

# Lady Meyer Struggles for Parental Rights

By Timothy W. Maier

**SUMMARY:** Catherine Meyer's former husband stole her children away to Germany. She now lobbies for laws that would make international parental child abductions a crime.

**TEXT:** Ever since her two sons Alexander and Constantin were kidnapped to Germany in 1994 by her estranged former husband, Catherine Meyer has been fighting back. Because if it can happen to Lady Meyer, now the wife of the ambassador of the United Kingdom to the United States, it can happen to anyone. And it has. Thousands of parents find themselves in similar situations.

In her 1998 book, *They Are My Children, Too*, she painfully describes the ordeal she has endured since she was robbed of sharing her children's childhood. Alexander was 9 years old and Constantin was 7 when their father, Hans-Peter Volkmann, a German physician, decided not to return the children to their mother in London as was required under British law.

During the last six years, Lady Meyer has worked in the United States with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, or NCMEC, and has lobbied for laws against child abduction. She was instrumental in getting a congressional resolution passed this year in the House and Senate urging compliance with the Hague Convention, an international treaty designed to reunite children with custodial parents. She frequently testifies before Congress and her testimony helped launch a current General Accounting Office investigation of Hague violations in Germany, Austria and Sweden.

Lady Meyer heads a loose federation called Parents of Abducted Children Together, or PACT, a support group primarily for parents whose children are detained in Germany. She also is working with NCMEC to set up an international division. The founding meeting is set for November.

When she sat down recently with *Insight* at the British Embassy in Washington she was asked what it is like to fight for six years and still not have her children. "You begin to understand people who are wrongfully convicted, serve time in jail and then dedicate the whole of their lives to fighting for justice. You become like that," she says, clutching photographs of her sons. She fought to hold back tears as she told the story of her long crusade for justice.

**Insight:** Go back to Aug. 20, 1994.

**Catherine Meyer:** I came home and there was a registered letter waiting for me. I recognized the handwriting of my ex-husband. As I opened the letter I was trembling because there was something wrong about it. Why didn't he just telephone me? When I got to the phrase, "There is something I must tell you," I knew. I immediately telephoned a friend and was crying on the telephone as I said, "He's not sending the children back from their holidays." And this old friend, quite knowledgeable of the legal system, said: "Well, that's terrible, and this is very serious. He can't do that. That's illegal."

**Insight:** Were you separated at the time?

**CM:** For about two years. I had custody and my ex-husband had access rights. And what happened was that I sent the children on holidays according to our arrangement.

**Insight:** This never happened before? **CM:** No, but there were some signs that I describe in my book. It just never dawned on me that he could do a thing like that.

Insight: How often have you seen your boys since that time?

CM: In more than six years I've been allowed to see them a total of 24 hours. For the first five years I was never allowed to see them alone. The longest time I was allowed to be with them was two-and-one-half hours, and there were periods of one year, for instance, in which I wasn't allowed to see the children at all. It's an indescribable feeling. I mean, it's bereavement. In some ways it's worse than a bereavement because it never has an end.

Insight: Tell us about those meetings.

CM: In December 1998 I was able to see the children on my own with my present husband, Christopher, without a third party being present. At the beginning of the meeting it was very tense. Constantin was even afraid of getting into a car with us to drive out to a restaurant. But Alexander, who at that time I hadn't seen for nearly a year, was calm. We sat for lunch, the four of us, and it turned out to be nice.

The next visit I had was six weeks later in January of 1999. The children immediately became tense and aggressive and said they wanted to leave. The question naturally arises as to what happened during six weeks to change the children's attitude so much. They became really antagonistic, and by the time we saw them in February both said, "We don't want to see you anymore."

Insight: Any evidence of physical abuse?

CM: No. But nothing compares to psychological abuse. In some ways it's really more frightening because you don't see the marks, you don't know what the long-term effects might be.

Insight: What language did they speak?

