SILENT VOICES

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Contents

Preface	vi
Where will I start?	1
The shadow becomes lighter	11
We didn't know half of what was going on	23
Any chance of a salmon?	31
I wanted to start a new life	41
It's a different story nowadays	45
Keeping the family secret	49
It was so different from the North	63
If I was born on the other side	81
We only had the Provos	85
In business you get a different view of life	95
I am grateful to be alive	109
It's just part of my family history	115
That was all down to the North	119
One event changed my life forever	123
Nothing is simple	131
Crossing the line	135
I was so caught up in it all	141
It is important for me to keep my culture	147
Looking for directions	153
Republicans have feelings – We are flesh and blood	157
It was absolutely crazy stuff	171
Do you go across the Border much?	176
It was all over in five minutes	177
There was no other path for me...	181
The struggle in Africa	207
I went from strength to strength but it wasn't easy	215
You were with your own people	221

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.

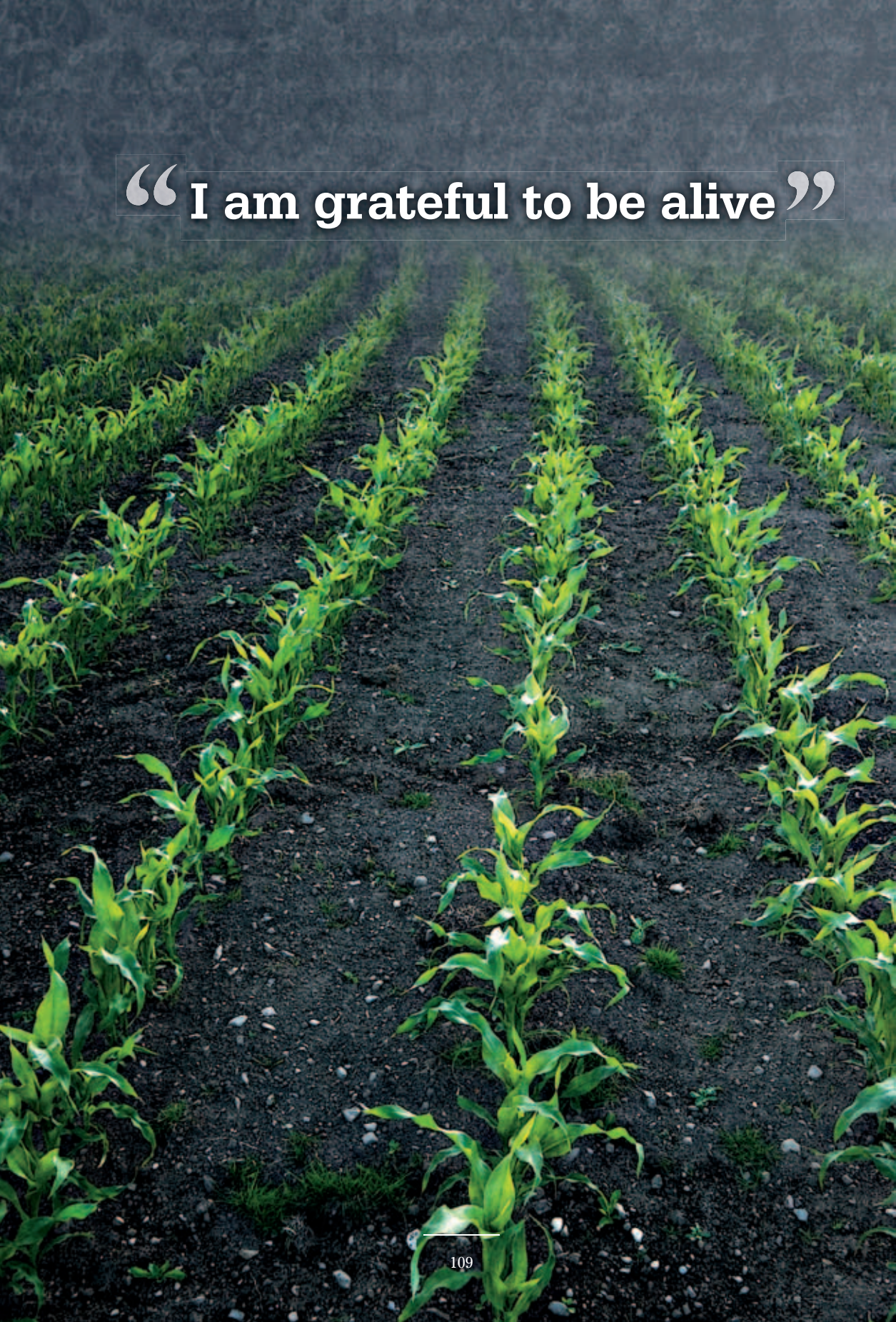
Storytelling is about individual truth telling. It is not about setting any record straight and does not presume that there is a 'true story'. There are many true stories and for every story here there are dozens more untold stories that make us who we are in Sligo in 2011.

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.


“I am grateful to be alive”

I am grateful to be alive

I was a little kid but bad things stay in your mind forever. It was for a few months when the government changed, I saw bombs and shootings and everything, people running to save their lives. We all had to leave, my mother and my aunt and my cousin. My aunty and her daughter are in America now. I phone my Mum. She sent me to Europe and risked her life. She had to flee to another African country. She is still there, I am here by myself, and it's hard. I lost many people in my family. I lost my Dad, I was eight years old. We had to leave but we could call home. Then we had to move to another country and we weren't safe and I had to come to Europe. I lived for a few years in another EU country. I didn't know about Ireland, about conflict and everything, I just knew Ireland as a place on the map.

