A WORLD OF STORIES

Explore the stories of people from around the world who have made the Causeway Coast and Glens their home.

A WORLD OF STORIES

Contents

A World of Stories

Throughout its history, Northern Ireland has welcomed people from other countries, moving for work, education, or escaping war and persecution. Refugees have been resettling here permanently or temporarily since the nineteenth century. This booklet is based on A World of Stories, a Coleraine Museum exhibition held in Coleraine Town Hall 13th May – 26th August 2023.

The exhibition sought to highlight the stories of those who have resettled in the Causeway Coast and Glens from outside Northern Ireland throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Exploring beyond the orange and green narrative that so often dominates conversations of Northern Irish communities, A World of Stories is a celebration of modern diversity.

At its heart, the exhibition showcases the personal histories of people who have made the Causeway Coast and Glens their home. From students and economic migrates, to those following their hearts or fleeing wars and persecution, this booklet aims to highlight that there are a whole world of stories within our borough, and every story is worth telling.

The project is part funded by the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Good Relations programme, supported by The NI Executive Office (Together: Building a United Community), and delivered by Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services. We are thankful to all our participants who so generously gave their time, and their stories, to help bring this exhibition to life.

Mayor of the Causeway Coast and Glens, Cllr Ivor Wallace, with Council staff, asylum seekers and volunteers at a Good Relations information event held for asylum seekers in January 2023.

Migration Before World War II

There were few established migrant communities in the north of Ireland before the creation of Northern Ireland. From the mid-1860s, Jews escaping pogroms arrived from Germany and eastern Europe. Many early Jewish immigrants became linen merchants, including the Jaffe family who built the Belfast synagogue. Gustav Wolff of Harland and Wolff was from a German Jewish family.

After the outbreak of World War One and the German burning of Louvain, newspapers reported mass killings of Belgian civilians. Around 250,000 Belgians fled to England; 3,000 continued on to Ireland. A reception committee held fundraising drama and music events and Robert Acheson Cromie Montagu offered to house refugees in Portstewart Castle.

In January 1915, thirty-five Belgians (including their priest, Father Goeyvaerts) arrived in Portstewart. The Coleraine Chronicle printed an appeal letter in October 1915, asking for potatoes for the Belgians, dispelling rumours they were clothed in finery and living on "the fat of the land". Although some refugees stayed on in Ireland, over 90% returned to Belgium after the war.

Belgian refugees in London. ©IWM Q 53305

HELP TO PROVIDE FOR
THE HOMELESS
BELGIANS
TOWN HALL, COLERAINE,
Monday, 9th November
CINEMATOGRAPH DISPLAY
(Non-flam Films)
Of the Fine Irish Drama, RORY O'MORE
ALSO
WAR NEWS FROM THE CONTINENT,
INCLUDING
THE DEFENCE OF LOUVAIN,
Mobilization Scenes in France, Belgium, Germany, and England, on Land and Sea.
Vocal and Instrumental Items at Intervals.
Reserved Seats (Balcony), 1/6. Admission, 1/- and 6d. Tickets can be had and Seats Booked at Nicholson's, Diamond.
Doors Open 7.30 p.m. Commence at 8.
Proceeds in aid of Local Fund.

Ad for a fund-raising film in aid of Belgian refugees to be shown in Coleraine in November 1914. ©Coleraine Chronicle

The original café opened by the Morellis in Stone Row, Coleraine. ©Morelli Ice Cream Ltd

By the 1920s there was also an established Italian community which mainly worked in the catering industry. Pietro (Peter) Morelli from Casalattico opened a café in Stone Row, Coleraine, selling fish and chips and ice cream. He married local girl, Annie Dymond, and they opened 'The Ice Palace' in Portstewart. In 1925 the business passed to Peter's nephew Angelo.

In the 1930s many Jewish businessmen moved to Northern Ireland due to increasing Nazi violence in Europe. Hungarian Maurice Komjat founded the Daintifyt Brasserie Company Ltd in Cookstown and Limavady, making ladies underwear for stores in London and New York.

Robert Wallace arrived in Ballymoney as a refugee from Belgium in 1914. Fostered by Margaret Anderson, he stayed in Co. Antrim and became an extremely popular member of Dunaghy Flute Band. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he enlisted with 2nd Battalion London Irish Rifles. Deployed to North Africa in December 1942, he was killed during the assault on Hill 286 at Bou Arada the following January. He is buried at Medjez el Bab Cemetery, Tunisia. ©Richard O'Sullivan.

Mark Bands' drapery shop, Ballycastle 1958. Mordechai Bendas, known locally as Mark Bands, was born in 1879 in Belarus. In 1934 he moved to Ballycastle where he was the only Jewish resident in the town. He owned and ran a drapery in The Diamond until after his 80th birthday in 1959. Courtesy Duncan Cairns, ©The Estate of Douglas Cairns

The Impact of World War II

A WORLD OF STORIES

The Second World War brought big changes to Northern Ireland's demographics. Many children and families were evacuated from Belfast to the country, including entire schools. Campbell College relocated to the Northern Counties Hotel, Portrush, in 1940 and remained there until 1946.

The first US troops arrived in January 1942. They were stationed across the borough from the Roe Valley to the Glens of Antrim. In 1943, the 82nd Airborne celebrated Christmas in Portrush. Local children were taken to Barry's Amusements in jeeps and given doughnuts, chocolate, and chewing gum. Santa Claus distributed presents.

AMERICAN RED CROSS

CHRISTMAS PARTY

for Portrush School-Children

Through the courtesy of the Commanding Officer of the American Forces, all Portrush School-children from 5 years of age to 14 are being entertained on Christmas Afternoon, Saturday, 25th December, by the American Red Cross, at American Red Cross, Orange Hall, Portrush.

If, by any chance, your child has been overlooked, please contact immediately Miss Kingsbury, Portrush 3375, West Bay View Hotel, Officers' Club, Mark Street.

An American Soldier will call for your child and return him or her on Saturday Evening.

SANTA CLAUS
REFRESHMENTS
CANDY

CHEWING-GUM
JEEP RIDES
AMUSEMENT PACK SIDES

ALL CHILDREN WELCOME

American Red Cross Service Club, Portrush

Announcement of a Christmas party in Portrush organised by the American Red Cross in 1943.
©Coleraine Chronicle

Portrush Orange Hall served as the kitchen and mess for the US troops and was even used to host a Christmas Midnight Mass for the many Catholic US servicemen.