CM: German, which was another huge problem because I speak only pidgin German. That was not the language in which I spoke to my children. This puts an additional barrier between them and me.

I asked Alexander, "Why don't you want to see me?" And he started reciting, "Because you wrote a book full of lies." And I said, "Alexander, have you read my book?" And he said, "No, but Daddy tells me."

And so I told him, "I wrote that book because I love you, and I've been trying to see you all of these years." To which he said, "You lie. Daddy told us that you can come and see us any time you want, but you never did."

Alexander was saying things that children don't say: "You force the press to write lies." And I said, "You know I can't do that. You know I don't control the press."

And so it was very difficult, because I could see how this child was reciting things that obviously did not originate with him. In December when we saw them I took along some Christmas presents. They were things from America of the kind every kid loves. Things tend to come on the market here before they do in Europe, and Alexander was very pleased with the gifts. You know, skateboards and things like that. Then, suddenly, he was saying, "And you're trying to buy us."

Insight: They don't write to you?

CM: I've received one card in six years. It was a one-and-a-half liner and obviously dictated: "Thank you for our present. Yours, Alexander." As if my child would sign "Yours."

Insight: Did the German court grant you visitation rights?

CM: Today I have no visitation rights whatsoever.

Insight: What's to stop you from getting on a plane, going there, knocking on the door and just announcing: "Mommy's home"?

CM: I did that in 1995, when I had access rights. My ex-husband didn't let me in the house, called the police and told them I was there to try to abduct the children. So, there I was in Germany surrounded by the police. I showed the policeman my court decision saying I have "an access right." The policeman relaxed and said, "Well, I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it, because in Germany access rights are not enforceable."

Insight: How have you been able to endure this?

CM: I think I survived by working hard for justice and holding to the conviction that what we have learned from my tragedy can be used to help other children and their parents.

Insight: The book was therapy for you?

CM: In one way it was awful because I had to go through it emotionally again. But on the other hand it was the first time that I was forced to talk about it. I don't like talking about my emotions because it makes me feel like crying, and if I'm crying I'm not fighting.

My initial book was published in England and it was called Two Children Behind the Wall because I feel like there is a brick wall separating me from my boys. Whatever I do is wrong: If I write to my children I am accused of harassing them; if I don't write to my children I'm accused of not caring for them; if I talk to the press I'm grandstanding; if I don't talk to the press then they say I won't fight for my children. My children were stolen from me, but it is I who am on trial.

Insight: The child of American parent Joseph Cook also was kidnapped to Germany but may be coming home soon. Does that give you some hope for your own case?

CM: Mildly, but after six years of disappointment it's very difficult to be too optimistic. And, I think, even Joe Cook is being careful not to count on it too much. After you've been disappointed so many times you decide to believe it when it happens. And a lot of people among the German authorities tell you, "Oh well, you have to have patience." Well, to a parent who has lost his children, what is patience? I mean, every day is a day more without those children. But I think, you know, it's fabulous what happened to Mr. Cook. And, thanks to the president and the Congress, we have been able to get a message across so that Germany now has accepted that there is a systemic problem in the way it handled obligations under the Hague Convention.

Insight: Because of your position, do you get any flack from the United Kingdom or from your husband, the British ambassador to the United States, about what you can or can't say?

CM: No, he has been unbelievably supportive and wonderful, but it's a two-edged sword. I think my present circumstances did not help my private case at all. Perhaps seeing me happily married is not what my ex-husband wants. And the local courts may be disinclined to listen to the wife of a British ambassador. But it puts me on a fantastic platform from which to raise the issue and fight for other parents. I'm really thankful, but it does impede me in certain things. A few years ago I joined French victim parents in demonstrating. Obviously, I can't do things like that now. So, it limits some of the things I can say. Because of my husband's position, I'm no longer just a private citizen.

Insight: Hillary Rodham Clinton calls this a "human-rights" issue. Do you agree?

CM: Without a doubt, when a child has no access to one of his parents and when a parent has no access to his or her children, it's definitely a human-rights issue.

