

# SILENT VOICES

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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.



“Keeping the  
family secret”

## Keeping the family secret

I was brought up in a house with Republican sympathies. My Dad was very angry at the time the hunger strikers died, he would have vocalised that in the house so I would have been aware that there was very strong Republican sympathies in our household. I would have been 11 or 12 at the time.

When you're that age, you don't really think anything much about the fact that some people called occasionally to the house and stayed over. They would have been strangers to me but would have been known to my parents of course. A child has inherent trust in their parents and if your parents felt that it was important enough to have this person in the house, and that they had honourable reasons for having a person in the house, you trusted their judgment. And so, you never asked.

As you got a little bit older, you became more aware that some of the people that stayed in the house didn't venture out. They might have been staying a couple of days, or a couple of nights as the case would be, but they wouldn't go out for a walk or leave the house during the daytime, which I found strange.

You were never told that person A is a member of any organisation or anything but the first few times they would have stayed, mum or dad would have said, 'this is a friend of your dad's who's staying here but he doesn't really want people to know that he's here' and your antenna goes up. They might have said something like 'don't ever mention that 'Pat' or 'Sean' or 'Mick' are here – and they invariably always were 'Pat' or 'Sean' or 'Mick'! By the time I was well into my mid teens I was very much aware that they were involved in the armed struggle and more than likely, that they were wanted by the security forces. But you weren't told in clear terms the reasons why people

were staying. It was something you just gradually became aware of. You got your initial suspicion by virtue of the fact that you knew the political sympathies in the household.

My parents probably knew that I had gradually become aware of who these people were. I would have talked to my father about politics and he would have understood from talking to me that I would have been Republican-minded. I was living in a household with Republican sympathies, a Republican minded ethos and you grew into that and became part of that. You became part of keeping a secret of the fact that there were men, and they nearly always were men I think with maybe one exception, who stayed in our house. To some extent you were proud to be part of keeping that secret and protecting these guys.

Some guys may have only stayed one night and may have come very late, and maybe at times, you were put out of the bed and you had to sleep on the couch because a grown man wouldn't have room on the couch. Sometimes people stayed longer – they could have stayed anything up to a week or 10 days. Some people you would only have seen once, some people would have been coming intermittently to the house and you would have formed relationships with them. But you were always conscious of the fact that you couldn't ask too much about the individual. You didn't want to ask about their background or you didn't want to ask, 'well is their real name actually Pat?', because you knew that it was better for everybody to know as little as possible. The less I knew, the less likely I was to let slip to mates in school.

Of course you had curiosity because you assumed that these were Republican soldiers who were doing something exceptional, whether people agreed with it or not, that they weren't your ordinary kind of guy. There's not a sense of glamour to what they were doing or anything and they didn't come into the house and be kind of – you know sticking their chest out – or saying, 'I'm such and such'.

They would just be different characters; some of them would be fairly outgoing and mad to chat. When they'd be chatting to one of my parents they might have said maybe a bit more than they should have because for some of them it was the first chance they would get to relax, where they could feel that they were comfortable in their surroundings, that they weren't having to look over their shoulder. Other individuals were quite content and happy to sit in the armchair

in the corner, to bide their time for several days or maybe a week or whatever, to keep themselves to themselves. Not interacting wouldn't have been through being ignorant or anything towards the family, we were always treated with kindness, politeness and deference by them. I presume it was more self-discipline than anything else, but they would keep to themselves, watch the news, want us to pick up books, we would get the newspapers for them and things like that.

Some of these guys would have been on the run and would have been afraid to get arrested this side the border because of the possibility of extradition. They wouldn't necessarily have been coming to our house after any specific incident. Some of them would be 'on the run', and might have been for months if not years, so they weren't necessarily having to lie low because of something they had been involved in a week ago on the other side of the border. So, generally speaking, you wouldn't try to link a guy with a specific incident. There were occasions when maybe several men would have been staying in the house, and you would suspect that they had recently been involved in some specific activity. But by and large, it was mostly individuals looking for a place where they could just have a few days to unwind, and know that they were in what they would perceive as being a good Republican house.

Guys who'd been on the run for years would have moved from safe house to safe house. They couldn't stay in one place for too long because if visitors, ordinary social visitors called to the house, you wouldn't get away with saying, 'this is a friend of such and such who just happens to be visiting.' You might get away with it once or twice but not all the time. If ordinary visitors saw the same person there several times over the space of two or three weeks – you would have that person moved on.

