SILENT VOICES

Community & Enterprise Department
Sligo County Council
Riverside
Sligo

Tel: +353 71 9111111

Contents

Preface

Silent Voices is a collection of personal stories. The contributors are people who have in some way been affected by Partition or the 'Troubles' in Ireland or by conflict elsewhere in the world. All have a specific Sligo connection although the stories are not all set in Sligo. The stories reflect the people who told them and it is their own voice and words that you read in this book. The stories were told to an interviewer and later edited by that interviewer in collaboration with the storyteller. What you read here is the final distillation from that process.

This collection does not set out to represent a definitive view of any event, person or place. It simply tells you, the reader, how the events recounted impacted on the storyteller. Some things you read may make you feel uncomfortable; some may make you feel sad. Others may cause you to laugh or smile or bring to mind friends lost, wisdom gained, times past. For some readers the events in the stories will be part of history, and maybe for many of us little bits of history will emerge through these pages that are made new by being told from a different perspective.

Storytelling is about individual truth telling. It is not about setting any record straight and does not presume that there is a 'true story'. There are many true stories and for every story here there are dozens more untold stories that make us who we are in Sligo in 2011.

Storytelling is a way to make sense of things that have been outside our understanding, or beyond us. Telling is cathartic, it brings closure to the storyteller and many of the contributors reported strong feelings of relief associated with speaking their own truth to another person whose only job was to listen and record what was being said. It takes courage to tell our stories, especially if they are

hard to hear. As you make your way through this book remember that the contributors are just ordinary people trying to live their lives as best they can.

All contributions are anonymous, except where the substance of the contribution demands otherwise. The experiences recounted touch on universal themes associated with the impacts of conflict. Many names, places and other identifying references have been changed in the stories. Images used have been mainly chosen by the contributors.

Nothing is sanitised or tweaked to make it acceptable to any group or viewpoint and it may well be that you will read something in these pages that will make you think again about something and cause you to look at people and events in a different way. If that is so, the collection has done its work.

“Where will I start?”

Where will I start?

Where will I start? When I came from England to Ireland when the marriage broke up? That's how I ended up going to live in the North. I was here in Sligo for 18 months and my mum and dad was helping me. There was no such thing then as Deserted Wives Allowance, there was nothing, so I was still living with mum and Dad. That was in the 1960's.

Then my father-in-law, God be good to him, he got me a little house in Crossmaglen. You would get money then in the North, same as in England, you could have got about £11 a week.

I knew nothing about Crossmaglen before I went there. All I knew was that my husband was from there. I hadn't the foggiest idea what it was like. It was a beautiful little town, people were so friendly and so nice, even my landlord that we were renting the house off, he was an absolute angel. He used to come and take us to Mass on Sunday, him and his wife and children and if it was raining, he would come and take me and the children to school. And the people at the bottom of the road, when they got to know me, if a car came in the road or anything, they would check out to see who it was. I was lucky, I had beautiful neighbours.

My husband had deserted me so I was left with not a very nice mother-in-law, an awful mother-in-law, and that's when it all started off, that awful life, back then. Even now, years later, it's upsetting to remember that. It's still upsetting, that's what my son said to me, he says, 'Mum you've got talk to someone about it'.

I had the children with me and there was nasty things said to them by some people, they said they didn't have a father and they were bastards. My mother-in-law was very nasty and she blamed me that her son deserted me. I was only 28. I was afraid of her. If she said jump

then I would jump. I did have an awful bad marriage, awful bad; I was beaten a lot of times. There was no support in those days, nobody to talk to about it, no; nobody at all.

But as I said, we had beautiful wonderful neighbours, wonderful neighbours. But it was different for them. They were married like and they had their children, some had older children. Where I was, where I lived, there I was, like just – we'll say a quarter mile in a field and there was nothing near me only just this little house, all on its own. I used to say to the children it was like someone just came and picked up the house and dropped it in the middle of the field. It was very remote, just me with two little children. My eldest had made his communion and his younger brother was only four, very, very young at the time.

