

# The fate of Rosemarie Doederlein, who vanished in 1954, is at last known

*She was 14 when she vanished from N.D.G. What has emerged is a bare-bones portrait of a woman who hid her identity and gave false information about her past.*

Author of the article:

[Susan Schwartz](#) • Montreal Gazette

Published Dec 19, 2022 • Last updated Dec 19, 2022 • 5 minute read



Vera Doederlein, 11 (left), with her sister Rosemarie, 13, in Germany in April 1954. They sailed for Montreal in September and, later that year, Rosemarie disappeared. Photo courtesy Vera Doederlein

Rosemarie Helga Doederlein was 14 when she disappeared one afternoon in late 1954. Her mother sent her to a bakery near the family's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce apartment to buy a loaf of bread — and she never returned.

She was new to Montreal, having arrived only weeks earlier with her parents and younger sister, Vera, from a village in Germany; she spoke no English or French and knew no one outside the family. Police efforts to locate her failed. Every year, the family moved from one neighbourhood to another, searching for her.

Now, at last, there are some answers.

Through the efforts of a Toronto police detective, a social media campaign and, mostly, third-party DNA obtained through a consumer DNA genetic testing kit, it has been determined that Rosemarie turned up in Ontario in 1957 and married at 16, had a family, lived a full life and died at 69.

Yet what has emerged is a bare-bones portrait of a woman who used false identities and supplied inaccurate information about her past. The answers have raised more questions — questions to which perhaps Rosemarie alone knew the answers.

Why her sister never got in touch with her birth family is “the big mystery,” said Vera. “But I am thankful that her skeleton wasn’t found somewhere up in the Laurentian mountains.”

Vera Hastie moved to California in 1963 and now lives with her daughter, Christa Hastie, and Christa’s family. At 79, she is the only surviving member of the immediate family and she and her daughter decided recently to make “a last-ditch effort” to learn more about what happened to Rosemarie.

With help from digitized records from the 1950s, Detective Constable Michael Kelly of the Toronto police department’s Homicide and Missing Persons Unit was able to figure out that Rosemarie surfaced in Ontario and married in June 1957 at 16 and gave birth six months later. She had five sons, got divorced, married again and moved to British Columbia, where she ran a bed-and-breakfast. She died in 2009.

“We have been able to answer the question of *what* happened — but the *why* and the *how* give rise to more questions,” said Kelly, who concluded his investigation at the end of September. “Did she leave voluntarily, or was she taken and convinced not to look for her family?”

A social media campaign resulted in press reports and some leads — the Etobicoke Guardian, for instance, reported in September that some residents said they may have known Rosemarie as Mary or Helga — but it was DNA that solved the case.



A hit on the third-party consumer kit ancestry.com showed Vera to be a close DNA match to someone in the Toronto area: By the amount of DNA the 20-year-old match shared with Vera and by her age, “there could be only a handful of possible relationships to my mother — one of which is grand-niece,” Christa said.

Privacy laws made it difficult to locate members of the current generation, but consumer DNA genetic testing kits and other records made it possible to build a family tree.

With assistance from the German government, investigative genetic genealogists and professional DNA tools, it was determined that the probability the DNA match is Rosemarie’s grandchild was 100 per cent, Christa said.

The Toronto-area DNA match had little information about Rosemarie or her side of the family. But a search by Kelly of digitized records of Toronto-area directories led to the identification of people who provided information confirming that they were descendants.

“We were able to connect with a few of her sons and a few grandchildren,” Christa said. And they learned a few details about Rosemarie.

“Apparently, she made delicious German food and embroidered, crocheted and knitted — and even won an embroidery contest later in life,” she said. One grandson told them Rosemarie loved to collect red purses.

According to two Toronto-area grandchildren, Christa said, Rosemarie never wanted to cross the Canadian border and supplied inaccurate information when questioned about her past and her family history.

“There was something she must have been afraid of,” she mused. “What stopped her from saying something?”

“The person who would know best was Rosemarie,” Kelly said. “But even what she told her children was not the truth.”

She never spoke of having lived in Montreal — ever, he said, and provided false information about Germany, including incorrect names for cities and people.

She also adopted an assumed name. On her marriage certificate, she listed a false birth date, a false family name for her father and her mother’s maiden name. Kelly was able to match the handwriting on Rosemarie’s marriage certificate with that on the prayer book she left behind.

An original Montreal police report or media reports describing Rosemarie’s disappearance might have helped, Kelly said, but none could be located.

“I am relying on Vera’s explanation 68 years later,” he said, adding that he believed Rosemarie’s parents “were genuinely heartbroken over her disappearance.”

Vera told Kelly she believes it unlikely that Rosemarie ran away because, if she had, she would not have left behind such cherished possessions as her prayer book and her red purse. “But we are all guessing and supposing,” he said.

Still, what has been put to rest is “this notion of ambiguous loss,” where people can’t let go because the possibility exists that their loved one is still alive, Kelly said.

Said Vera: “I have joy knowing that Rosemarie was surrounded by the love of her five children, several grandchildren and great-grandchildren, all of whom loved her dearly.”

Another bonus: by submitting DNA through such sites as Ancestry and 23andMe, Vera was able to identify a few new blood relatives and to connect with cousins in Germany. They now have weekly conversations, on Fridays.

Christa said she and her mother shared their story to raise awareness about the role of consumer DNA kits in solving missing persons’ cases and to encourage people to buy them — perhaps as Christmas gifts — and to upload their DNA to the sites to help law enforcement with missing persons’ cases.

“As more people in the world submit their DNA to consumer databases like Ancestry and 23andMe, the ability to reach across time zones and continents to find a missing relative is in our hands,” she said. “Yet police lack training in accessing and using this information.”

Christa said she also wanted to recognize the assistance she and her mother received from investigative genetic genealogists in Germany, Canada and the United States, from Toronto police detective Kelly, “who went above and beyond” and from Facebook genealogy group administrators and friends.

“I think that for every person whose loved one goes missing, it is far easier to think they had a full life,” Kelly said. “And Rosemarie did.”

[sschwartz@postmedia.com](mailto:sschwartz@postmedia.com)

source: <https://montrealgazette.com/news/local-news/the-fate-of-rosemarie-doederlein-who-vanished-in-1954-is-at-last-known>