

SILENT VOICES

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

Community & Enterprise Department
Sligo County Council
Riverside
Sligo

Tel: +353 71 9111111

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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 wanted to start a new life”



I wanted to start a new life

I am a woman from Africa. I don't want to say what part because it could put my family in danger. My life has been affected by conflict in my country and inside myself. I did not want to leave my children or grandchildren. I had to run for my life. I cannot say how I got here because that could put others at risk. I did not know anything about Ireland. I heard it was a part of Europe. I thought Europe was a rich place with lots of tall buildings. I thought Sligo would be full of skyscrapers. I thought I would have a new life here.

I used to have a business. Now I have no work. I'm not allowed to work. As an Asylum Seeker I get a bed in a centre, in a shared room. The bedding is not changed often enough so I have to wash it myself. I get three meals a day, always at the same time, like prison. I can't choose what I eat. This is nobody's fault. It's the way the system works. If I have to be somewhere else when meals are served I miss that meal. I have no money to buy extra food. When I come to meet you for this project, or to meet anyone outside the centre, I want to be clean, to smell good. I can't afford shower gel. I get nineteen euro a week. Nineteen euro! People say that is shocking. As a woman I want to look good, to wear a little make up, and to fix my hair. I have no money for basic toiletries. I am willing to work at anything. I want to work. I want to pay my taxes. This makes no sense. Why keep me here for months, for years, doing nothing? The only people who benefit are the owners of the hostels.

I hear about Peace III projects getting funding. That is good. But even a very small amount paid to participants or a voucher would make a big difference. I have been asked to tell my story over and over. One time I was offered a glass of water and a piece of bread.

People in Sligo are friendly. I have not experienced a lot of racism. I have heard stories about people saying about us: 'they go around wearing designer shoes.' Sometimes you get good shoes in Charity Shops. If people see you looking well they don't understand that the only place you can afford to buy anything is the Charity Shops. It is humiliating.

It's not just having no money. Its being stuck in this place. Having nothing to do. It is depressing. Sometimes you crave different food, hot spicy African flavours or sauces. But you can't get it anywhere. I crave it sometimes, a simple thing like that, a little taste of home. I used to have plenty to eat. I ran a good business. I would like to run a business here but I'm not allowed. I wanted to start a new life. Now I have no life.

Since I came here my grandson has passed away, my brother was injured and died from his wounds. Sometimes I wish they had killed me too. I would be better off dead. I would be in heaven.

I used to have a good life. I worked hard. I got up at 4am to get my children ready for school. We had to leave at five in the morning because of the traffic in the city. The school was two hours away. Then I would drive to work for eight o'clock. I would have to pick up my children in the evening, go home, cook, clean, wash dishes, wash clothes. I was happy looking after my family. Now they are gone. They have to pretend I am dead. I have lost everything.

I thought I was coming to a good place. I saw a video about the North of Ireland once, about Peace Building and the Troubles. I didn't understand what that meant. They were showing what was happening in those years. I got the shock of my life. I never saw that before. I never knew. Then I thought it was like what happened in my country. The government party fighting with other parties. In the North, the Catholics and Protestant parties seem like two tribes fighting each other. It is a bit better now in my country, but still they are fighting. It is better in the North but still they are shooting sometimes.

My parents told me not to hate anybody. I told my children not to hate anybody, only to love each other. But as a child I was told not to go that way to school because 'those people will kill you.' I did not understand why. I did not fight but I had to leave my home to save my life. If I see you, a stranger, you are not white or black or green, you are a human being. You are the image of God. That helps me; to think like that. People take your house, kill your family. It makes me

bitter. They say forgive and forget. Can you forget? I don't think so. Some things you never forget. I say I forgive them. They are far away. If I looked them in the eye could I forgive them? I don't know. I want to forgive to help the next generation to live a better life. Because they weren't there. They didn't see it. They are innocent.

I believe like in the Bible that some people have to sacrifice their lives. But you don't do it for you. You do it for the next generation. My generation has suffered a lot. Our children died. People in Ireland say we come here to take their jobs. I came here for freedom, just to live.

In my country we also have a lot of foreigners. I didn't know what a refugee was. Foreigners get better treatment in my country. I can't go back. My family would be in danger. I could lose my life. I don't want to go back. I don't want to think about the North of Ireland and what happened there. It takes me back. I don't want to think about those times. I want a new life, a better life. I want to work.

If I met a politician I would say, Let Me Work. Don't leave me here to rot. Just eating and sleeping and walking around. Like a prisoner: sleep, wake up, eat, sleep again. It's like the parable in the Bible. One person made a seed multiply, one buried it. I want to be fruitful. I could run a business in Sligo, a good business. I know how.

Instead I have to stay here, waiting and waiting. Waiting for years. The government promised change. They have been talking for ten years. Nothing has happened. Nothing has changed. I hope this story helps a little bit to change things.

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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