I got a little job, a cleaning job with a schoolteacher, a few extra pounds and my own mother-in-law reported me for working. They came out and they were going to take the Deserted Wives money off me, the eleven pounds a week. But the teacher, she was a lovely lady, she said, 'No, all Annie does is come here to pass the time because she's scared out there in that house on her own. She makes a cup of tea and I give her a pack of cigarettes.' She was a lovely lady, that teacher. Then I had nothing.

But it was awful when the bombing started. I remember being in the house one night and all of a sudden – there was a little shop down the road, a couple of times it was targeted, and a bomb went off, and the windows in my own little house, some of them was broken.

Even my Mum and Dad didn't even know how scared I was in Crossmaglen. For months on end, the two children and myself went to bed with our day clothes on us, because if any bangs came or any noise we knew we could get up and run.

I remember going into school in the morning with the children, and I used to be petrified because the soldiers used to be behind, you know, they would be walking behind the ditches sometimes. They were around any time, all the time, night and day, and I used to be literally petrified, literally petrified.

I remember one day, on St Patrick's Day and I had the children all ready for going to Mass, and we had our little shamrocks on. I looked out of the window – there was about 12 or 14 soldiers outside the door. And my children had an old bin with water in it, and of course English children used to love frogs and pets and things, and they had

the frogs in this water tank. The soldiers were there – they were nice, they were very nice. A soldier had chocolate in his pocket and he knew I was scared and he gave the chocolate to one of the boys. The boys didn't understand, they thought it was a game, God love them, sure they thought it was great to see ones coming around, because in them days, years ago, every little boy got a gun for Christmas with the caps and of course they saw the soldiers there with the real guns like, you know, for them, it was a bit of excitement.

But I was petrified, because I knew a girl, well I didn't really know her personally, but I remember a girl that was tarred and feathered in Crossmaglen because she spoke to a soldier; that was all. That went on in those days. She was stripped and there was tar put on her and she was feathered. You see that's what I was scared of that day when the soldiers came round. I thought, oh mother of God, the next thing is I'm going to be tarred and feathered.

The children knew that I was scared, and I was trying to cover up, to keep it from them. lt was a horrible experience. I was scared when the soldiers came into the house, because people knew that they had come in and I thought people would tell; sell you out for nothing, for doing nothing, in them days. I was afraid because of me being in England, and the children having English accents, that they would think the children were English and they'd make assumptions, and think I was cooperating or whatever you call it with the soldiers.

Another part of the Troubles that stays with me is the helicopters. You'd go into town and there was always helicopters, every day, flying around you and you'd think 'Oh my God what's going on now? They would be down low and you would think, 'oh bloody hell, the soldiers are around now, where's the next bomb going to go off?' We were surrounded by the border and if you went shopping you had to go through the border and you were checked and all that.

And then there was a big explosion down at Cullyhanna and I always remember seeing the pieces of the bodies of the soldiers, and they were picking them up and putting them into bags. I can always remember that and now even to this day after all those years, when I hear thunder, I'm absolutely petrified, because I can hear the bomb, not the thunder. Or, if I hear the bang of a balloon going off behind me, or on New Year's Eve with the fireworks, I'm absolutely terrified. I won't go to my sons on New Year's Eve because they have the fireworks going off. Anything like that, it absolutely freezes me.

I still remember that bombing to this day and how I thought at the time 'Jesus that could be one of my children in years to come. Some mother loved them children.' I could just visualise my son maybe going into the Army. They are all human beings; that's the way I looked at it. I can see where the IRA were coming from, there were a lot of them genuine, they would think to themselves, 'right, this is our country, you shouldn't be here', but at the end of the day those Army lads were paid a wage just the same as you or me going out to work, that was their job like, you know, because a lot of them joined to get trades in the Army. Afterwards I knew people when I was in England in later years, lads that were in the army and they said that they joined for to become mechanics.

After that bombing I didn't know where to turn to. I got to a breaking point; let me think when that was; 1972 or '73. Nobody was helping me. I couldn't live on eleven pounds a week, then something else happened.