The first American shell fired in Europe is said to have been fired during a training exercise in the Sperrins by the 151st Field Artillery Battalion, based at Bellarena. The commanding officer of B Battery, Captain E. Surdyk had the names of the men and officers of B Battery engraved on the shell before giving it to the Mayor of Coleraine, Daniel H. Christie for safe keeping. Alderman Christie returned the shell case, along with a bottle of Coleraine Whisky, in 1946.
©Minnesota Military and Veterans Museum

By 1944, there were over 120,000 US troops in Northern Ireland, 10% of the total population.

Many local women fell for American soldiers resulting in 1,800 marriages. In early 1946, USS Henry Gibbins transported 906 Irish brides and children to their new lives in America. War-time romances also saw local servicemen returning home with new brides. Among the men of the Coleraine Battery (6 LAA RA (SR)), Andy McGowan and Norman Walker married Gertrude van Empel and Hanny van Haarlem whom they had met in Nijmegen, Netherlands; Harry Stockman met his wife, Annie, in Brussels, Belgium.

Angelo Morelli's sons, Nino and Corrado, were in Italy learning Italian when war broke out and ended up in a displacement camp. Luckily, Camp Commander William Cunningham was from Portstewart and recognised the boys who were returned to Portstewart safely in 1945.

Andy McGowan was serving with the Coleraine Battery when he met Gertrude van Empel during the defence of Nijmegen Bridge in September 1944. They married on 18 July 1945 and Trude arrived in Portstewart in 1946.
©John McGowan

Between 1940 and 1945, over 100 Polish airmen were based in Northern Ireland in various RAF Squadrons as well as two Polish Fighter Squadrons operating from RAF Ballyhalbert. The graves of 15 Polish airmen are scattered across the Province.
©Maciek Bator

Migration and post-conflict Northern Ireland

A WORLD OF STORIES

After the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, immigration increased significantly. Peace and economic growth brought 110,000 international migrants to Northern Ireland between 2000 and 2009. Less than a quarter stayed long-term and, due to the financial crisis, more people left Northern Ireland than arrived between 2008 and 2013.

Between 1998 and 2003, 1,248 work permits were issued to Filipino nurses to fill NHS staff shortages. Less than half of these nurses remained by 2004. Between 2000 and 2003, the food processing industry actively recruited staff from Portugal and Eastern Europe.

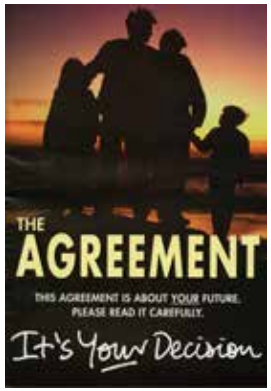
In 2003, Northern Ireland earned the unenviable title of the "race hate capital of Europe" after vicious attacks against the Chinese community in Belfast. In April 2009, after a World Cup qualifying match between Poland and Northern Ireland, there were violent attacks against Polish residents in Belfast. Later that year, over 100 Romanians in south Belfast were attacked over false allegations of favourable access to social housing and benefits.

An anti-refugee rally at organised by the so-called Protestant Coalition at Belfast City Hall in December 2015 ahead of the arrival of Syrian refugees. ©Colm Lenaghan/Pacemaker Press

A counter demonstration organised by Belfast Anti-Fascists at Belfast City Hall in December 2015 ahead of the arrival of Syrian refugees. ©Colm Lenaghan/Pacemaker Press

Growing pressures on public services appear frequently as newspaper headlines, but the economic benefits of migration are barely mentioned. Between 2001 and 2011 EU workers contributed 64% more in taxes than they received in benefits. Compared to other parts of the UK, Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage of immigrants, but the highest level of negativity towards newcomers. In 2018, sectarianism accounted for 25% of violent crimes reported to the Public Prosecution Service compared with 39% which were racially motivated.

In 2001, just 1.5% of the population of Northern Ireland were born outside the UK and Ireland; this rose to 6.6% in 2021.



The Agreement, delivered to every household in Northern Ireland ahead of the referendum on the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement. ©Ballymoney Museum

Racist graffiti in the West Strand area of Portrush in 2019. ©Steven McAuley/McAuley Multimedia

Racist graffiti on the wall at the Salvation Army community church, Coleraine, in 2015. ©Steven McAuley/McAuley Multimedia

Refugees

Following the discovery of a German plan to attack Gibraltar during World War Two, 7,700 Gibraltarian refugees arrived in Belfast by ship. Sixteen Nissen hut camps were built at sites including Derry/Londonderry, Broughshane and Kells. Many refugees spoke Spanish despite being British, and were not permitted to work.

In November 1956 a Hungarian uprising against communist rule was suppressed by Soviet troops and over 200,000 Hungarians fled. Almost 600 Hungarians stayed in the Bangor area while medical examinations were completed before being flown to Canada for resettlement.
The reunification of Vietnam under a communist government in 1975 saw thousands flee, many crowded into small wooden boats. In February 1980, twenty-three Vietnamese refugees resettled in Ballysally, Coleraine. Racially motivated attacks forced them out of the area; many resettled outside Northern Ireland.

Since 2015, the Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme has resettled 1,814 Syrians in Northern Ireland, out of 20,000 to be brought to the UK. Refugees are selected by the UN Refugee Agency based on needs, prioritising survivors of torture or violence and women and children at risk, along with close family. Housing, health and education are provided for one year, and refugees have the right to work. Nearly half of refugees are children, and almost three quarters of the adults have A level equivalent education or a degree. To date, eight Syrian families have been resettled in Causeway Coast and Glens.

Between December 1938 and September 1939, Kindertransports brought 10,000 unaccompanied children to the UK. Many lived with Belfast Jewish families, until the Blitz in April 1941, moving to a Millisle farm. Children learned farming and domestic skills, and attended local schools. The farm closed in 1948. Images ©Stefan Bown/IWM (Documents.6478)

Ziu Tai Giet and Vay Phong spoke of their experiences fleeing the Communist takeover of South Vietnam to a committee in Coleraine in December 1979 ahead of the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the area. According to Ziu Tai Giet, "Compared to the situation in Vietnam, Ulster's problems are almost inconsequential." (Coleraine Chronicle 08/12/1979). Photo ©Chronicle and Constitution Archive.

