

SILENT VOICES

(c) Copyright 2011 Sligo County Council. All rights reserved.

All stories in this publication are copyrighted by Sligo County Council.

Readers may use these materials solely for personal and non-commercial use. Readers may download or send material to a printer solely for these purposes. It is forbidden to otherwise copy, modify, or distribute the contents of these pages, or publish, broadcast, transmit, or otherwise distribute any portion of this publication either in machine-readable form or any other form without the express written authorization of Sligo County Council.

For permissions and other copyright-related questions, please contact:

Community & Enterprise Department
Sligo County Council
Riverside
Sligo

Tel: +353 71 9111111

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.

“The struggle in Africa”



The struggle in Africa

Most people I think, have heard about genocide in West Africa because of the news and the film Hotel Rwanda. I have been affected by conflict in that part of the world. I cannot say what country. I would like people to know why people are fighting. What is the backbone of this conflict? What causes conflict, especially in Africa? I would like people where I live in Sligo to understand.

In my opinion, these countries that are suffering from conflict are the ones that have natural resources like gold, diamonds, copper, aluminum, stuff like that. Like in Liberia for example, the rebels want to get control of the territory where the natural resources are. Sierra Leone is another example. It is a very rich country, in resources, but it is also one of the poorest countries in Africa because of civil wars and corruption. It is important to check the motive behind it. In Sierra Leone there was a very nasty war between the rebels and the government troops because they wanted to control the territory of the diamonds. They wanted to exchange diamonds for weapons and ammunition. The rebels got the support of the people.

The news in the West does not always give the full story. Take Liberia for example, Charles Taylor got control of the country. Then he exchanged diamonds for arms and sold the arms to Sierra Leone. Now he is being charged in the Netherlands, in The Hague, for crimes against humanity. Anyone who steals the wealth of another country, or their own country and causes thousands of people to be killed is guilty of crimes against humanity. Many people from Sierra Leone fled to The Gambia, many people.

I was taught not to fight. I tried to get an education in my country. But you know, if you are not financially strong, it is hard. To go to higher education you need finance. I know Ireland was colonised by the English. Many African countries were also colonised, so now I speak English.

When people have to leave their own country they should get asylum and support to make a new life. I cannot talk about what happened to me. I want to forget, to move on with my life. If I talk about it I have to remember what it was like when they came for my family, to kill my family. I don't want to think about that or to keep talking about it. I want to live now, to integrate into this country, into the community in Sligo.

I have learned about Travellers. They are very kind people. They have suffered discrimination and bad treatment. Every Saturday they come with their vans to take us to football matches. There is a team in the hostel, called Globe House Dragons. I like sport. I would like to see the team getting into a league. That would be great for morale. It would give everyone a lift.

I think a lot of people don't understand that we are not allowed to work. I want to work. I used to be a chef. I have qualifications. I know all about food hygiene, health and safety. I could teach people. But when you are an Asylum Seeker, you can't work. Even if I get to stay here it will be years before I can become a citizen.

You just have to wait. The process is very slow. They are in command. You have to wait. You have to keep positive. My life is very different now, completely different. I knew nothing about Ireland before I came here, just that it was English speaking. I thought it was part of the UK. I saw a film about the North, about Enniskillen. The only difference I could see was the number plates on the cars. Everything else looked the same to me. In Africa every country has a border with flags and soldiers. I did not know that Europe has no borders like that. I could never go back to my country. It would be too dangerous. I did not want to leave but I do not want to live a corrupt life. I want to make my future in Ireland now, to get a job, to further my education. That is a dream for me.

I don't think I will ever see my family again. International calls are very expensive but I have some contact on the net. There is light at the end of the tunnel. I will never give up hope. One fine day, you never know, only God knows.

You need to be positive. I try to push myself in different ways, like going to the library. It's free. I can get different books, get more knowledge. I like detective novels; they take your mind off things. It's a good experience in Ireland but it's also a challenge. You get good days and bad days. If you think too much you can get down. I try to

eradicate the bad times from my mind. I don't want to destroy my mind. But I see some people around me can't cope. It affects them a lot, thinking about their family and waiting and waiting. They think they will get some news, and then they don't know what's happening. They have to wait again. They get down, they get depressed.

It's very hard to survive on nineteen euros a week, not knowing what will happen in the future. You have to have strong willpower. If I keep thinking about my situation, if I get down, no one will lose, except me. When I think about it too much I get heartbroken. If I get sick, if I have a heart attack, I will lose. At the end of the day, I am the only one who feels this pain, my own pain.

Life is about strong willpower and good faith. You can jump up and down, protest, but at the end of the day, you realise life is about money, finances. If you are not financed in this town, you can't move. But you have to keep going. If you think about something bad, make yourself think about something good. If you think about death, think about life. You have to have determination and willpower. You have to accept you will get down for a while but you have to try to integrate. How you do that depends on each individual person. Some people don't like to socialise. You have to push yourself. If you stay in one place, people get to know you. They might need your help for something some day. I try to mobilise people, to bring people together, organise things. Like last month we travelled to Galway. Before that we went to another town. Sometimes we go to Donegal for a football match. It brings people together, even people who don't like football; they come for the bus trip.