My youngest, he had kidney problems, he used to wet the bed. The poor little darling he went down with my mother-in-law one night and he wet the bed. She got up and beat me, hit me across the face because the child wet the bed and she threw the mattress out and burned it. That pushed me to breaking point.

I couldn't tell anyone what was going on, not even my mum and dad. My dad and me were very close, I was afraid it would break his heart to think I was in such a state. I kept trying to put on the big show that I was happy and all that, but I wasn't.

I didn't know what to do. I couldn't take it any more because I thought Jesus the soldiers are around, I'm here in the middle of the thing, if anybody comes in or if anything happens, what am I going to do with the children? I think there must be a God up there because that night, my mother-in-law came up to see me. She very seldom used to come up there and I don't know how she seen it or what she saw, I can't remember whether she saw the tablets or what but she got the doctor and an ambulance.

I was put into Saint Columba's. I don't remember anything for the first couple of weeks, I hadn't a clue what happened or how long I was in the hospital or anything. She took the kids but apparently they had an awful time with her.

I got lots of shock treatment. I swear by that treatment. I know it's a horrible treatment because your mind, your brain is completely

shattered, but as far as I was concerned that was what brought me back to life.

I remember too a policeman being blown up at the bottom of our road, and I knew that policeman like from going to school with the children and seeing him in town. We were coming out from town one day and we just came on it, a big crater in the road, with white bags. The soldiers were picking up body parts and putting them in white bags. There was a shop that was targeted, a petrol station and grocery shop. I never found out why because not very long after that I moved out.

After the policeman was blown up my ex-husband wrote to me and told me to come back down here as he had a place for us. I always remember as we were going across the border, from Crossmaglen into Newry, into Dundalk actually, getting the train. The soldier says, 'where are you going?' We had the bags packed and he says, 'I wish to God' he says, 'that it was me that was going away today.' They shouldn't have been in Ireland, there was no way they should have been in Ireland, but at the end of the day, the things that were going on shouldn't have gone on, it was all tit for tat. I was all for a united Ireland but I wasn't for that carry on at all, to this day I wouldn't be for that carry on, the shootings and bombings. I saw too much of it. It stays with you.

I went back to my husband. We moved back to England. It was a big mistake, going back to him again. The same thing all over again, womanising and bringing women home to the house and into my bed and putting me out of the room, it all started again. I had no support. I have the scar there on my leg, where I had 37 stitches in it, he cut me with a knife, and he broke a tooth, and he broke my nose in three places, and I remember well, God be good to her, my sister coming and I was sitting on the settee with an old sheet wrapped around my leg, and she said, 'what happened?' and I said, 'I fell.'

I told her I fell down the stairs, and she got the ambulance. I went to hospital, and I remember the doctor saying to me, 'do something about this', he says, 'the next time it will be your throat', but I stuck it out because I was scared, I had nowhere to go and nobody wanted to know, not even the police. My sister got the Police and they said that there was nothing they could do unless I took him to court. There was nothing they could do. I just had to get up and get on with it. There were no refuges back then, in the early 70's. I had no phone.

It was an awful struggle. You had to keep it all to yourself because you were embarrassed, I was so embarrassed to think that I was such a disappointment to my mum and dad and like, in their eyes I wasn't but I was their oldest child and they didn't want me to go to England in the first place. My sister wrote to Daddy and he came over and brought me home.

Then I got my marriage annulled. It was two years of hell trying to get that done. I got it on the grounds of cruelty. They got all the hospital records to prove it. I would never ever advise anybody to go for annulment. I thought it was the best thing if I ever wanted to get married again. But it wasn't explained to me what it meant really. Years later my sons went to the chapel when one of them wanted to get married and they were told by a priest, that because my marriage was annulled, they didn't exist. I swear to God. I said, 'listen, how can you not exist, I have your certificates, I have your communion and your confirmation certificates'. I didn't know that when you get an annulment, in the laws of the Catholic Church, your marriage is completely wiped out.