There was an instance I remember, it was probably the first time that I would have really realised the calibre or type of men that were staying in the house. One man had stayed in the house for a number of days and about two weeks later one of my parents took me to one side and said, 'you may see something on the news in regard to one of the lads who was here not so long ago'. I said, 'how do you mean?' And it was explained to me that he had been killed on active service. That would have been the first time that I would specifically have known that it was Republicans involved in armed action who had been staying in the house.

I remember at the time, when they reported on the news about the person who had been killed, the inference from the journalists was that this was a person who had been fairly heavily involved in armed struggle and would have been wanted on both sides of the border. So then you began to realise that there was an element of danger. I don't mean mortal danger – but there was an element of threat to the family to the extent that if Gardaí or any other body would have become aware of a stranger being around the house for any length of time, it could have implications. Maybe one of the parents could have faced jail time or the Gardaí would have been watching you the whole time. There would be implications in terms of parents losing work and stuff like that. So there was a realisation that, not only were you protecting the person who was in your house, you were protecting your own family too by not talking about it. The only other people I would have talked to about it were siblings – obviously we were all part of the same dynamic.

I would have assumed that the Gardaí were aware of the Republican sympathies in the house. One of my parents would have been active during the hunger strike campaign and that was tantamount to 'if you're not an active IRA member you are definitely a supporter'. So the house did come under suspicion at times. I think it was in the late 80s, there was an awful lot of activity, there were quite a number of men 'on the run' across the country, the Eksund was captured bringing in weapons, I think it was around the time of 'Enniskillen' and there was basically a massive dragnet across the whole State looking for weapons and looking for men on the run and I remember the house was definitely visited by the Gardaí during that time.

A house search is disconcerting because you are suddenly seeing men on your family property carrying weapons...it was Special Branch, not the uniforms. I know from talking to other Republicans that our house search wasn't different to anybody else's. The house search happens very early in the morning when you're asleep in your bed. Obviously if they suspect that there's someone staying in your house, the optimum time they think they are going to get them is during the dead hours, the bedtime hours. I remember it was very early, sometime after seven o'clock in the morning, so your immediate thing is a sense of, 'what's going on here?' The door is being hammered and you're looking out the window and you see unmarked cars and some patrol cars and you see that there are men out the back of the

house as well. You knew what was coming. I was just glad there was nobody here when they came, so there was very little they could do in that regard. But they were putting down a marker and I think that while some people may have stayed occasionally after that, the amount of people staying would have been less and less and more sporadic.

When they raided the house, they were looking for individuals, so there wouldn't have been that much upheaval. They would have looked up in the attic and outside sheds. They wouldn't have looked through everything in fairness, or turned everything over; the house didn't look like a burglar had been through it. You watched as it happened, you'd have stood in the room and just watched them while they did it. They were very thorough, they went through everything – up in the attic, through every cupboard, under the stairs and they tried to see if was any space under the floorboards – that kind of thing.

There was some hostility from them, but you knew they were just doing their job. Some of them obviously took a bit more joy in it than others. They went through everything systematically, they started at the top and then they worked their way down and when they were finished they left. I didn't feel that the household had been violated, if anything there was just a sense of relief that they hadn't found anybody or anything. It never happened when there was somebody here and that was probably luck as much as anything else because there were some guys that would have stayed a little bit longer than they should have.

It became quite well-known within the local community that our house had been visited by the Special Branch and it immediately earmarked your household. It flagged up to the whole wider community that the Gardaí think that these people are in some way involved in Republican activities. So, where it caused you discomfort would have been that your peers viewed you in a different manner. I would have tried to explain it off – that there were hundreds of houses being raided across the country and that for some reason they had decided to check our house. They thought that mum or dad were, I don't know, Republican inclined. Some guys would have given you a certain amount of stick, you know, 'Ye must be a big Provo family or something, to have the guards coming in big numbers like that'.

I would have got negative repercussions too. It wouldn't have been said to your face, but you knew that in the likes of school, teachers suddenly saw you through a slightly different prism; that you were 'one of them', and at the time Republicanism was very, very much a minority viewpoint here in the South. I can't put my finger on any incident at school where I could say I was specifically discriminated against but I knew there was a different tone to the way that adults dealt with you. You were also aware that kids who would have been mates – their parents would have been saying, you know, not to go to our house, because the guards had been there and obviously 'they are up to no good in that house.' So it did have an effect, but I wouldn't say it was an overly negative one.

