SILENT VOICES

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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.


“It is important for me to keep my culture”
RUSSIA
Black Sea
GEORGIA
ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN
TURKEY
Caspian Sea
KURDISTAN
IRAN
SYRIA
IRAQ
Mediterranean Sea

It is important for me to keep my culture

I was not literate,
but my teacher educated me
I did not know how to sing anthems
but poor people taught me
I did not know anger
but the oppressor taught me
I did not know liberty
but my homeland taught me

I was born in a camp in Iraq. We lived in tents for years. Then we moved to Jordan. We lived in tents there for another four years. Life was really hard. The weather was really bad, hot. It was really scary as well, a lot of danger. We got help from the UNHCR. We got litres and litres of water. There are eleven in my family. We had one tent for cooking and one for sleeping and sitting down with friends. The camp was between Jordan and Iraq. It was really dangerous, a lot of animals, snakes and things. We had to clean the ground all the time.

Before that we lived in a house. My dad was trying to build a house for us. He worked really hard to get money to buy stuff for us. Saddam was really bad in Iraq. He wasn't helping people, except for some friends. When the bombs were dropping all the shops were closed. We had no food. My dad was trying really hard to move us to Jordan by lorry. We got up at night, at five in the morning to get into a lorry with a lot of Kurdish people. We were afraid we would die. My dad just prayed. Then there were aeroplanes. It was really dangerous. My mum was sitting in the lorry crying and crying. We were all holding

each other until we got to a safe place. It was a long journey for hours and hours in the truck.

Then there were Americans giving us food, giving us tents, helping my dad and my brothers putting up a tent. I was happy. I said, 'oh my God, we are safe, we are in Europe.' I was crying. Then my dad said No, we were in a safe place but it was not Europe. It was really hard after that. First we were in one place then after a year we moved to a different camp. But some terrorists they were putting bombs into our camp. They were trying to kill us. All the people were moving from buildings and from tents, moving outside to be safe. One night it was really bad. We were all moved outside. We were sitting on the ground. The bomb was in a car and we had to run away.

In 1988 Saddam killed thousands of Kurds in Halabja and many other places. He wanted to kill all the Kurds. He used chemicals. It was genocide. Kurdistan is part of Iraq. You can find it on YouTube, all this stuff.

There were a lot of Kurdish people in the camp in Jordan. The UNCHR, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, came to the camp. They were speaking to families saying which countries they were going to. My aunty was trying to get us into Finland. But they didn't accept us because we are a big family, I think. After four years, in the next camp a Kurdish family were sent to Ireland. They sent a picture to my brother. When we saw the picture we were so happy. My dad was praying we would go to Ireland. I was saying, 'Dad, only in our dreams. We are in a camp, how can we go to Europe?' He said to pray. Then our name came up for Ireland. We were looking at the names and we saw our name on the list. Oh my brother was so happy, oh my God, yes. Then we were waiting. I think it was one month. The Department of Justice was interviewing our family. I was small at the time only thirteen, now I am eighteen. Then after that we were waiting six months. We went to Mayo first, then we came to Sligo. There were three groups, one went to Mullingar, one to Carrick-on-Shannon and one to Sligo. Nine families I think. We lived in a big house in Sligo for four years. We had a lot of upset and moving around. We are happy now. New life, not scary, no snakes. Ireland is my dream come true.

My first year here I had a problem with the language. They were saying, 'how are you'? I didn't speak any English. I didn't know what they were saying or what to answer. I would go home crying from

school. But my teacher was really nice, helping me to speak English. The students are nice, some of them are friendly.

My first language is Kurdish, my second is Persian then Arabic. I can speak a little Arabic but understand it and read well. I learn English now for four years. And French for my Junior Cert. I had three teachers helping me to learn English in Ireland. I love them. I can't forget them. They were nice. Now I have to do my Leaving Cert and they are helping me as well and I am trying my best. Ireland is a really good place for people to live. My whole family is together now.

My dad used to work as a lorry driver. He can't speak English that much. They are not giving work to him. My mum finds it hard. She was in Iran, then Iraq, then Jordan, now Ireland. She is trying to get English and finds it very hard to learn. My dad loved working hard. He says, 'oh if I was in my country, I could work. Why do you need language? I can do everything.' My mum and dad are paying for us, to help us with school books. My sister is looking for work. She is not getting any money. She says, 'It's really hard looking for work. I am copying a CV, copying and giving it out but no work.'