I got a job after that and met a lovely man. He had been married before so we couldn't get married in a church. We got married in a registry office in England. Then we went away and got married in the Church of England. It was a beautiful service. We had twenty five years of real happiness. He was very good to me.

I'll always remember what Daddy said to me 'Look, if he is good to you, I'll accept him, as long as he is good to you. You married an Irishman and look what happened to you – as long as he's good to you and looks after you and the children he is always welcome in my house. But Mammy never accepted him because he was a Protestant, up to the day she died she never accepted him. I said to her in the nursing home 'Mammy, what in the name of God did I do to God? ', that's the words I said to her, 'what did I do to God Mammy? Everything I touch goes wrong in my life'. 'I know what happened to you' she said, 'You married an 'oul Protestant'.

The awful thing was my friend Karen was there with me, she drove me because I can't drive. Karen is Church of Ireland, she was with me and she heard what Mammy said, and you can imagine how I felt. Since my husband died, through all these years that woman has never missed a day but she calls to me either before she goes to work or she comes home from work. I remember after my husband died,

I was sitting down talking to my mother. 'Mammy' I said, 'you don't like Protestants, why did you go to the funeral?' 'Oh' she said, 'Oh I wanted to see what the inside of them 'oul churches was like'.

The time Lord Mountbatten was blown up. I was working in the factory in England. I remember hearing it on the radio that morning, or on the television or something like that, that morning before I went to work and I remember saying to my husband 'Vincent, will you pick me up, I'll ring you, and let you know what's happening.' Because I'm not kidding you, I was absolutely petrified going into that factory that morning. That we would be all killed, all the Irish would be killed.

Vincent was sitting on tenterhooks all morning waiting for me to ring him, but I rung him at dinner time and said, 'Vincent, everything is perfect, don't worry.' Not one person in that factory ever said a thing to me about it. There were three Irish that was working there out of a couple of thousand and nobody ever mentioned it. But I felt so bad thinking that it was in my own home town, in Sligo, that it happened. And I felt disgusted. I felt absolutely disgusted to think that, like I was so proud of being Irish on Saint Patrick's Day wearing my shamrock and my badge and this happened. That day, when Mountbatten was killed, it took the pride away. But the people in the factory, they didn't hold it against me.

I came back here to Sligo to look after my dad, and then he died. Then three years later my husband Vincent died. When I came home with Vincent, Daddy said, 'it's a prejudice really, it's like you are judging somebody without knowing them personally' – about Vincent being a Protestant and all.

There's no way I would want to go back to what was going on in the North back then, years ago in the 70s like. I'd like to forget all that now. I'd like to be able to bury that. My husband, God be good to him used to say to me 'don't live in the past, go for the future.' But I can't do that, I want to but I can't. It's the guilt I have for all the years and everything that happened. I do say to my children 'oh if it was only for me, you would have had a better life.' Thank God we got out of it, that there was nothing happened to me or my children.

I know a lot of people lost their lives on both sides but, thanks be to God, if there is a peace in Northern Ireland so that everybody can work side-by-side, both Catholics and Protestants, then something has been achieved. In England, I worked side-by-side with every nationality and religion was never brought into it.

If the fighting has brought peace to Ireland, then thanks be to God, the people that fought for it should be made heroes. If I'm somewhere and a rebel song comes on, I'm up there you know, and even my children, even though they are all born in England, they are all into the rebel songs. Don't get me wrong, I would be all for a united Ireland but not for bombings and shootings, or going back to being so scared of what was going on around you. I don't give into that old shooting and killing and all that at all. I mean does it solve anything?

I think there should be a 32 county Ireland but I don't want my children shooting or killing for it. If I thought for one minute that one of my boys were going out to shoot somebody deliberately it would break my heart, it would really break my heart. I would rather see them living as they lived in the famine than go back to that. If someone came to me now and said, right, you're going to lose your house tomorrow unless you do this, I would say right, sod you, take it, I'll live in the shed. I'll live in the shed.