Resettlement of Afghan refugees in Northern Ireland began following the fall of Kabul in November 2021. Up to 840 Afghanis will be resettled across Northern Ireland using the same criteria as for Syrian refugees.

In February 2022, Russia invaded Ukraine. Under the Homes for Ukraine scheme, 598 Ukrainian refugees have received visas for Northern Ireland. Three thousand Ukrainians were expected, so far only 1,189 have applied.

There are no official refugee camps in Lebanon; Syrian refugees live across more than 1,750 different localities. Seventeen percent of them live in informal settlements like this one in Zahle. ©UNHCR/ Houssam Hariri.

A Borough of Sanctuary

Across the Causeway Coast and Glens, council staff, charities and volunteer groups have worked to welcome all those who have moved to the borough from around the world.

Causeway Multicultural Forum

The Causeway Multicultural Forum was created in 2002. It promotes inclusion and diversity, and the preservation of health and wellbeing among inhabitants within the Borough of Causeway Coast and Glens who are members of, or support ethnic minority communities, without distinction of age, sex, race, political, religious or other opinion. The voluntary group aims to proactively welcome and help new citizens assimilate into the local community and provide signposting to other relevant support agencies.

Causeway Borough of Sanctuary

Started in 2013, Causeway Borough of Sanctuary is a volunteer group and registered charity that promotes the inclusion and welfare of all newcomers to the Causeway area including refugees and asylum-seekers. They work through individual contact in partnership with a range of local, statutory, community, voluntary agencies, and faith organisations to celebrate the contribution of migrants to the area and challenge hostility and discrimination.

Members of the Causeway Borough of Sanctuary and volunteer English teachers with Syrian families at a reception hosted by Mayor of the Causeway Coast and Glens, Cllr Richard Holmes, in May 2022.

Causeway Interfaith Forum

The Causeway Interfaith Forum represents members of the Christian, Bahá'i, Islamic, Muslim and Hindu faiths. It was founded in 2017 to foster open dialogue between representatives of all backgrounds on matters of religious and community importance. The central aim is simple: to promote tolerance, respect and understanding among all creeds across the Causeway.

Building Communities Resource Centre (BCRC)

BCRC is a charity supporting communities across the Causeway Coast and Glens. In addition to programmes promoting social justice, integration, social affairs, inter-community dialogue and peace and reconciliation, BCRC's ethnic minority support project provides drop-in services for the Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic communities, ESOL classes, and intercultural competency workshops.

Connection Café event hosted by BCRC in 2022. Connection Cafés provide an open opportunity for people to meet, chat, share ideas and learn about culture and language over a cup of tea. ©BCRC

Reception hosted by Mayor of the Causeway Coast and Glens, Cllr Richard Holmes, in May 2022 to welcome Ukrainian refugees to the Borough.

Migration from South Asia

A WORLD OF STORIES

In the 1920s and 1930s migrants arrived from the north Indian states of Punjab and Gujarat. The majority were commercial travellers, selling clothing door to door in rural areas in return for weekly payments. Others had shops and, later, many owned clothing factories.

Many more South Asian migrants arrived after partition in 1947. No Indian food was available locally, and Jewish butchers were relied on for halal meat. Dwarka Nath Kapur moved to Coleraine in 1952 working as a commercial traveller between Ballycastle and Cushendall. He commented "I would leave for Cushendall on Monday and come back to Coleraine on Friday … I was a strict vegetarian, not even eating eggs. I therefore had to make do with cooking my own meals in the guest house where I was staying or eating what I could get in the local café."

James Mackie & Sons, a textile machinery manufacturer also played a part in the trade relationship between India and Northern Ireland. Many Indian engineers came to Belfast to receive training. In 1955, a subsidiary, Lagan Jute Machinery Company, was established in India with 400 employees.

During the Troubles, many second-generation Indians emigrated to larger Indian communities in England. However, within Northern Ireland there were few issues for South Asians and salesmen were usually waved through army checkpoints.

In 1981, the Indian Community Centre opened in a former church at Carlisle Circus in Belfast. It holds a Hindu temple and preserves the history and heritage of Indian people in Northern Ireland. The Sikh Gurdwara in Derry/Londonderry opened in 1995. The Belfast Mela was founded in 2006 and is now Northern Ireland's biggest celebration of cultural diversity.

Hindu temple in the Indian Community Centre, Belfast. Hindu Dharma believes in Vasudev Kutubhkum, the world is one family. ©Indian Community Centre

Naresh had grown up in Coleraine but returned to India to get married in 1970. Indu joined him in Northern Ireland after their wedding.
©Naresh and Indu Jairath

Indian performers at the Belfast Mela 2022, Courtesy ArtsEkta.
©Carrie Davenport

The East Asian Community

During the 1960s, Chinese immigrants arrived to work in the catering trade, owning restaurants and takeaways. Northern Ireland's first Chinese restaurant, The Peacock, opened in 1962. A job offer was required for a UK visa, so initially the Chinese community were concentrated in the food industry. Second generation Chinese were then able to move into other professions.

The Chinese Welfare Association was established in 1986 to support the community and promote cultural understanding. Simon Tang, a Chinese takeaway owner from Carrickfergus was beaten to death in the street in 1996. His murder prompted the Chinese Welfare Association to establish a taskforce supporting victims of hate crimes.

Until the mid-2000s the Chinese community was the largest ethnic minority community in Northern Ireland. In 2011 the Chinese community was estimated at between 3,000 and 8,000, but by 2019 had grown to between 12,000 and 15,000.

Mayor of the Causeway Coast and Glens, Cllr Ivor Wallace, with members of the Chinese community group, The Wee Tea House, celebrating Chinese New Year, 2023. ©Bonny Cooper

There has been a Chinese Consulate in Belfast since 2014. Eileen Chan-Hu, the daughter of Chinese migrants and founder of CRAIC-NI, promoting cultural diversity and inclusion, said, "when I was young I didn't even see a Chinese New Year in Northern Ireland. The celebration is much bigger now"; Chinese New Year is now part of the annual civic celebrations in Belfast.

