

Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry

Witness Statement of

MJV

Support person present: Yes

1. My name is MJV My date of birth is 1938. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.

Life before going into care

2. I was born in the Springburn area of Glasgow. I lived with my mother, father and older sister who was four years older than me. I know from my sister that I also had a younger brother. He was about four years younger than me but I don't remember him at that time. I wouldn't meet until after I had been in care in Australia.
3. My mother was very sick after my brother was born. She was on her own and my father was away to the war. I think that may have been a reason why my sister and me were taken away and eventually put into care in Edinburgh.
4. I remember going to a lot of different places for evacuees during the war. I was always with my sister at all of these places.
5. My sister went into care before me. She went to the Good Shepherd Orphanage at Colinton in Edinburgh. After this I fretted and cried until eventually I was allowed to go there as well.
6. I was taken in a double decker to the home at Colinton. I hadn't had any contact with my mum and dad when it was decided I would join

Life in care - Scotland

Good Shepherd Orphanage, Colinton, Edinburgh

General

7. When I arrived at Colinton [REDACTED] came running along the passageway to meet me. After this we were never split up again.
8. I was very happy at Colinton. There weren't any issues and no abuse.
9. It was all girls at the home. There was little family groups of children. These weren't just siblings. It might just have been to give children a feeling of being in a family group. The home was well ahead of its time doing things this way.

Staff

10. The convent was run by the Good Shepherd nuns. Mother Theresa was in charge of the orphanage. I don't remember the names of any of the other nuns. There was older women that worked in the laundry. They would look after us as well. The nuns were lovely. They were all very gentle with the children. All the children loved it there. I felt very secure.

Dormitories

11. We were in small dormitories. These were different from what we would have when I went to Australia. [REDACTED] was in the dormitory with me.

Mealtimes

12. The food was good. The nuns grew things at the back of the convent. We were allowed to pick fruit.

Leisure time

13. We were allowed to play in the dell near to the home with our friends from school and the local area. I also used to go to the brownies.

Trips and holidays

14. We would go out on trips quite a lot. I don't remember the places that we went to but we were always outdoors.

Schooling

15. I went to St Cuthbert's Primary School in Slateford Road. I would get the bus to the school in the morning and then back to the home after it was finished. I never had any problems at school. I really liked it. I think I done pretty well there.

16. I wasn't with [REDACTED] at school. She went to college.

Healthcare

17. I don't remember having to see a doctor or a dentist.

Religious instruction

18. I would go to mass at the convent. The nuns would sing and I would feel an inner peace. I took on religion quite seriously at that time.

Christmas and Birthdays

19. The nuns would make Christmas special. There was always a nice meal and games. I don't remember my birthdays at the convent.

Visitors

20. I remember my dad visited me a couple of times. I have a memory of going out with him and being on his shoulders. At that time my father was still in the army. He would wear his uniform when he came to the convent. My mother never visited. I would find out when I was older that my mother had been put into hospital although I didn't know this then.

Review of care/detention

21. I think that I must have had visits from the social work. I don't remember who it was that came to see me.

Migration

Selection/information

22. Someone came to the orphanage and did a presentation to us about Australia. I can't remember the details. At the end of the presentation we were asked who wanted to go to Australia. I put my hand up.
23. I forgot about it until a year later when I was told that would be going to Australia. I was told that I would be going to a foster family. There was no mention about going to a convent. I can't remember if it was the nuns or the people that gave us the presentation who told us that we would be fostered
24. At this time I never thought that I would be going and not coming back. I assumed that I was going there for something like a holiday then I would return home.
25. There was no contact with our parents. I don't know if my mother and father were contacted about us going to Australia. My father wouldn't have signed anything that meant we weren't coming back.

26. I was given a medical before I left. My eye sight and other things like that checked. I think it was just a general health check.

