

JUNE 5, 2008

VINELAND, N.J. – Many years ago, the late Bill Bertoia – a legendary antique toy dealer and co-founder of Bertoia Auctions – was on one of his regular buying trips around Europe when he received an invitation to a birthday feast in Ladenburg, Germany. The honoré was an auctioneer named Götz Seidel, whose company specializes in antique toys. At that time, neither of the gentlemen had any inkling their businesses would one day grow closer as a result of Götz's little girl, Pia. Now 19 years old, Pia Seidel will soon conclude a successful two-month internship with Bertoia Auctions that has helped to create a bond of international cooperation between the Bertoia and Seidel family businesses.



On April 14, Pia commenced her duties at Bertoia's, a spacious gallery near the New Jersey shore, where she immediately felt at home surrounded by thousands of antique toys – many of them early German pieces. "I literally grew up with my parents' auction company, which opened 20 years ago," Pia said. "Now I help out with the cataloging, especially the Steiff toys, which are my special interest. It was exciting to arrive only days before Bertoia's April 17 to 19 auction, as there was so much activity and so many nice people."

The arrangements that led to Pia's internship were done in proper European style, with her parents, Götz and Corinna, making the initial contact through Bertoia's president and co-founder, Jeanne Bertoia. Both Pia and her parents felt that work experience at a "prominent, very well-known auction company" would be an invaluable opportunity for her, especially at such an early point in her career. What Pia hadn't counted on, however, was an invitation from the close-knit Bertoia clan to stay as a houseguest in their family home.



(ABOVE, left to right: Jeanne Bertoia, Pia Seidel, Michael Bertoia)

Jeanne Bertoia explained: "I'm fortunate to have a spacious home, so there was no reason why Pia should stay anywhere else. She has been a delightful addition to the household and a very willing and capable staff member at the gallery."

Pia remarked that the Bertoia family has made her feel "very comfortable ... I was even welcomed every day to lunch at Hector and Ophelia's house," referring to Jeanne Bertoia's father-in-law and mother-in-law, who live near the gallery. Pia said she will be telling her friends back in Germany that she "can't wait to go back," and believes her internship will create a cooperative marketing relationship between Bertoia's and Ladenburger Spielzeug Auktion that will continue into the next generation.

In fact, the parallels between Pia and the younger generation of Bertoias – siblings Michael and Lauren – are striking. All three individuals grew up around their respective families' auction businesses. Helping with cataloging and previews, learning how to handle phone bids, even checking out customers and carefully packaging their goods are all skills they learned in common as youngsters, although on opposite sides of the Atlantic.

One of the aspects of her visit that Pia most enjoyed was the opportunity to travel. "This was my first visit to the USA, and I was lucky enough to see much of the country as I helped Bertoia's staff members to pick up many collections. Our travels made me realize how large America really is. The town I come from, Ladenburg, is full of charm – a picture-postcard scene at every corner. It was inhabited by the Romans, leaving us many historical buildings and sites, but is probably best known for being the home of Dr. Carl Benz, founder of Mercedes-Benz. But it is very small, with a population of just over 12,000 people."

Although she was exhilarated about coming to the United States, Pia was also nervous about traveling alone, without her father as a chaperone. "I didn't know what to expect," she said, "but it has been an experience I will never forget. I have realized that the auctions are very similar in the U.S. and Germany. The big difference is that American auctioneers speak much faster!"

Asked to relate her most memorable experience as an intern, Pia quickly replied that it was her chance, during Bertoia's April sale, to translate phone bids for a German phone bidder who did not speak English. "I handled his bids through most of the sale, and he was very successful. It really made me feel like part of the team."

Pia will be coming back to America later this year, to assist with Bertoia's Nov. 7-9 Winter sale. As always, there will be an abundance of European antique toys on hand and an opportunity for Pia to use her German language skills on the phone bank. But before she makes her return trip, Pia and her parents plan to take the opportunity in September to show their scenic hometown and nearby surroundings to Michael Bertoia, who will be representing the family business at antique toy shows around Europe. "We will welcome Michael to come to our auctions in Germany," said Pia. "I feel that we have a new family in Jeanne, Michael and the entire Bertoia staff. We will remain close for many years to come."

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