Many Vietnamese refugees were resettled in the new town of Craigavon in 1979. Most were unhappy with the conflict and conditions in Northern Ireland, and soon left to live elsewhere. ©Victor Sloan

The Filipino community in Northern Ireland has also fluctuated over the years. Active NHS recruitment saw large rises between 1998 and 2003. Although many nurses returned to the Philippines, there are still around 200 Filipinos in the Causeway area, many working in the service sector, industry and nursing jobs.

Chinese performers taking part in the carnival preceding the 12th July Orange Parade in 2008. ©Cuil Rathain Historical and Cultural Centre.

Members of the Causeway Filipino community visiting Rathlin Island in 2022. Courtesy Christine Gucor

EU Migration

From 2000 to 2003, the food processing industry actively recruited processing operatives from Portugal and Eastern Europe. Under the Sector Based Skills Scheme, low-skilled migrant workers from outside the EU could work in the UK for up to 12 months. However, work permits were held by employers, so workers couldn't change jobs unless a new employer applied for a permit.

In May 2004, eight central and eastern European countries known as the A8 (Poland, Latvia, Slovakia, Lithuania, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia) joined the European Union, together with Malta and Cyprus. There were no restrictions on EU workers in the UK, except the Worker Registration Scheme until 2011. Proportionately 25% more A8 citizens registered in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK between 2004 to 2011.

Research showed that 65% already had jobs in their home and the majority of migrants moved to the UK to improve their income and life options. Oliwia Widuto moved to Coleraine from Poland in 2006, aged 8, and remembers difficulties learning English in school, "I was miserable there because the kids treated me as if I was an alien. And I felt like culturally I wasn't that different. I didn't even look any different."

When Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU in January 2007, restrictions were imposed on employment until 2013; only around 1,000 people from these countries arrived before 2010. Numbers of Northern Ireland residents born in Poland and Lithuania now exceed those in the Chinese and Indian communities. The number of EU workers in Northern Ireland peaked in 2016 at 57,000 and by 2021 stood at 38,000.

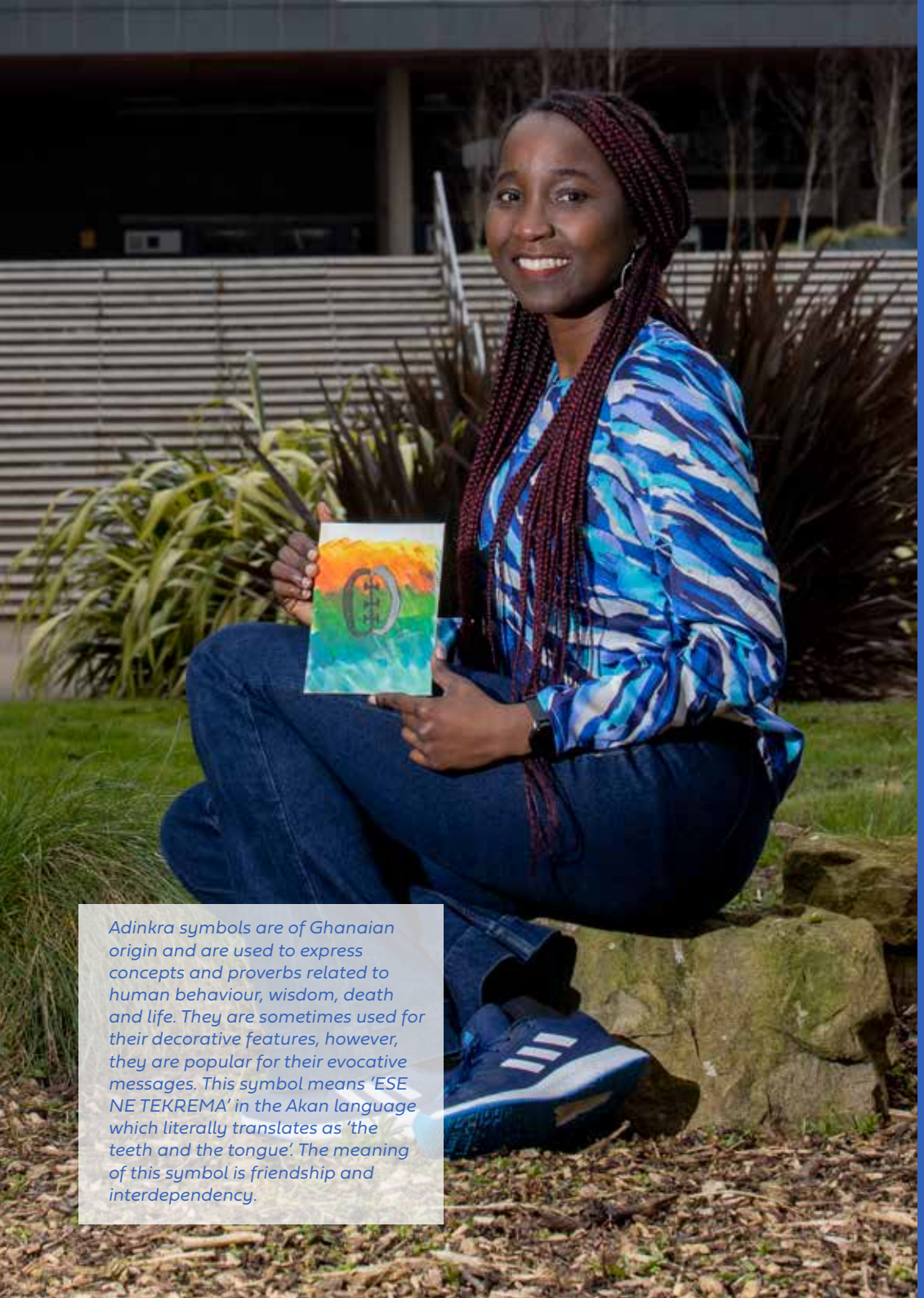
Launch of the Polish Room at the Ulster Aviation Society in 2021, recognising the contribution of Polish airmen to the defence of the UK during the Second World War. ©Maciek Bator.

Members of Northern Ireland's Romanian community taking part in an event in Portadown in 2022. ©Belfast Intercultural Romanian Community

Pupils and staff of Coleraine's Polish Saturday School, along with Cllr David Harding, Mayor of Coleraine, and council staff during the 2014 'My Polish Treasure' programme.

