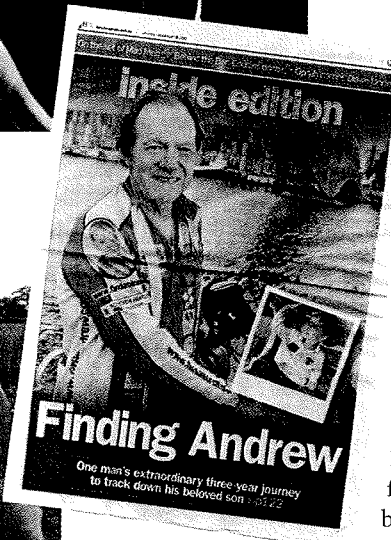
mother Melinda, who has a history of psychological problems. She took him from their home on a flight to Frankfurt and then on to Holland (where she apparently believed she would have the best chance of winning legal custody), and then disappeared altogether.

Ken, a plain-speaking deputy fire commissioner, was devastated by his loss, and a warrant was issued for Melinda's arrest. Interpol managed to trace her to Frankfurt, but there, the trail ran cold. In an unprecedented move, the Family Court in Andrew's native Australia lifted a ban on his name being published in order to aid the search, but the cross-border issues were so complicated that progress was hampered from the start. It took months

for even the smallest gain to be made and Ken, consumed with anxiety for his child's safety, decided to take matters into his own hands: he took early retirement from his job and this May started a 6,500km bicycle ride across Europe in the hope that someone might have seen his son.

"I was sitting at home, thinking, 'What can I do?'" says Ken. "And I thought, 'I can cycle.'" He set up a website, got fit and, funding himself through charitable donations and his own savings, travelled to London in time for International Missing Children's Day on 25 May. From there, he crossed into northern France and began the long cycle east, through Belgium, Luxembourg and into Germany.

Everywhere Ken went, he wore a ▷



TOP: Ken's ex-wife Melinda with Andrew. LEFT: When Melinda abducted Andrew, Ken cycled through Europe in a quest to find him

local lawyers who speak English and can alert Interpol for help in tracing the child. But, beyond that, mothers and fathers are left largely to their own devices, forced to play by the rules of a country whose culture, language and legal framework are often unfamiliar.

In Belfast, Dawn Sadia's seven-year-old daughter Nassima has not returned from Algeria since her father, Mustapha, took her there on holiday in 2006. Nassima, a bright, pretty girl with fair, shoulder-length hair and dark brown eyes, has been missing ever since. As Algeria lies outside the bounds of any international treaty, Mrs Sadia has been left powerless.

Under Algerian law, any children born to British women who are wives of Algerian nationals are also regarded as Algerian citizens. "It's absolutely awful," says Sadia, who has been advised by her lawyer not to go into the details of the case. Yet as she speaks, she cannot help but let the hopelessness seep into her voice. She sounds dispirited and drained of energy. "It takes so much time to get anything done," she says in a soft Northern Irish lilt. "It's one of those things."

Some parents take matters into their own hands. In a similar case in Nashville, Tennessee, Christopher Savoie ended up travelling to Japan after his ex-wife Noriko took the couple's children back to her native country. In doing so, Noriko violated a US court custody decision, and Tennessee authorities issued a warrant for her arrest. Yet, when Savoie tried to snatch his children back in Japan he was arrested, because Japan has not signed up to the Hague Convention.

In these extreme instances, tracking down children can be an emotionally and financially draining process: some desperate parents resort to employing professional bounty hunters or private detectives. Others, like Ken, seek to raise the profile of their plight in an innovative, attention-grabbing way. But the vast majority are left fending for themselves, pouring money into legal fees and having to navigate their way through the complicated bureaucracy ▷

The number of parental abduction cases has tripled since 1995

Ghana. "It's extremely difficult to bring children back from a non-ratifying country, as you have to do it through the civil courts of the country where the child is," explains Cooke. "There are no mechanisms in place at all and they do not have to honour or respect our laws."

LOSING A CHILD

Foreign Office figures released in July show that abductions to countries not signed up to a global treaty have risen by 39 per cent in the past year, taking the total to 146. However, the issue of child abduction affects parents from all social groups, with many children taken to the United States, Spain, France and Ireland as well. The majority of abducting parents are now mothers: some are genuinely fleeing abusive situations, but many simply want to go home or start a new life.

In cases such as these, the "left-behind parent" faces a gruelling fight for justice. The UK government can help track down

T-shirt bearing Andrew's face, beaming with that recognisable gap-toothed smile, and a phone number and request for help.

In September, Ken finally received the news he'd been waiting for: an anonymous emailer told him his son was in Amsterdam. The tip-off proved correct. "I was living on the edge for two-and-a-half years," says Ken, speaking from Holland. "Now, I have my son back and it's incredible. To any other parent who has had their child abducted, I would say: never, ever give up."

But although Ken's story has a happy outcome, the sad truth is that an increasing number of desperate parents will be spending this Christmas without their children. According to figures released by Reunite, the UK's leading charity in this area, the number of parental abduction cases has tripled since 1995. Sadly, it will likely be years before many parents are reunited with their children.

The government's International Child Abduction Unit, the central authority on the civil aspects of parental abduction, deals with more than 500 cases a year. "We have noticed a substantial rise," says Sharon Cooke, the advice line manager for Reunite, who puts it down to the fact that, "There are more mixed international marriages. The world is getting smaller because it is easier and cheaper to travel abroad. Also, companies are expanding internationally, so people get posted abroad with their jobs and often end up falling in love and marrying people they meet in foreign countries." The issue has been further exacerbated by the rise in divorce rates – when a marriage fails, one partner might want to return home or escape abroad with their child.