There are some talented lads on the team. They want to be good footballers. People like watching good footballers. They don't see the colour of your skin, they see you as a good player, that's the first thing. Football teaches people to overcome difficulties, to face challenges. Life is a challenge actually. You finish up with this one and another one comes in front of you. Challenge after challenge. You have to be mentally fit to meet life's challenges. If you overcome difficulties, it's a good experience. You learn from it.

One of the hardest challenges living in Ireland is the system for asylum seekers. Having to stay in one place, three to a room. Waiting to hear from the solicitor, waiting to hear about your case, for months or years. You can walk around outside, go where you want, but all this waiting and not knowing is like mental torture. It's like prison.

Everyone wakes up at the same time, eats at the same time. There is no choice. It is good to have a bed, to have meals. It's not good not to be allowed to work. A short term, part time permit would be good, while we are waiting. It's a procedure. You can do nothing. You just have to wait.

You have to keep busy. We play football, snooker, go to the library, read newspapers. I read novels and books about health and safety and food hygiene. I think everyone should know how to avoid food poisoning or food contamination. It's good to have inspections in the hostel. We should have them more often. It's good that they change the menu every month. It would be good if we could cook for ourselves. If everything is provided you do nothing. I don't like doing nothing. I like to be active. I like to help people as much as I can.

I don't know much about politics here. I read the Irish Times. Someone wrote that the contracts to the hostels are renewed every year. Nobody benefits from this system except the hostel owners. The government here treats asylum seekers like cattle, moving them from here to there. I don't want to keep moving. I want to settle here, to work. I would like the right to work. I would like to pay tax, to contribute to the Irish economy. Every little helps. I don't want to just take. I want to give.

The government and the hostels give us a helping hand, a bed and three meals a day. We could run our own hostels, cook our own food. This would give us some satisfaction, some independence. We'll see what happens with the new government, if there is a little change or a big change or no change.

When Irish people here the words Asylum Seekers some see the negative side of it. They think we are just here for money. This is quite wrong. They have no knowledge of how the asylum system works. If I was able to work I would have more respect and more dignity. If you don't have dignity and self respect it's not good for your faith. The moment you put me down I feel down, I start to lose faith. If you disrespect me just because I come from Africa I feel really down and low because I don't have the power, I don't have the tools to challenge you.

We are free to practice our faith here. We have religious freedom. In the hostel there is a mosque. We pray every day, five times on Friday. To have that freedom is important. Faith doesn't only mean religion. Faith means strength, a good mentality, good will, that's

all part of faith. It's a feeling I have in my heart. Since I was seven my parents taught me 'respect your elders.' This is the number one priority where I come from, show respect. Elders doesn't just mean your family but people in authority and to treat everyone else with equal respect. When people take that away from you, you have to stand up against injustice. I come from Africa. If I violate the law in Africa they will prosecute me. If I violate the law in Ireland they will prosecute me. This is right. We should all have equality before the law. When you go to a foreign country, you should respect the constitution of that country. In every democratic country citizens have the right to voice their opinions, to come out with their point of view. If you don't cast your vote your voice isn't being heard. You have the power to vote, to demonstrate on the streets, the power of the people. When you have freedom of movement and freedom of speech you don't need to be violent, you can challenge on any level.

We learned a little about Ireland in school, that Ireland was a British colony a long time ago and we learned that the IRA were labelled as terrorists. It's good to have the Peace Process. Suicide bombers are not good, you could take innocent life. That's not the solution. Some people, when they think of Muslims, they think 'terrorists'. But killing innocent people, that's not what Islam is about, it's a religion. The Prophet does not commend those types of actions. Terrorism is unlawful. To take somebody else's life is unlawful. Terrorism is not in the Koran. They can hold the Koran and call Allah's name and kill, but it is not documented there. If you are a good Muslim and believe strongly in your faith you would never go that path. It is wrong. The fanatics say they do this for the cause of Allah. It is wrong.

There is good and bad in every society. Muslims have good people and bad people. Christians have good people and bad people. The IRA were labelled as terrorists and they are Christian. They planted bombs in the UK in the 80's. They were fighting for a cause. They believed that was the only thing they could do to change things.

You hear people talk about democracy. But in 90% of the countries, in my opinion, they are not exercising democracy. America is a superpower. They say they are champions of democracy. But when did black people get the right to vote in America? How did they get it? Through peaceful protest. They came out in numbers and in the end of the day, they succeeded.

In Egypt now people are coming out in numbers because what was happening was wrong. You cannot rule a nation for 20, 30, 40 years and have your son take over, then a family member, in a kingdom. Nobody voted. This whole thing started with a fruit vendor in Tunis. He was there for 20 years. That's what I heard. They destroyed his fruit stall. He poured petrol on himself and burnt himself. That's where the protest started in Tunisia. People started an uprising. In Egypt, the army fired on people but later they stopped.

If one person takes a stand it can make a difference. The population is more than the military, more than the police. If the population is five million, they can't kill five million, which would be genocide. Peaceful protest is the best way. Just go and sit down. Come out in numbers. Stay on the streets. If thousands of people come, it will change things. One voice cannot be heard but thousands can. The majority carry the vote.

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 than 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.

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.



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