A WORLD OF STORIES

Personal Histories



Adinkra symbols are of Ghanaian origin and are used to express concepts and proverbs related to human behaviour, wisdom, death and life. They are sometimes used for their decorative features, however, they are popular for their evocative messages. This symbol means 'ESE NE TEKREMA' in the Akan language which literally translates as 'the teeth and the tongue'. The meaning of this symbol is friendship and interdependency.

Adelaide's Story

From Ghana to Northern Ireland

I was born in Ghana, which is on the west coast of Africa, I am originally from the volta region of Ghana but born in Kumasi. Kumasi is in the Ashanti region of Ghana ... I grew up in Accra and went to junior high school, basic school, everything in Accra.

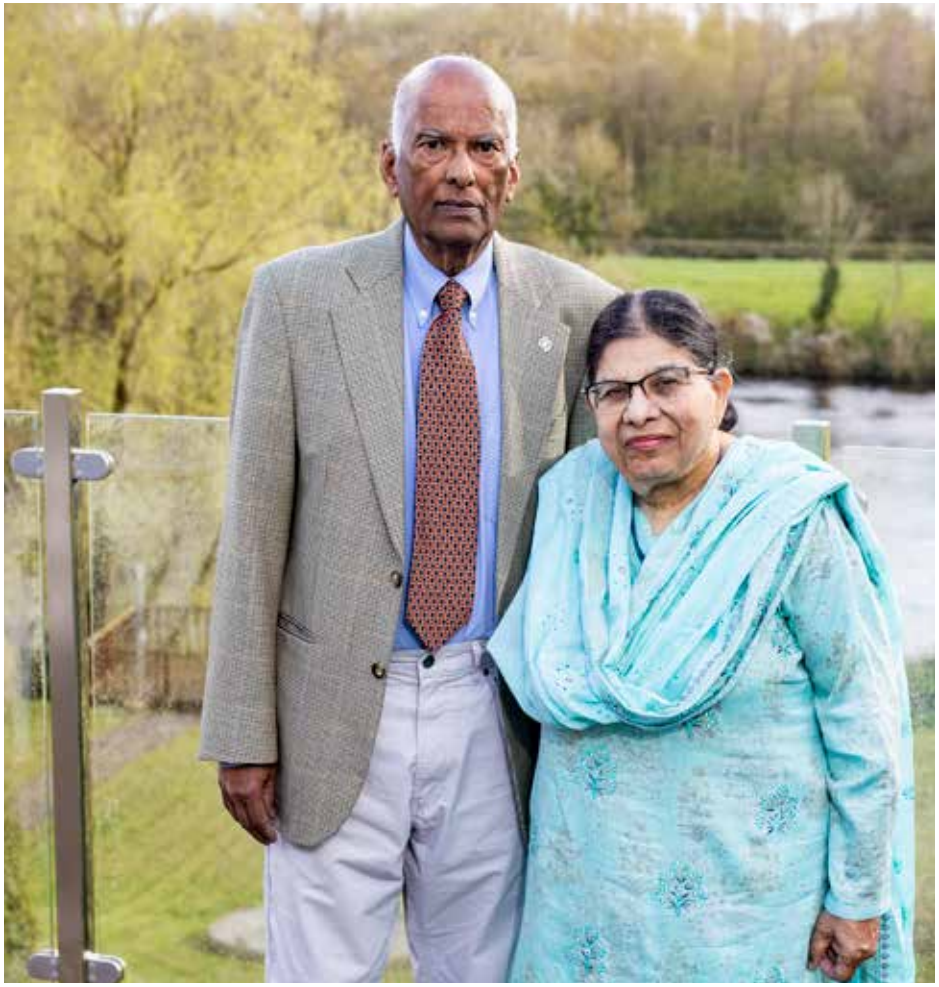
The Ashanti kingdom is ... a kingdom inside the country, but it has influences in all the parts of Ghana, and some chiefs and queen mothers from the kingdom are part of the Peace Council ... we have different members of the Peace Council. So you have traditional rulers, we have religious leaders, we have political leaders, we have leaders of different [ethnic] and social groups coming together to form the Peace Council.

I'm a Pharmacist in Ghana ... I got into researching treatments for chronic wound healing ... I decided to look elsewhere other than Ghana to do my PhD for the experience, a different kind of experience. I found a project that was doing something related ... in Northern Ireland. ... So that's how come I came here.

I honestly didn't know Northern Ireland, I just thought it was part of Ireland, and not part of the UK. I was so naïve ... the experience has been great, although most of the great experiences I've had is because of the people I've come into contact with ... For me the acts of kindness from people has been humbling ... I didn't have any expectations of the people, but I think that the kindness of people has been engraved in my mind and my heart.

Ahmed and Fozia's Story

From India to Northern Ireland via England



Ahmed: We both were born in India, southern India in a place called Hyderabad. Hyderabad was an independent state before the Indian union was formed … [In 1965] industry had just taken off after the war in the UK. They were looking for people to come and work, so I came over … I left India with three pounds, and at London Victoria I had £1.50 … The country has been very kind to me.

In 1973 I came to Northern Ireland to work for DuPont company. Then in 1975 I went back to India, as it is the tradition that families arrange marriages … In 1975 we got married in India, and ten days later Fozia was brave enough to travel with me back to Northern Ireland.

[During the Troubles] the running joke was when you are stopped in the street and asked are you a Protestant or a Catholic, you say no, I am a Muslim. Are you a Protestant Muslim or a Catholic Muslim? … But simply by the colour of your skin you were outside this conflict … People in Ireland are ever so kind and helpful, but they were very unkind to each other at that time.

Fozia: … I had no obligation to marry Ahmed, but I chose to marry him… Whenever the marriage was arranged, I had finished my house job and I was doing a senior house job in general medicine … [In Northern Ireland] I worked mostly in general Psychiatry, but I also worked in addiction and old age Psychiatry. I used to deal with a lot of very suicidal patients …

To come here at that time, there were not many Asians where we were living, so I found it, not traumatising, but I was a bit lost. When I came I had very good neighbours who were friendly … It took me about two years to get to learn the accent of the people, and now I can say which part of Northern Ireland people have come from by their accent.

This framed picture was sent to me by the China Council for Promotion of International Trade and the Chamber of Commerce of Foshan city, the cradle of Ling Nan culture and where I'm from. The surrounding is silk, a local speciality; it has the status of intangible cultural heritage. The paper-cut picture shows roof eaves in the typical style in that area. This is a picture that really represents Foshan, and represents the work I do, and represents a connection between here and Foshan.