I am in no way regretful about what my parents did and I'm quite proud of the fact that I would have, just by maintaining my silence and keeping the secret there was in our house of men on the run, played some small part in republicanism. I have never viewed it as a negative in my life, it's something that I have pride in with a small 'p'. I'm not thinking I've done great service to Republicanism just by being a youngster in a safe house. But at the same time, I'm proud of the role we played in allowing Republicans to stay here when they needed a place to put their heads down, they needed some space with family or with their partner or whatever. Your front door was open.

You might have seen someone that little bit more regularly and that's when we would have formed some kind of relationship with people. You got to know them, although you mightn't have gotten to know their name or their background, though you could guess from the accent where they were from. You wouldn't have known if they were from a big family or a small family, but you would get to know the kind of person they were in terms of be they respectful, or polite, or a bit more outgoing, or talkative, or you would get to know them by what they wanted to watch on telly – you got some kind of insight into them. So, even though I would have known some of these guys for quite a number of years I wouldn't have known their real names. I would have known them by their nicknames or whatever name they used as they moved around the countryside. Basically, you had been asked by local Republicans to keep a person in your house for whatever length of time it was and it wasn't your business to know who they were.

There was one guy who stuck out. He only stayed sporadically, but I was aware that he would mainly have been living in safehouses in the vicinity because you would have seen him quite often. He was a character; and after being in the house on several occasions you got to know him, you knew a bit about his background and you knew from the way he carried on that he was a fairly jovial type of person, he was good craic, he would talk about anything, he would talk about sport, and he would talk about his own family or where he came from or he might talk about what was going on anywhere in the world, but the one thing he never really wanted to get into any conversation with was specifics about the North. It was not something you ever pushed.

I got to know him afterwards and I admired the man for many of the things he went through. It said an awful lot to me. He was never a shallow person but because you only got to scratch the surface, you would just perceive him as being an outgoing person. But once I knew what his name was, I knew his background story and you would admire the person because he has an inner steel that you would never have been aware of.

There was a hidden depth that he would only show to a small number of other people and I'm thankful that he allowed me to see that. He was always very good to the extent that he would try never to turn up at our house empty-handed and by and large these would have been guys who hadn't much money. My mum and my dad would sometimes try to give them a few pound if they were leaving the house because they were living hand to mouth.

They would have to eat whatever was given to them, because they were imposing on your hospitality. They would never say 'I don't like this or I don't like that'. They had to accept the conditions they were in and indeed some of the houses would have been a bit rough in character. They accepted that was part and parcel of their lifestyle. Some houses would have been very swanky with the best of food and the best of everything. But they would never differentiate. There might have been some houses they would have been more willing to stay in than others, but at the end of the day they accepted that whatever house they were put into, the person who was opening their door to them was doing it with the best of intention, so they would have respected each of those people equally.

I remember one of the guys telling me that he stayed in six or seven different houses on six or seven nights. He moved from house to house night after night, and in nearly every house he got bacon and cabbage and boiled potatoes! He was laughing about it and he says, ‘after three or four days, you just can’t look at another bit of hairy bacon!’ But he ate it anyway. Some of the families would be like ours, tight around the house financially. But the dinner was on and if one of these guys was in the house, the dinner got split six ways and there was no questioning that. Whatever we had in the house, that person was as welcome to it as a member of the family.

Being in a small house, we always sat in the living room together. Some guys would be extremely quiet and would watch whatever was on – if my mum was watching Coronation Street – he watched Coronation Street. But you would have eaten as a family and you would have gotten up in the morning and had breakfast together. There were many mornings I would have come down and there was a strange man at the table eating my porridge! Of course, there was more porridge made for me, but you didn’t view it as surprising to come down in the morning and to find a man, an adult man, at the table and your mother making him breakfast.

You just treated it as the most normal thing in the world, and he might have said, ‘I’m Pat’, and I’d say ‘I’m Enda’, and he would have said, ‘are you going off to school?’. He would try in his own way to make some conversation with you, and you knew it was probably more awkward for him than it was for me. He was probably going from household to household and having to strike up some form of civil relationship where he could have a conversation with people in the house – and then maybe having to move two days later to another house and having to do the whole thing all over again. So it had to be hard on guys like that. After a while you got to know how to make conversation with a guy who was staying and to make it as easy as possible for them.

It was probably like having a relation staying in the house for a while, you were a bit more on your best behaviour, you wouldn’t be rowing, you wouldn’t be fighting over the TV or anything like that while they were there. These guys were just looking for a bit of space or a bit of breathing time or whatever and you wanted to make it as easy as possible for them and as relaxed as possible.

You tried to accommodate them as best you could, and especially if they brought a partner here, or family, you tried to give them as much space as you could. Some of them could be weeks, months without seeing family. If members of their family were coming, it would have to be arranged very, very carefully because there would probably have been some level of surveillance on immediate members of the family. Some of these family members would have travelled quite some distance to come here and if they were seen by local Gardaí they would have been immediately alerted to the fact that a certain person was living or staying somewhere in this region. So you knew that occasions like that were very special to these people. We would try and leave them alone as much as we could, but living in a small house, it wasn't that easy.

By and large, nearly to a person they were men, and most of them would have been anywhere from early 20s to their mid-to-late 40s – mainly men in their 20s and 30s. There were some guys who were a bit rough, who would have cursed, you know, effed and blinded a bit too much. My mother would have certainly not approved because she had kids in the house. But you accepted that this was part and parcel of who that person was and it was more important to keep that person in the house than to say, 'that person is a bit too loud or a bit too rough'. I can't think of anybody who I disliked. There were people you felt indifferent to because they had very little interaction with you – that may have been self-discipline or the nature of the person.

There would have been some people who you worried about after they left because you had formed a relationship with them. You worried about them because first of all, you didn't know if you would see them again, you didn't know if they were leaving the house to take part in some activity, you didn't know if they were just going to go to another safe house, you didn't know if they were going to be arrested 100 yards down the road so you would say to yourself, 'I hope such and such is okay'.

I'm not saying they would have been suffering from anxiety, but there were some people who had more of a nervous disposition. You would have caught them at times looking out, peering out behind the curtains to see what was outside, and me mother or me dad would say, 'get away from the window', or whatever, 'somebody will see you'. It would have constantly been on their minds that sitting here

in one place for any length of time, they could have been opening themselves up to being arrested.

There would have been some guys who you could see were visibly very relaxed, they felt safe. I would assume the ones who would have had a more nervous disposition would have been guys who might only recently have been living this lifestyle. I knew one guy who was several years ‘on the run’, coming in and out of the house and he was extremely casual. I don’t mean casual to the extent that he was parading around inside the house during the daytime or that he was taking unnecessary risks, I mean in the sense that he was comfortable, he accepted that that was his way of life, he wasn’t looking over his shoulder the whole time. He would be very disciplined and would only come in and out of the house during night-time hours when there was less chance of being seen.

The first couple of times there was a knock on the door when you had someone staying you would be very jumpy. But it wouldn’t be markedly unusual for somebody to come knocking at the door – it could be a relation or it could have been a neighbour living across the way. When the person came to the house first, you would have been told a sort of semi-cover story, that ‘this is Pat, or this is Mick or whatever, and he’s looking for work in the area’, so that if anybody came into the house and said, ‘who’s your man?’, I says, ‘he’s a guy that dad knew from building sites years ago and he is just down here on spec looking for work, I don’t know if he’ll be around for long’. So, when there was a knock on the door, you didn’t immediately get all nervy and go pushing the guy under the stairs or anything like that. I never really thought about it until now but I’d assume that when visitors came into the house that if there was a strange man there and invariably a lot of them would have had northern accents; my relatives had to have been suspicious. They would have known my parents’ political sympathies and they would probably have put two and two together. But it was never spoken about and I’ve never heard any relation ever questioning my parents about any of these people.

They probably would have thought, ‘that’s one of them Provos’ or whatever but they kept their mouths shut because they may or may not have agreed, but they probably respected my parents’ right to do what they did. I assume they knew that it was in the best interests of our family not to broadcast that there was strange people staying in the house. So, I never even thought of it until now but you didn’t get

nervous, you didn't start sticking guys into cupboards and stuff like that every time there was a knock on the door.

If the guy stayed in the house more than 24 hours, there was going to be somebody arriving at the door at some stage, so after a while you just got used to how you deal with those situations. You realised that as long as you kept quiet about it, as long as the person who stayed in your house didn't go wandering around during the daytime, as long as you didn't do anything to bring suspicion on the house, there was no point in actually getting your head beat up about it. You had come to the realisation that if the guards came to raid the house, they came to raid the house to get this guy. They would have had the house surrounded and the guy wasn't going to get away. So there was no point in trying to hide the person because if the guards came that far to raid a house they were going to find him.

I would assume they were never armed. I never asked, I never questioned, but I would assume with hindsight that guys who came to the house most definitely would not have been armed. It would have put the house under threat – I don't mean immediate danger from the firearm itself – but it would have meant that all the adults in the house could have been charged with possession of that weapon, not just the person who was carrying it. I would assume it was an unwritten thing that you wouldn't do anything to endanger the household you were staying in because that would break a certain bond of trust. You've opened your door and you are risking your house being raided and being labelled as a Provo house or whatever.

While they were taking a chance that they were going to get arrested, they weren't going to do anything to endanger a household, especially one with children in it, that the parents would end up in jail and basically leave things very hard for a family. I would be relatively confident that any of these people never carried a weapon into the house, not only our house but any household.

I did have concerns about the neighbours saying something. With the best will in the world, I don't think there are very many households anywhere in the country where somebody drives up to the house and it's not visible from somebody else's house. You have busybodies in every community and maybe they are not malicious, but there is this thing about being nosy and wanting to know what's going on in other people's lives. I don't doubt that there were people within our community who were very hostile to Republicanism and

would have to some extent been delighted to be able to ring up the guards and say, 'I think such and such a family is harbouring one of them Northern lads' or whatever. So yes, you were conscious of it.

I don't think anyone ever reported us. There was never anybody caught in our house which would lead me to believe that. But it was safer when you took nothing for granted. By and large, people moved during the night-time hours but if somebody was coming to your house, and you had a fairly good idea what time of the day it was, you would leave the door unlocked, so that that person could just walk straight in.

I can recall one or two times when it happened to be somebody's birthday. I definitely remember a birthday cake being produced for somebody who was staying. This would have been a person who stayed with us quite a number of times and that the family really liked. I don't know how me mum found out it was their birthday but obviously none of their family were going to see them – it's not like they could put a birthday card in the post and send it down to them or anything like that. Me mum – being a mother – would have been aware that he wasn't with his own family. My mum had a few favourites and she might have a treat for dinner. You wouldn't have seen steak very often in our house or a roast chicken during the week, but sometimes, a special kind of dinner might be cooked especially for a guy staying in the house and invariably we all had a share in it too.

You would have seen on occasions, some of them, especially maybe one or two of the younger guys, would be itching to get out. They maybe wanted to have a pint and stuff like that and dad would have to explain to them the problems it would have caused even if they went out for a couple of hours and had a few pints. Once drink was imbibed, who knew what was going to be said.

You were part of this kind of collective in terms of keeping the family secret – which was the guy staying in your house. The only threat to that guy was the guards, so you grew to be more conscious of keeping one eye open to see if there were extra patrol cars in your area. You learned very quickly what an unmarked Garda car looks like – it always had a D reg and it always had two aerials. You were constantly keeping your eye out for that if you were coming home from school, to see if there were any cars like that passing up and down the road more often than they should. You did grow to have – I

wouldn't say a hostile attitude towards the Gardaí – but to be very wary because you saw them to some extent as the enemy who would be after the guys in your house.

Being constantly aware just became a kind of a semi-natural thing to do. Most of my friends would probably have viewed the guards indifferently, as most young people do. My attitude wouldn't have been hostile but it wouldn't have been friendly towards them.

The strange thing is, for anybody who hasn't gone through this, they will think, 'this is extraordinary', you know, 'a young person being brought up in a house where there were men who were wanted by the security forces living there' – but it was normal, there was nothing extraordinary about it. The only thing was that you had to make sure you didn't talk about it outside the household.

Dad went out to work in the morning, came back at five o'clock in the evening or whatever time he would finish and we would sit down and have our dinner. Mum would do whatever housework she had to do or get a lift into town and do the shopping, and the guy was left behind in the house. You came in and he was sitting there and he would say 'how are you doing?' and you would chat – it was normal.

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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*