I thank God I'm alive. I am here three years now, waiting and waiting. Everybody you can ask, they will tell you the same. We are still waiting, for years. One day you get a letter in the post from the Department of Justice, yes or no. You just have to wait for that post. Your life is on pause.

I have lots of friends now, other refugees. We just eat and sleep, walk into town, watch TV, eat and sleep. The next day walk into town, go to the gym, come back, eat and sleep. At least you can get exercise, come back tired and sleep without stress. It's very hard living without my family. I hope we will meet up again. I live with that hope. Whether you are Christian or Muslim, we have only one God. So we pray and hope, that's the thing, just hope, hope, hope. My family is religious, we believe in God. But we don't have to be happy when God gives us something nice or to think when he's punishing us, that we did something wrong. Punishment can follow maybe with a good thing. I don't know if you understand? We have to even appreciate when

God gives us a hard life, not just a good life because we have to thank him for everything he does to us, you know, every second of our life is from God. I believe we have a life after this life; we go to heaven. No one will ask in heaven 'where are you from? What is your status'?

There are racist people in Sligo. You can see, they don't like black people. I don't want to change my skin colour, you know, because people don't like it. Even if we got permits to work I think we would still have racism. People think we come here to take their jobs, to take everything but we are not here for that. We can't work, we are not allowed. They just see us from outside, they judge us from outside, that's not good enough; they have to see what's inside of us. From outside they see we are black, they think we are some terrible troublemaker or whatever. They drive us to be bad because of how they treat us. If you treat me bad because I'm black, I'll be bad, but you have to treat me as human. I am human, a human being. If you treat me bad I have to defend myself. I'm human.

Living here I saw things on the news about the North. I heard the story. They were telling us what happened between Northern towns, between Catholic and Protestant. I know about the conflict from word of mouth, TV, news and things.

The conflict in my country is different. It is not about religion. It's about the government. It's like what is happening now in Libya, the government, it won't step down. In my country we had mafias, they came to control the town, they came by force. They fought to be where they are now and they don't want to leave. They will kill people or fight, force people out of their homes, like what happened with my family. That government is there twenty years. I can't go back. Once you leave my country, if you come back you will go to prison or they will kill you.

If the government changed in the future, if it was a good government I would like to go back. But African presidents are selfish, they just take for themselves, they are punishing people, you know? If they would treat people like they treat their children we would have no war, but they don't. In Africa we have everything, resources and everything but the people don't use it. People in America, people in Europe they use it, you see?

People are not treated equally in my country. The government is the problem. It is better for my family in America. My auntie is old, my cousin has three children now. My auntie minds the children, her

grandchildren and my cousin has work. She has a better life now, but I don't. I would like to work but I am not allowed. I would put myself in any job, even cleaner, I wouldn't mind, shop assistant, anything. I know computers, first aid, English. I would like to be a childcare worker or a nurse. My cousin in America, she is a nurse. I would like to have my own family and to see my Mum, in the future, if I get my status, if I can travel.

You have to forgive and forget, you know? If you keep forgiveness in your mind for the whole of your life, it will make a difference. You have to forget, move on. It's hard. I still have dreams. I try to forget. I read the Bible. I think about something else. You don't talk about problems every day, you don't even talk about asylum seekers because you have to clear you mind. I don't watch the news that much. I don't want to think about that part of my life. It is upsetting because we see people dying, killing each other. So I don't think it's worth it, to put yourself through that stress, to watch it, so I try to forget, to watch something else, because we have our own stress. It's better to watch something else, to relax. I watch movies a lot, to take my mind off things. I don't watch news about Libya, they have their own problems, and they have to sort it their way. I hope the rebels succeed but I don't know a lot about it. A good government is a democracy. You can say what you want, you know? Not if you say something you find yourself in prison. I was in Dublin when they had a protest about the hospital in Sligo. I saw the demonstration. It was peaceful, the guards were protecting them and everything.

Back home you see the policemen with guns and if you do anything – bap, bap, bap – there is a shooting. There is no freedom to speak. You can only speak in your house. It's really difficult because you don't trust your neighbour, he might be working for the government. You might say something to your neighbour, then the next day you might find yourself killed or in a prison cell. A lot of things like that are going on.

When I am with my friends in Ireland, we sit around the table, we chat and we laugh. We have an acting class every Thursday, it's really fun. It's half Irish, half refugees. When we are there we forget all about the past and everything. We laugh a lot. Those Irish people they don't make a difference between us and between themselves. They treat us as human.

In Ireland everything is different, the culture, the music, the dance, the food, the taste of the food. In Ireland you just live in your house, you shut the door, you wake, go to your job, come back, shut the door. But back home, once a week or every night sometimes we go visit neighbours, we have much more community life. If something happened to you, all the community would have to help you, they would come and help you, that's their job, they would stay to encourage you. Now there is nothing. You stay by yourself, shut the door. I cry the whole time. Nobody wants to share. Where I grew up you shared everything. Not here, not now, no. The food is very different. We have all our own food, our own language, handwriting, everything is different. I used to read a lot, back home, a long time ago, now I prefer to watch movies, tv, read magazines. Sometimes I think if I was back home I would have my own family, my own career. At home, people marry in their twenties, have three or four children, sometimes eight children, sometimes only one child, it depends. I grew up in an Orthodox family, now I go to a Catholic church. If I want to go to the Orthodox Church I have to go to Dublin. In my country, if you are Catholic or if you are Muslim, you are welcome. If I was at home, maybe I would be in college, I don't know.

I'm grateful to be alive, I have a bed to sleep in, and I have meals. I hope in the future to have my status, to be with my mum, to have my own family. If it's possible to bring my mum here, you know, that's the hope. I call her sometimes. She calls me sometimes, because she is my mum, you know. She says, 'How are you, my baby?' What can I tell her? I am alive.

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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