Leaving Scotland

27. I was nine years old when I left. I actually had my tenth birthday on the ship. I was given a suitcase and clothes before leaving for Australia. I remember that we were pretty excited about going. There was seven of us from Colinton that were travelling together. It was me, my sister and five other girls.
28. I don't recall the trip between Scotland and the port. I remember that we left from Tilbury docks in London in [REDACTED] 1948. There was a priest there and two female chaperones. There was only one of the chaperones got on to the ship with us. I don't remember any other migrant children being on the ship. I think that it was only the seven of us.
29. The ship was the SS Ormonde. I had never been on a ship before. The only thing that I remember about the journey was that I got the measles and I was very ill. I know that the ship stopped at the Suez Canal but I didn't get off.
30. When the ship arrived at Fremantle, Australia we were taken to the Mercy Convent for a couple of hours before going back on the ship.
31. When we left Fremantle we sailed on to Adelaide. After leaving the ship we went to the convent at Goodwood, which was a suburb of Adelaide. I don't remember the journey from the ship to the convent.
32. I was thinking 'why are we here?' I was expecting my new foster parents to be there to meet me. When I saw the convent I thought it may just be a brief stop the same as Fremantle.

Life in care – Australia

St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage, Goodwood, Australia

General

33. When we arrived at St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage it seemed so bleak. It was not a welcoming place. I was devastated when I realised this was where I would now be staying. I cried for about a week.
34. When we had left Scotland it had been snowing and cold. At Goodwood the heat was really unbearable. There were no fans or anything to cool you down.
35. The nuns met us when we arrived. It was the Sisters of Mercy who ran this place. This was the same order as Fremantle. Their habit was different from the nuns at the Good Shepherd. They wore mainly black. This was a stark difference to Colinton. The nuns there wore a cream coloured habit. We'd come out of a country where the climate was very different to Australia. Here it was very hot and humid. It was very different to Scotland. I found it difficult to deal with this change.
36. The Mother Superior told us about the rules. Even though it was very hot the atmosphere in the convent was very cold.
37. We were all given a number, I think my number was [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] was [REDACTED]. This was what you were called by. The number related to everything. It was stitched onto your clothes. It was all very regimented, much like being in a prison.
38. It was girls only at the convent. There was a mixture of migrants and girls from Australia. There was sometimes a bit of trouble between the groups. In total there were about ninety girls in the home.
39. I never felt happy at the orphanage. I went from a place where I had been really happy to loathing the place I now stayed. I think I realised very quickly I wouldn't be leaving that home any time soon to go into foster care.

Dormitories

40. The dormitories were upstairs. I was in a huge dormitory with a whole lot of other girls. There was a nun in charge of each dormitory. The younger girls were on one side and the older ones on the other side.

Clothing

41. You had to queue up for your clothing at the laundry. There was an older English girl there who worked in the laundry. She would dish out the clothing to you. For some reason this girl didn't like me. She tried to give me clothes which didn't fit. When one of the nuns heard the commotion she told the girl not to treat me in that way.

Mornings

42. You got up every morning before 07:00 am. Sister ^{MJW} [REDACTED] would come in reciting the bible to wake us up. The first thing was to kneel at the side of the bed and do your prayers. After this you got washed and dressed. When you made your bed it had to be done a certain way.
43. My sister used to wet my hair and try put a curl in it with the brush. One morning Sister ^{MJW} [REDACTED] came in when she was doing this. She grabbed the brush from [REDACTED] and went to hit me and [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] grabbed the brush from her and said, "Don't you dare hit my sister". Sister ^{MJW} [REDACTED] backed off and didn't try this again.

Mealtimes

44. You lined up at the dining room and walked in together for your meals. It wasn't nice. Before you went into the dining room you were given Epsom salts. I think this was for your bowel movements.
45. It was porridge for breakfast every morning. I didn't like it.

46. For the other meals there was stew, which was very watery. The tapioca was also horrible. The punishment for not eating your meals was usually to go and stand somewhere.

Bed wetting

47. One of my friends, [REDACTED] who was Australian used to wet the bed regularly. The nuns would make her stand in the bathroom, which had a marble floor. [REDACTED] was made to put the sheet over her head when she was doing this. It was freezing in the bathroom.
48. The mattress was taken off the bed to dry. [REDACTED] was then made to sleep on the bed springs. This happened quite a lot. It was very cruel to treat [REDACTED] like this. It was also very traumatic for me witnessing it.
49. Nobody tried to find out what was wrong with [REDACTED]. She ended up having to go to hospital and had her spleen removed. She nearly died.

Washing and bathing/Hygiene

50. There was a great big bathroom with sinks on each side. There was no toothpaste. You had to use soap to clean your teeth. I would just use water. It just seemed so primitive and horrible.

Leisure time

51. There was one nun, Sister Clare, who I thought was better than the others. She would show us how to make toffee and other sort of homely things. Sister Clare also started to coach the basketball team.
52. Sister Clare was strict and a bit of a disciplinarian. On the odd occasion I had a hiding from her. This would be if I had done something wrong. Despite this she was fair with all the girls.

53. Sister Clare came to the orphanage after we arrived. She was actually very good with the girls. She would try and get us toothbrushes and places for our personal possessions. I think that she got a lot of flak from the other nuns for trying to help us.
54. The orphanage was very different to Scotland where we could go out and socialise with our friends. There was no brownies or getting the bus to school. It was a total institution.

Schooling

55. The school was within the orphanage. The nuns would teach you even though they weren't qualified. I used to help some of the younger girls who had problems with their reading.
56. I regret that the education I had in Scotland didn't continue at Goodwood.
57. My sister was taken out of school even though she was only fourteen. She was made to work in the front parlour so that it was nice for visitors. She also had to do some cleaning. This meant that she had to miss out on her schooling.
58. The Mother Superior would visit the school. She would ask who wanted to be a nun. The nuns tried to groom [REDACTED] into becoming a nun. They said she would get an education if she became a nun.
59. Sister Clare, taught me short hand, bookkeeping and typing skills. This would help me when I left the convent.
60. Sister ^{MJW} [REDACTED] taught drama, art and singing. Despite how Sister ^{MJW} [REDACTED] was with us in the dormitory I enjoyed these classes. It gave me a love of music in later life.

Healthcare

61. I never had to see a doctor other than for normal check-ups. I also went to the dentist regularly. We had to be taken to the dentist. There wasn't one at the convent.

Work

62. The nuns were paid for tying strings together for the butchers. They didn't do the work it was us who had to do this. It was also used as a punishment by the nuns. If you did something wrong they might make you do a hundred bundles of string. This was in addition to what you would normally do. I have bad arthritis in my hands now. I think that is as a result of tying all the strings.
63. There was a doctor and his wife who stayed next to the convent. I went there to do the cleaning. I wasn't paid for doing the work.

Christmas and Birthdays

64. During the Christmas holidays we would go to stay with Catholic families. My sister and I would not go to the same families.
65. I enjoyed Christmas. It was a good experience for me staying with the different families.
66. When my sister [REDACTED] was staying with the [REDACTED] family Mrs [REDACTED] would allow her to play their piano.
67. Mrs [REDACTED] had a sister who was a nun. They were still trying to get [REDACTED] to become one. [REDACTED] was told that if she became a nun then she would be allowed to teach the piano. [REDACTED] always resisted.
68. Mrs [REDACTED] went to the convent and told them that they had to let [REDACTED] leave as she didn't want to be a nun. She said if they didn't she would make the archbishop aware.

██████ was lucky that she had the ██████ looking out for her. I was glad that she was able to get away from the convent when she did.

69. After ██████ left she went and stayed with the ██████. She started to work with the Water Board. ██████ stayed with the ██████ until she was married.

Visitors

70. ██████ still came and visited me regularly. She was working locally so it wasn't too difficult to visit.

Review of care/detention

71. At some point there were visitors at the convent from either England or Scotland. They were there to check how the kids were getting on. We never got the opportunity to speak to them.
72. The nuns would have known in advance they were coming. This meant that everything would be fine for the visit.

Family

73. At some point I was told by one of the nuns that my mum and dad were dead. I just believed this. I thought it must be right as that's why we would be in an orphanage. I just felt that everyone had deserted us.

Discipline

74. The head nun, ^{MJY} ██████ was pretty brutal. If you did something wrong you would be sent to her. She would give you the strap.
75. I saw some of the older migrant girls being punished. They had run away. When they were brought back to the orphanage the nun in charge gathered everyone together.

She made an example of the girls. She hit them with the strap on the back and the buttocks. It was horrible.

Life after St Vincent de Paul's Orphanage

Leaving

76. There was a lawyer who would hand in fruit to the nuns. He told Sister Clare that he was looking for a junior. Sister Clare said she had just the person for this. I went to his office for an interview. I was successful and started as the lawyer's receptionist.
77. I was able to leave the orphanage and I found some accommodation. My friend [REDACTED], from the orphanage, came to stay with me as well.
78. When I left the orphanage there was no preparation. I think I left with virtually what I was standing in.
79. At the lawyers office the wages were good. I was given a pay rise every year. I was treated as an equal.
80. I used to keep in touch with Sister Clare right through to when my daughter was born. It was like a friendship as she was the one who put me on the road to my first job.

Other information

81. When I was young I moved around a bit before travelling abroad for about a year. I then returned to Adelaide. It was the first time I had been there for about five and a half years.
82. I started moving around again and eventually arrived in Perth, Western Australia. I met my daughter's father and the travelling stopped. We were engaged but never married. We split up before my daughter was born. After this it was just me and my daughter.

83. My daughter is the best thing that has happened to me. She means so much to me.

Campaigning/awareness raising/other organisations

84. My sister [REDACTED] met Margaret Humphreys from the Child Migrant Trust when she visited Australia. That was how I got involved with the Trust. This is when I started to become aware of other child migrants who had come to Australia. I think that what Margaret Humphreys has done for child migrants is just amazing.
85. A lot of people were unaware of child migrants until the Australian Inquiry started.
86. There have been a lot of benefits for me from going to the Child Migrant Trust. By speaking to them I felt that someone was listening to me. They understood what I had been through.
87. The Child Migrant Trust asked me to go to Britain and hear the apology from the Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. There was a group of us that travelled there. I felt that it was a very sincere and moving apology. There was a depth to what he was saying.

Records and family tracing

88. [REDACTED] would tell me when we were younger that we had a brother. She remembered him being taken away in his shawl to foster parents when she was very young. My brother's name was [REDACTED]. He was four years younger than me.
89. In the 1960's [REDACTED] was getting married. It was then he found out about me and [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] used a lawyer and managed to track us down in Australia. It was a few years before [REDACTED] got in contact with me and [REDACTED] in Australia. It wasn't until 1989 that I eventually met [REDACTED] and his wife [REDACTED].
90. In the late 1950's my sister [REDACTED] tried to find out about our family back in Scotland. She was sent a letter by a lawyer and informed that our father had been looking for

us. He wouldn't have done this if he knew we were in Australia. [REDACTED] also found out that our mother was still alive but was in a hospital. Our father had tried to get her out the hospital but he wasn't allowed to. This was a shock to me that our father was still alive. [REDACTED] tried to find out more information but couldn't get any until years later.

91. In the 1960's [REDACTED] found out where our mother was in Glasgow. I think it might have been our Auntie [REDACTED] and Uncle [REDACTED] who told us where she was. They had never visited her. I couldn't forgive them for that.
92. Myself and [REDACTED] travelled to Scotland to see our mother in hospital. It was actually an institution with locked doors. It was very traumatic as mother kept repeating, "Where have they taken the children". She didn't recognise or remember us. I thought that she looked a lot like [REDACTED].
93. I wanted to have a conversation with my mother. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her. Somehow I just couldn't do it. My heart went out to her. She must have suffered with no one there for her. I just wanted to hold her.
94. [REDACTED] and her husband asked about taking mum back to Australia. We thought that would be good for her but we weren't allowed to. Mum wasn't well enough.
95. Apparently when [REDACTED] went back with our brother [REDACTED] to get family photographs they weren't there. She was told by the staff that there hadn't been any. [REDACTED] knew there had been some as they were in her little cabinet. [REDACTED] had seen them there on a previous visit.

My Mum died from cancer in the 1980's, She was 79. If we had have received proper support and information from the Catholic Church or federal government then we might have been able to reunite properly with our mother before we did.

96. I have managed to recover some records and letters about my time in care. This was only very recently I received these documents from the records office in Adelaide. The documents didn't have very much information on them. There is a document in relation to me going to Australia. This letter was written by Father Ratican. It is signed by him

and my father. It is permission for me to go to Australia. I don't think my father would have signed this. I have looked at the letter and it seems that the writing by Father Ratican is the same as that of my father's signature.

97. The other records that I have seen are not detailed. They don't appear to be transparent. Anyone could have written what has been recorded. There were no records about my parents.
98. When my father came back from the war my mother was in a hospital. She was treated as being insane. I can't imagine what all this would have done to my father.
99. When I was in care I thought that my date of birth was [REDACTED] 1939. It was only when I got my records that I found out it was [REDACTED] 1938.

Other matters for relating to migration

100. I think Great Britain and Australia have been extremely culpable for what transpired in relation to us being sent to Australia. It was clear there was an agreement between the governments. The Australian government wanted to populate the country with white stock. The British government wanted rid of their poor. I have found out that there was a lot of talk at the time about us being imbeciles. Our identities were taken from us.
101. It wasn't just very traumatic for me and my sister. It was traumatic for our mother and father. I was happy in Scotland but my family was taken away from me. They robbed myself and [REDACTED] of our childhood and our heritage.
102. I have never had any ill feeling towards my mother and father. I don't believe they were party to the decision for us to go to Australia. They must have suffered. Being a mother myself I can only imagine what it must have done to my mother and father.

103. As a result of all the suffering there should be compensation for the families from both the Australian and British governments. The governments should also understand that any monetary measures will not undo the heartache and sadness that was our lot.
104. I don't think that the Australian Government has ever really acknowledged the child migrants. I think they would rather forget about it.

Nationality/passport

105. I had no problems obtaining an Australian passport. The only issue was that the records showed my surname was MJV [REDACTED]. This should have been [REDACTED] family name [REDACTED].
106. I eventually became an Australian citizen. When I did this you could become an Australian even though you were a British citizen. There was an agreement between the governments for this to happen. Years later this changed. It no longer automatically happened.
107. I still see myself as a Scottish national. I feel very strongly about this and see Scotland as my home.

Impact

108. I protect my daughter like [REDACTED] used to protect me. [REDACTED] had a tremendous burden to bare when we were in care in Australia. She acted like a mother to me.
109. I like to think I have a certain amount of stability because of my background. I don't let life pull me down. I am much stronger for it. I am fiercely independent.
110. My time in care left me without faith. I make up my own mind about things now. I have my own opinions on issues and won't be dictated TO.

111. I feel that as a result of being a child migrant I was robbed of my heritage and nationality. This is something that has always stayed with me. I feel very strongly about this.
112. I am so grateful my sister was with me in Australia. She took so much on to help me. I can't think how I would have managed without her. She was definitely like a mother to me.

Final thoughts

113. I think that countries need to view the child migrant scheme as a large injustice they facilitated. They really need to think of the enormity of it and how it impacted on every one of us. The countries involved need to hear about the individual traumas that children suffered as a result of the scheme. It is not enough to say it was because of the times and use that as an excuse.
114. I think that the welfare institutions of the time when I was put into care should also be held accountable. They looked on poor families in a way that was not acceptable. They thought they could do with you what they wanted. It was such a huge thing taking you away from your parents without any consideration about how you felt or your parents feelings. I have such a deep sadness for what happened to me and my sister.
115. There has to be an accountability and acceptance from the institutions that things happened. It is also not acceptable to say that it was just because of what happened in the times then.
116. I have no objection to my witness statement being published as part of the evidence to the Inquiry. I believe the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

Signed 

Dated *20.03.2019*