Insight: Do you blame the State Department for not listing these cases as human-rights abuses in its annual reports?

CM: I don't think it's the State Department's fault in particular since no other country has identified this as a human-rights violation. It hasn't yet been seen as a human-rights issue because there hasn't yet been enough attention paid to it. When along with three American parents I testified before a Senate committee for the first time, we really were introducing the issue to senators who didn't realize there was a problem. And so I think too few have realized how often these kidnappings are happening and the enormity of the problem.

Insight: You've worked hard to get a resolution passed in Congress recognizing this issue.

CM: That was an important first step. It was wonderful for American parents. It's a step from which other steps may proceed, and it also was very important because it says to countries like Germany, "Look, we in the U.S. are aware that there is a problem, and we want Germany, which has signed the Hague Convention, to start looking at, and doing something about, this problem. It affects American children and American parents."

Insight: What do you think needs to be done to bring home your children and the thousands of American kids being illegally detained abroad?

CM: Unfortunately, still a lot. I think one of the things is that this must become a human-rights issue, which always has been one of my main objectives. That will help a lot. Because, once something is recognized as a human-rights issue, it takes on a completely new dimension. But in the meantime, unfortunately, we need internal reforms in countries such as Germany that ignore their Hague commitments.

Insight: Would you support embargoes against those countries that consistently violate the Hague Convention?

CM: That would be very difficult to do. Only 18 months ago most governments were saying, "We cannot interfere because those are private legal matters." But now people are admitting that these have become international concerns. Before going into embargoes and things like that, I think we'll need to do a lot more work to educate the public to this set of problems and injustices. And I hope we don't need to exercise international sanctions but can obtain voluntary remedies.

Insight: Meanwhile, some parents whose children have been kidnapped have given up on finding a government solution. They have hired Rambo-like groups to free their children by extraordinary means. Why haven't you done that?

CM: My own mother has thought of that quite a lot, actually. But I didn't do it probably because of my education, and I thought to myself, "I'm in the right, and the Lord's there to protect me." Also I believed in the legal system.

When you start realizing that the system isn't working very well the thought may come into your mind to try to rescue your children in a Rambo escapade. But for most of us that is just fantasy. Of course, I've been approached by people with harebrained schemes. You know, my story would be published in the newspaper and someone would phone,

saying, "Oh, I can help you. Come and meet me," or whatever. You're in despair, so you meet them. That's when you realize they are trying to get you to hire them to kidnap your children by force. I've always been against that. I'm opposed to it because there's a very high risk of children getting hurt.

Later, I found out that two bodyguards were used to take my boys back and forth to school. So the proposed heroics would not have been successful. If I had done it, how would I live in London? For instance, how could my children go to school without being re-abducted? And so the children would be grabbed back and forth. I know of cases where children have been abducted and re-abducted umpteen times.

I now look to the Lord, you know, to protect my children. I want very little - essentially, access to them. I want to be able to see them on holidays, if nothing else.

Insight: If you could tell your sons just one thing, what would it be?

CM: That I love them, haven't abandoned them and that anytime they want to talk to me I'm always available to talk and to answer their questions.c

\*\*\*\*PERSONAL BIO\*\*\*\*

PERSONAL: Married to Christopher Meyer, the British ambassador to the United States. Born in Germany, Jan. 26, 1953. Carries both British and French passports. Educated in London at the French Lycee and received her B.A. from the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Speaks five languages.

CURRENTLY: Actively involved with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children and other organizations with which she lobbies for laws against child abduction.

WORK HISTORY: Joined E.F. Hutton in 1980 and became one of the firm's top producers. In 1984, she represented distinguished Russian artist Alexander Zaitsev and organized exhibitions of his paintings. In 1994, gave up her career when her boys were abducted by her former husband and has dedicated her life to fighting for her rights as a mother.

FAVORITE BOOKS: Climats by Audr Maurois and Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky.