

Philomena Lee expresses her wishes and concerns over Mother and Baby Homes Report

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I have waited decades for this moment – the moment when Ireland reveals how tens of thousands of unmarried mothers, such as I, and the tens of thousands of our beloved children, such as my dear son Anthony, were torn asunder, simply because we were unwed at the moment our children were born.

In my case, after my mother died when I was six years old, my 2 sisters and I were sent to a local orphanage, run by the Sisters of Mercy, where I lived for the next 12 years. I emerged aged 18, knowing nothing of the world, of life, of men, of sex so when I met Anthony's father John and I experienced fun for the first time, Anthony was conceived but I was unaware of what was happening.

My pregnancy was met with horror and I was sent to the Sean Ross Abbey, "Mother and Baby Home", without a clue of what was in store for me.

When at Sean Ross Abbey, along with the other women and girls, I was relegated to the role of an unpaid servant, deprived of my liberty, my independence, my autonomy and was subject to the tyranny of the nuns, who told us daily, that we were shameful and sinful & that we needed to atone for that by working for our keep and surrendering our children to the nuns for forced adoption.

I endured a very painful, breech birth and was taunted by the nuns, who said that my pain was a punishment for my promiscuity; they even told the other girls, to get down on their knees and pray for me as I might not survive. I loved my son immediately and I was his mother at Sean Ross Abbey and we saw each other every day. He was a beautiful boy and very, very bright and I knew he would succeed at whatever he did.

In my Anthony's case, he was selected for trafficking to America without my knowledge or consent and shortly after his 3rd birthday, he was suddenly taken by the nuns along with his best friend, Mary and sent off to Shannon Airport to fly to the US for a new life, with strangers, when he had never before left my side or even the grounds of Sean Ross Abbey.

In the midst of my own devastating grief, it cut me to the quick to think how Anthony and Mary might be feeling; everything they had known and loved, their mothers, their names, their friends, their culture, were gone, taken like them, never to be mentioned again.

It broke my heart all over again when I discovered that Anthony (now known as Michael Hess) had returned many times to Sean Ross Abbey, looking for word of me, only to be told by the nuns that I could not be traced and that in any case, I had abandoned him when he was a few days old.

I had also been at Sean Ross Abbey, along with my daughter Jane, many times, looking for word of Anthony to be told that he was untraceable and that I should "live with that".

Anthony would ultimately die, without hearing from the nuns that they knew exactly where I was and most cruelly, without telling him, that he & I had lived together for 3 years, that I had loved him and without telling him that it was my dearest wish to find him, hold him & tell him how much I loved him. I also wanted this for my daughter Jane and my son Kevin, who were desperate to know their elder brother.

The nuns had even accepted two substantial donations from Anthony before he died and from his partner after his death, to have a gravestone erected at Sean Ross Abbey, bearing his original name & the inscription, "A man of two nations and many talents".

Jane and I only discovered Anthony's fate thanks to a photograph of Anthony's gravestone taken by Judy Campbell, which Mari Steed (another Irish citizen, born in Bessboro to a loving mother and trafficked to the US) spotted in a discussion forum run by Irish adopted people and told us the tragic news.

It saddens me so much to hear from the hundreds of adopted people, I meet every year at the memorial service at Sean Ross Abbey, that the Irish state, having breached so many of their human rights, seeks to prevent them from knowing the truth about their early lives and treats them no better than criminals. They are denied their own names, their own birth certs, access to their files and the truth of their family destruction. It seems to me that this is a deliberate ploy to hide from the survivors and the world the shameful way they treated our children.

I have worked closely with Adoption Rights Alliance since they helped Jane, Kevin and I to discover Anthony's fate and together we established the Philomena Project in 2014.

The main goals of the project are to empower the mothers and children so cruelly separated, to discover the truth about what happened to them and to hold to account the Irish State and other agents, who brought about this cruellest of separations.

For the purposes of healing, I believe it is essential that the Irish State and various churches involved in the enslavement of unmarried mothers and the trading of their children, would apologise, without reservation and would compensate the many generations of families, who have suffered unbearable suffering and loss as a result of the state's failure to recognise and honour the equality promised to all Irish citizens by the state's founders.

I can only hope that the authors of this report, recognise these facts and that those of us who were detained against our wills in "Mother and Baby Homes" and gave birth there are **not** all of the mothers nor all of the children who have suffered and that the tens of thousands, who went through State Maternity Hospitals, State Children's Hospitals and various private institutions suffered the same fate, the unlawful destruction of their families, through forced adoption, child trafficking, forced labour etc.

I am dismayed that portions of the report, have been leaked to the press ahead of the survivors having sight of it and digesting its findings. This will undoubtedly add to the heartache and trauma of those directly affected and I am concerned for the welfare of all.

Irish people owe it to the memory of those mothers and children, who have died, without knowing the truth and to resolve that such atrocities will never be allowed to happen again.

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For further comment, please contact:

Jane Libberton, Daughter of Philomena Lee, tel: +44 7811 945208 / jane.libberton@hotmail.co.uk (**Note to journalists:** Philomena Lee is not available for further comment).

Susan Lohan, The Philomena Project, tel: 086 816 3024; email: susanlohan@hotmail.com

Mari Steed, the Philomena Project, tel: USA 001 215 589 9329; email: maristeed@gmail.com

PLEASE NOTE USA time difference, Mari Steed is in Richmond, Virginia