Bonny's Story

From China to Northern Ireland

I came from [Foshan in] mainland China ... After I graduated, I practiced law in Guangzhou for six years ... 2001 was just before China joined the World Trade Organisation, so I thought to myself I would maybe go abroad to do this Master's degree ... improve my English, and learn the western way of doing business as well.

A lot of people ask me, why Northern Ireland? "Why? Where? Is it safe? Why you want to go there?" ... one of the representatives from Ulster University came and talked to us, and she showed us a picture of the north coast, and just had me. I just thought "What a beautiful place, I have to go there." That's why, as simple as that. Maybe a bit romantic, but that's how.

When I was in Coleraine, I met my now husband. At the start, with the Ballymoney accent ... he slowed down and used proper English. I can understand it, no problem. But whenever he turns round to talk to his own friends, I'm just completely lost. For at least three years I'd no idea what they are saying ... That's how I came here and what happened – why I stayed.

I have a reasonable educational background and married a local man, so I have kind of fast tracked into the local community. For somebody else who's maybe not as well educated as me, don't have these connections with the local community, it would be doubly hard for them. That's why I came up with this idea of setting up the Wee Tea House, this wee group for Chinese women in the local area. I thought, I've gone through all that, I've all the knowledge, and all the connections. If I could help even one person its worthwhile.

Chantal's Story

From France to Northern Ireland via Brazil, New Zealand, Singapore, the Netherlands and Germany

I was born in France, in Lyon, which is the second or the third biggest city in France ... my city is a big mixture of plenty of different nationalities, and culture, and diverse elements from the world ... there is an impact in the culture of the inhabitants. It made me curious of everything, certainly curious of travelling.

I did many countries. I used to live at least two or three years in a country ... Rio de Janeiro ... Holland ... Germany ... Singapore... New Zealand ... The more I was travelling the more I encounter people a bit like me, who are not nationalistic. They are born somewhere, but that's it.

I found myself in Berlin, and my neighbour upstairs was this guy, [now] my husband ... As the Irish saying said, as soon as an Irishman marries a foreigner he brings the woman back to his mum. And that day I regret I didn't marry the mum instead of the son. The mum was fantastic, fabulous, unfortunately I lost her four years ago. But she was fabulous, and this fiery temper, you know the Irish, the fiery woman. I loved her to bits.

The first time I visited this country, it was with my American girlfriend, before getting married to my Irish husband. Shame on me/us, we didn't know there was Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Some years after, in January 95, I came to live in Coleraine and lived almost as many years here as in my own country.

So for me, I married the country. It's bizarre, but bizarre in a nice way. There's always something very special happening here ... I could say I am a romantic refugee.

Clyde's Story

From South Africa to Northern Ireland via England and Scotland

I was born … in Johannesburg, South Africa. I lived with my mother and father, and my grandparents were very nearby for the formative years of my youth.

After Mandela got the presidency things started changing a little in South Africa. Things started changing for the positive, but also for the negative as well … The poverty is universal, black and white people can be very vicious and awful … It sort of spiralled out of control through corruption in the country, and that's just the way it was.

It's a beautiful country, and it's a beautiful lifestyle, and the community's second to none, with really nice people. But there's that dark side of the poverty, and the violence, and there's no value of life. It's vicious, it's not discriminating, no-one's safe, and you can see that on people.

My grandparents, who had made the decision to emigrate [to South Africa] from Scotland, they decided that it was time that they left … So my mother made the decision that her and me and my sister would go along with my grandparents … At some stage … the decision was made that … we would settle in Belfast.

When things were starting to get difficult for me in Belfast, I thought I would just go to Rathlin for a couple of years and straighten my head out … I worked on the local fishing boat here, fishing crab and lobster … on the second year that I was here, I met my partner … We've really gone from strength to strength on the island, and had lots of opportunities. There's been so much opportunity for us here, and a lot of encouragement and support from the community.

Dasha's Story

From Ukraine to Northern Ireland via Poland, Germany and France

Photos of Dasha's pizza and karyoke restaurant, Dr Hunger, in Borodyanka before the war and after its destruction from a Russian bomb.

I was born and raised in Donetsk region, in Eastern Ukraine. I studied management in economic relations, and after Donetsk I decided to go to Crimea. I lived in Crimea for three years, and moved to Bucha [Borodyanka]. Together with my business partner we opened our first small business. We made, sold, and delivered pizza.

When the war started early in the morning on 24th February, there was an announcement. "War has started". There was initially some confusion and disbelief. What does it mean, war has started? Many thought it would end tomorrow, or in a matter of days. Nobody expected it to escalate the way it did. Our people were taken by surprise.

Borodyanka was occupied by Russians. Curfews were imposed, and our people were restricted and couldn't develop an accurate picture of what was going on. A missile was fired into the centre of Borodyanka, where my restaurant was located. My first restaurant was burned and destroyed, which was very upsetting. Then two days later I got a photo of my boyfriend. It was a picture of his dead body, and I was asked to identify him. It was a horrible picture. He was just lying among the rubble. There were many such tragedies.

A small group of us decided to leave and we moved first to Poland, and then to Germany, France and on to Northern Ireland. The first month was very difficult here. It was like another planet. People were very kind and very friendly , but there were many cultural differences.

Of course we miss our country. We think a lot about everything that is going on there. We want to be useful here, and give something back to the people who have helped us.

Flora and Bruce's Stories

From Eritrea and the USA, via Italy, Switzerland, and Malta

Flora: I was born in Africa, in Asmara in Eritrea, my father was a captain of the [Italian] navy. When we lost [WWII] ... the Red Cross came to take all the children, babies, and women .... to Italy ... spending three months on a ship. I grew up in Genoa, later my mother took me to Sicily, which was very different from North Italy, when I was six ... it was very traumatic to adapt to the Sicilian language, and to the customs.

[We heard that the Bahá'í assembly in Coleraine needed a new member] Instead of nine people they were only eight ... I knew [Northern Ireland] was a country in conflict, and that the conflict was religious. That gave me the interest to come because I said "yes, religion really is one." That's what the Bahá'í faith teach... that's very positive.