Two international treaties, The Hague Convention and the European Convention, have set the legal framework for child abduction cases in the UK and 58 other countries since 1985. The purpose of each convention is to secure the immediate return of a child to his or her own country of habitual residence and to ensure that international disputes over access are dealt with by the country of origin. But significant problems arise when a child is abducted to a country that has not ratified either convention, such as Pakistan, India, Thailand, Nigeria or

of law courts in a foreign country.

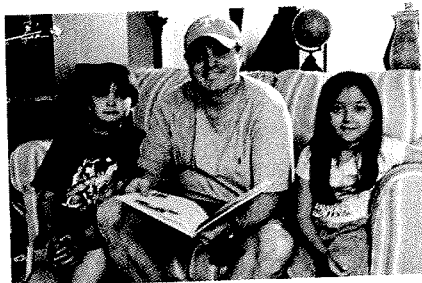
It is a bewildering process and one with which Lady Catherine Meyer is only too familiar. In 1994, her sons Alexander, seven, and Constantin, nine, went to spend the summer holidays with their German father – but never returned home. “You are left feeling completely on your own,” says Lady Meyer, who subsequently re-married the former British ambassador to America, Sir Christopher Meyer. “I was suddenly getting faxes from my ex-husband’s lawyers in German. I have schoolgirl German but legal German was incomprehensible to me.

“On top of that, it’s a huge bereavement. You don’t know where your children are. What if they’re calling out for you at night? It’s a horrible feeling.” But Lady Meyer, an elegant 57-year-old, refused to be defeated. For years she lobbied MPs and set up the not-for-profit organisation Parents And Children Together (PACT).

Yet her tireless campaigning came to nothing. Although a German court initially ruled that, in accordance with the Hague Convention, the children should be returned to their mother, the ruling was overturned by a higher court. It was decided that since the children had already spent four years in Germany, it would be too unsettling to move them again.

When finally reunited, she says: “My sons were practically grown-ups. These children are not told by the abducting parent, ‘I’m really bad, I’m doing something that is not correct.’ They are told, ‘I am doing this for your own good. Your mother is really horrible.’”

In fact, the impact of parental abduction on children can be deeply traumatic, sometimes only manifesting itself several years after the event. A 2006 report for Reunite interviewed 10 children, aged from 10 to 18, who had been abducted by a parent and spent between six weeks and 14 months away from home. Several of them experienced considerable stress and anxiety both during and after the abduction. One boy spoke of physical symptoms – nausea, headaches and vomiting – that increased the longer he was away from home. One of the girls recalled feeling too frightened to ask her father (who had



ABOVE: Lady Catherine Meyer in 1996 with photos of her children, who were abducted by their German father. LEFT: Christopher Savoie with his children Isaac and Rebecca, who were taken to Japan by their mother

‘Often the children are told that the left-behind parent has died’

abducted her) about her mother, or to admit that she missed her. To this day, the girl has a pronounced fear of the unexpected: “I was really scared if ever there was a knock on the door,” she says, “scared that I might be kidnapped. I’m still a bit scared now.”

The study was conducted by Marilyn Freeman, a Professor of Family Law at London Metropolitan University, who says that one of the most significant long-term concerns was evaluating how abducted children “regain trust in relationships with partners and family members. The children I spoke to found it extremely difficult to talk about their experiences.

“Very often, the children are told that the left-behind parent has died or rejected them. Then you think of the left-behind parents who have spent years searching and who are then handed these children who are strangers and

don’t even recognise them as parents.”

Astonishingly, there are hardly any systems in place to provide aftercare for reunited families. “It’s a massive issue,” agrees Professor Freeman. “What happens when an abduction is over is that everyone rubs their hands together and says ‘job done’. The child is returned, but for many families, it’s just the beginning of the trauma of re-adjustment.”

BECOMING A DAD AGAIN

Back in Amsterdam, Ken Thompson knows this better than most. After a three-year separation, his relationship with his son needs to be gradually re-built over time. His wife Melinda had formed the mistaken belief that Andrew was being abused by his father – in fact, she had been diagnosed with a paranoia disorder by one of Australia’s leading psychiatrists a month before fleeing.

Every day, Ken takes a tentative step closer to reaching out to the child he spent so long searching for. At the moment, their thrice-weekly meetings are overseen by a team of psychologists – to minimise the likelihood of Andrew being traumatised by his father’s reappearance. “I still can’t have a normal relationship with my son,” he admits. “I can’t take him to the park or the zoo. I can’t ride on a bike with him or go on a bicycle ride.”

In addition, the bureaucratic and legal process is extremely slow and complicated. Melinda is now in an Amsterdam jail awaiting extradition, while Ken is ploughing his way through Hague Convention Return application and custody issues.

But Ken doesn’t doubt for a second that all the effort will be worth it. Every time he feels downcast or frustrated, he remembers the first time Andrew called him “Daddy” after they were reunited. It is this single, potent moment that gives him the strength to continue. “At the beginning he didn’t know what a father was,” says Ken. “But the third time we met, he was excited to see me and call me Daddy.” Ken chuckles. “Now he says it all the time.” ●

• Elizabeth Day is a features writer for the Observer. Her novel *Scissors, Paper, Stone* (£11.99, Bloomsbury) is published in January