Sligo is a nice place, nice people, we have strong health. We love Rosses Point, a nice place, I love it. We have Yeats. I am learning about Ireland. I went to Northern Ireland, to Belfast with my school. I am going with my dad to different cities in Ireland. I love Sligo. It's like New York for us.

In Ireland I heard it was war between Ireland and England, in history, people were dying. In Iraq it was the same, between Iran and Iraq. In history, or now, war means fighting and soldiers, killing people and dying, being terrified.

It is a good thing to fight for freedom but in the past Saddam was doing things for himself and his relations. He didn't care about other people. Iraq is rich enough in oil. He was keeping the riches for himself.

When we were small we were not allowed to go outside. My father doesn't like fighting. He worked hard for us. When there was fighting our house was moving, shaking, falling over. My father wanted people to talk, face to face, no fighting. Talking for freedom is better than fighting. Everyone needs freedom but not by throwing stones, breaking nice hotels, breaking shops. I saw a Kurdish boy at the back of a crowd, just walking. They killed him. He was shot in the head. My mind is full of these things. People coming into houses, shooting,

killing. Our life was really bad there. We had a sitting room and a big garden. We were scared going to the bathroom, across the garden. Maybe someone will be in the garden, coming to kill us or kidnap, look for money from my family. I couldn't go to the bathroom until the morning. It was very bad. My dad's shoulder is bad now, like a boil coming up, because he was doing a lot of hard work to get money for us, to buy clothes, to buy food.

We are Muslim. At Ramadan, for one month, we get up at three o'clock in the morning, to eat, wash our hands, and wait for time to pray. We do housework. Pray again at lunchtime. Then we read the Koran. About six we make food to eat. My mum makes Kurdish food, like rice, chicken soup, salads. We put all the stuff on the table. When we were in Iraq we were just sitting on the ground. We had no table.

In Ireland we get up at three o'clock for Ramadan, fasting and praying, then sleep. Then get up at eight o'clock for school. It's really hard for one month, going to school tired, sleepy, no eating at all, no drink. But God is helping us.

We have Kurdish friends in Ireland from when we lived in the camp. We have friends in Carrick. We have no friends left in Iran or Iraq. I had an accident in Iraq, no traffic lights. It was really bad. I will never forget it. I can never go back. I like our house now in Ireland. I like the garden, I like animals, rabbits and dogs, puppies. I like living in Ireland now. I still speak Kurdish. I write Kurdish poems. I can't forget Kurdish. I live in Ireland but I can't be like Irish people. Everything is different here. The religion is different. But not that different because we believe in God and we pray. There is a Kurdish church in Dublin. In Sligo there is a hotel where Muslim people meet. It is important for me to keep my culture. First the culture and second the religion. There are a lot of different people in Europe now, Kurdish, Pakistani, Arabic people, who are Muslim. I would like to have a good life in Ireland, to get a job, get money to buy clothes.

I want to go to the IT, do business studies, then get a job, have a good life. I don't understand politics in Ireland. I don't follow it. I love Ireland because people accept us. I am praying God to help the government.

There are a lot of people in Ireland from the camp. They never talk to people. They have never been able to talk about it. I would like to have no differences between the colours, to respect each other, respect different religions. Don't be like Egypt, fighting, breaking

windows. Fighting is not good. I am afraid people in Ireland will think we are like that and won't give us work. I want to finish my course and get work. People might not give me a job because they think I am from Asia or something like that. I'm scared of that. People are not giving work to my father because of the language. I am afraid we will face discrimination. I want to work and to have a good life here; that is my hope for the future.

British army, of the soldiers. We were always going over and back and I didn't have any fear. I suppose because we had people in the RUC, my cousins' husband and my wife's cousin as well, that if we were picked up, we would have someone to use as a reference. And my wife on the other hand would always have been a little bit less comfortable in the North then I would have been. She was fearful of the soldiers and the army and the RUC.

People did talk to us about incidents in the North, not a lot, but they would a bit, when atrocities would happen. If we take the time of Bloody Sunday, the man that was working with me at that time, he took the Nationalist side as it were in that and was a bit hostile towards me for a little while. It wore off and we remained good friends afterwards and it's understandable, you know. But people's attitudes towards us as a community never changed.

I suppose everything is advancing in some way or another all the time and trying to look back at the past is negative. You have to move with the way things are evolving. There are far more important and difficult things than your religion and the politics of the country. Economic survival is far more important than any of those things I think. I've seen down through the years so many people showing a degree of bitterness and resentment and they have never sought or made many advances of their own. It eats away at you. Life is short and I would think the best approach is to try not to create unhappiness for yourself.

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'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