Bruce: I was born in the States, in a small suburban town outside of New York City, ... I loved New York City ... where I spent most of my recreational time hanging around [with friends] in Greenwich Village ... I moved to Philadelphia and other cities in the US, but that was just more of the same ... after marrying Flora, we relocated to several countries in Europe.

I became what people would now call an ex-pat, no particular attachment to any country ...which is good in terms of being a Bahá'í, I consider myself a world citizen ... So from the outside I see Northern Ireland with all its problems, but they don't affect me personally because I'm not Northern Irish. I'm just a guest here ... whatever people here decide to do to resolve their internal problems is alright with me. I think one way or the other, this place will settle down.

Gabriella's Story

From Bulgaria to Northern Ireland

I was born in Bulgaria … When I look back I just cannot separate my life from the politics and the political situation … Bulgaria was a Communist country since 1944 until 1989 … We lived like in a monastery, just completely cut from the rest of the world, no information on what is happening outside, no possibility to travel abroad and especially to the West … We didn't have money, but nobody had money at that time apart from a few people from the government of course. So it was a happy life, because you don't care about anything.

Suddenly things started not to go very well … Perestroika started as just an attempt to revise Communism to end the Cold War, but then it was a process that couldn't be controlled any more. It just developed like an avalanche … it was just a chaotic situation, the ordinary people who don't know much about such situations just suffered a lot.

[After coming to Northern Ireland] I had a brilliant job, interesting with a very high salary … I had everything, but I didn't have something very important, and it was human contact … The first two years it was a real nightmare for me, culture shock and terrible loneliness … I just didn't know anything about the society … I didn't know anything about the culture.

Gradually I became a member of the Causeway Multicultural Forum, and now I try to do everything possible to help people who are in a similar situation to me when I arrived … I'm still here in Northern Ireland, which is my second home … I start to enjoy many things in Northern Ireland. I met people who I really love … so I'm very grateful to this country.

Gill's Story

From Co. Dublin to Northern Ireland via England and Scotland

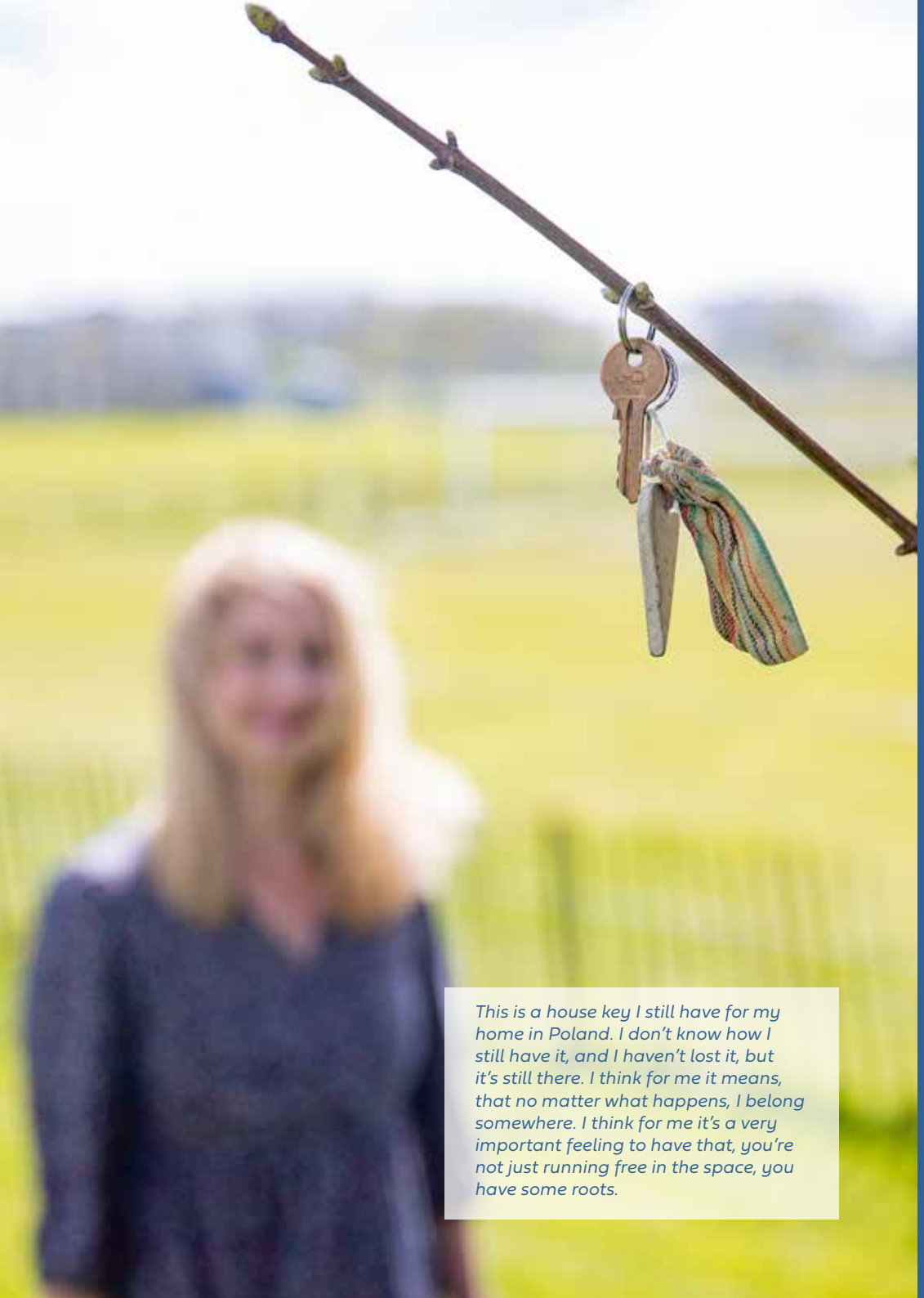
I grew up in Malahide ... The village was surrounded by big houses with Anglo-Irish type families living in them, the shreds of gentility, colonels from the Indian Army, awfully, awfully British ... I think I always felt more comfortable with ordinary Irish people ... My grandparents were very, very unquestioningly British, but my mother was quite nationalist. She was suspicious of British grandeur, whereas my father was more socially mobile and conflicted. As children we used to pull his leg and say, "Are we the British Empire today, or are we the downtrodden Irish?"