I would love to see a happy Ireland, I would love to see Gerry Adams, and whoever else was involved with it, standing up and saying, 'right, Ireland is united and we are all happy and there's going to be no more of this bombing and shooting.' I would like to see us united in peace. That's what I want for my children. I would never never never like to see my children or my grandchildren going through what I went through, what I saw.

I mean – I know both sides was fighting for what they believed in, but the only good thing I suppose that came out of it was that we got the Peace Process.

We got the Peace Process and all that, like they go to prison but then come out again in a few years, and they are walking the streets, they are free to go and murder again. To me it's like well, life should be life. If you go out and deliberately murder somebody you should get a life sentence. I don't know how I would feel if somebody murdered one of mine – oh Jesus, if somebody murdered one of my children – oh God bless us and save us, I couldn't live there, I couldn't, I would have to move. My heart goes out to people in the North now. There's no way I could live next door to somebody that even hurt one of my children or my grandchildren. I think I can understand the heartache.

As we are now in 2011 we seem to be getting along all right, whereas years ago in Northern Ireland it was bad because a Catholic couldn't get a good job. You were ostracised, you were put to one

side, whereas now they are alright. Catholics can go into the police, they can go into the hospitals, they can be doctors, they can be nurses, they can be teachers, whereas before they couldn't get any jobs like that. They couldn't mix, now they can. So I say, stop the bombing, stop the shooting, stop killing each other, because at the end of the day what is it all for? I live now for my grandchildren, and my children, that's my future, that's my world.

Acknowledgements

Sincere thanks must go above all to the storytellers for their courage and generosity in sharing their personal experiences with us through this publication.

Thanks to Mary Daly, Joni Crone and Marie Crawley, who gathered and edited the stories, for the sensitivity, care and professionalism that they brought to this project.

To the many people who gave of their time to review this publication, thank you for your insight. Thanks also to Tommie Gorman, RTE, for launching this publication.

Special thanks to those who helped steer and guide this project – Bernadette Maughan, Chris MacManus, Marion Brogan, Noel Regan and Sue Hegarty. Thanks also to Peter McKee from Borderlines for sharing his project experience.

Thanks to the Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Committee who commissioned this project and to the project promoter Sligo County Council In particular, thanks to the assistance provided by Sligo County Library Service and Community & Enterprise Office staff

Thanks also to Jeff Kay of JDK Design for his expertise in designing and printing this publication.

This publication forms part of the work of the Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Action Plan (Phase I) and has been possible thanks to the support of the EU's Peace III Programme.

European Union
European Regional Development Fund
Investing in your future

sligo.ie

The Project has been supported by EU's PEACE III Programme managed for the Special EU Programmes Body by Sligo County Council on behalf of Sligo Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Committee (a sub-committee of the Sligo CDB)

'Silent Voices' is powerful, original, deeply moving - at times searingly so - and gives invaluable insight into what was suffered by real people on this island, and why, over recent decades. This book is also a timely warning against attitudes which would have us bound by the past, rather than bow to it. It is a reminder that, while we cannot change that past, "we have chosen to change the future," as President McAleese has said.

Patsy McGarry,
Religious Affairs Correspondent, The Irish Times

Perception and reality are inseparable themes in these stories of courage, betrayal, resilience, perception and pain. Landscape writer Rebecca Solnit once noted that if a border is natural, it must have no history. The experience of reading 'Silent Voices' bears testimony to that.

Lorna Siggins,
Western Correspondent, The Irish Times

These are stories of ordinary men, women and children who were caught on the wrong side of the line: the Border in the case of the Protestant community; the uniform for the Catholic in the UDR; ethnicity for Travellers and refugees; the perimeter fence for the prisoner. The official record appears superficial and contrived when set alongside these riveting personal stories of loss, displacement, hurt, misunderstanding and endurance.

Paddy Logue, Irish Peace Centre

Secrets, subterfuge and sometimes shocking, these stories reveal a Sligo I barely recognise, but the voices from the grass roots cannot be discounted. The truth in these accounts is unsettling, but rightly so.

Mary Branley