I trained as a Social Worker ... I got my first job in London ... Then after four years of that I went up to Edinburgh to a senior job in the Royal Infirmary ... I ended up in Coleraine; I have never regretted it. I said I'll come for a couple of years, I'll buy a little house and see. Forty-two years later, I'm still here ... It just felt right. I had a conviction that this was where I was supposed to come ...

But it was very frightening. I was never frightened as an adult until I came here during the Troubles, because I didn't know the country, and I didn't know the territory.

I ran into [sectarianism] in a big way. I think I was probably one of only two or three Protestants at that time in my work. I was bemused in the beginning ... you don't think about it when you're part of the dominant community with all the assumptions of the dominant community, until you end up in a community where you're not. So there's a lot of work to be done still here, but we don't talk about it very much. Forty years as a member of Corrymeela has helped me understand better, my dream is for an Ireland where we will reach out and come together in peace.

This photograph, taken in the mid 1950s, is of my parents, my sisters and brother on the pier beside our holiday 'hut' near Sneem, Co. Kerry. Lovely Augusts full of sea, boats and adventures, the memories of which we all still share and enjoy together today.



This is a house key I still have for my home in Poland. I don't know how I still have it, and I haven't lost it, but it's still there. I think for me it means, that no matter what happens, I belong somewhere. I think for me it's a very important feeling to have that, you're not just running free in the space, you have some roots.

Gosia's Story

From Poland to Northern Ireland

I was born in a small town in the southeast of Poland. It was in general a very happy childhood ... people were only emerging from the Communism era, and it really had a massive impact on the way our parents were looking at the world around. I think it was so deep into our culture not to do anything that would bring attention. Many times people were giving up their ambitions, they just wanted to be unseen by the others, because they didn't want to put their families at risk.

My Mummy got sick very suddenly. That changed the whole world for me ... all of a sudden I noticed everything that I didn't like about Poland. I didn't like the corruption ... So my Mummy had died, and five days after that I left Poland; I left very cross.

I ended up here, which was in a way, a pure accident. It wasn't planned whatsoever ... I absolutely fell in love with everything. From the moment I left the plane I looked around, and I felt this is the place I belonged to. I must say that I still have that feeling ... from the very first moment I felt like I'd found my place in the world.

I can see the difference between what we had growing up as young people in a post Communism country, to what people have here ... It's not about comparison, it's just a different reality ... I'm glad my children can experience what they can, what they have here ... I feel this is my home, I have my children here, I feel like I'm a tree, my roots are here. I was born in Poland, and part of me will always belong there, but this is my home.

Indu's Story

From Sri Lanka to Northern Ireland via England

I was born in staggeringly beautiful Sri Lanka ... to parents of mixed heritage, one a Buddhist, and the other a Hindu ... as things transpired there was a prolonged civil war between the Hindus and the Buddhists, which meant that growing up wasn't easy because they were meant to have different loyalties, because of their, different ethnicities. It was a difficult time for all of us that has left deep wounds within the population.

I remember being afraid to tell people about my mixed ethnicity because safety was more important than identity. The [Hindu] Tamils were blamed for the problems that the [Buddhist] Sinhala majority were experiencing ... I remember constantly dreaming of finding a place where I could breathe, where I could be me ... I had some family in England, so I decided to come to London. London didn't disappoint. I was home.

Then I met a stubborn but gentle Irishman, and there was an instant affinity ... There was however hostility from my side of the family ... ironically about our mixed marriage, our different cultures. Deciding to come to Northern Ireland was even more difficult, because it was never part of the plan ... I struggled to settle into life here, because it was worlds apart from the beloved cosmopolitan city, I used to call home. Soon the parallels with my homeland started to emerge.

Unexpectedly I was gifted an opportunity ... working with young people from challenging backgrounds. ... very quickly I realised that I had found my wee niche, or where I belonged, the reception from the young people was humbling. I had stumbled upon my purpose. What brought me to Northern Ireland, I can safely say, is love, and what keeps me here is also love. That's why I'm here!

Juliana's Story

From England to Northern Ireland via Co. Mayo and the United States

I was born in Manchester, and as a family we moved from Manchester to my father's home place just outside Tuar Mhic Éadaigh, which is Tourmakeady in English, in the county of Mayo … I was just four years old when we made the big move, coming from quite a lot of modern conveniences in Manchester, we moved then to a small farm, an old house … we were thrown into a new language, the whole neighbourhood spoke [Irish] more or less …

All of my education was through Gaelic or Irish … A lot of our wording would have been Irish as small children, but we didn't even realise. We just thought that was the English word, because that's what we heard, we didn't know any different.

I ended up working in New York for almost five years … I found it quite tricky after leaving New York, coming to Northern Ireland, and trying to catch on to all the different dialects, and the Ulster Scots.

I was only here six months and I met my husband, and it was a bit of a whirlwind romance. We were engaged after three and a half months and married after fourteen months … I went from hill farm in the Gaeltacht in Co. Mayo, to a hill farm in Glens of Antrim. Growing up in Mayo you heard very little about Northern Ireland. You only heard the bad stuff sadly … I have to say Northern Ireland has been very good to me. I'm very happy here, it's home.

I have these special photographs from home, Co. Mayo. They're of Binn Fheá mountain. This is where my father grazed his sheep. We thought he'd live to 100, but sadly, cancer took him. This was our last trip to the hill together. It was his wish to be cremated, and his ashes scattered here.

Ksenia's Story

From Texas to Northern Ireland

I was born in Houston, Texas and grew up there until I moved over here. So I'm a Texan first, and I say I'm an American when I have to show my passport.

My father is Russian-Ukrainian. They emigrated to Argentina in the early 1900s and then in the late '50s, early '60s he moved to Buffalo, New York of all places, for the American dream ... Although he was college educated he was an immigrant, he spoke three or four languages, but he was an immigrant, so he had to start out at the bottom of the barrel ... My mother's side of the family, they were Polish, emigrated early 1900s to America.

[I studied] psychology and English, and it was actually by that stage I had met the reason why I moved here ... I decided to go for love instead of education, and I moved over here in 2005 with my son ... [Rathlin] Island's welcoming ... They take you for who you are, and get to know you, and take you at face value or your work ethic ... It's like a family here now, I wouldn't move again. It's not just because I'm too lazy to make such a big move, I actually do love the place.

[My son] was eight when he moved over. It was quite funny because we were discussing nationality the other day, and he said "I consider myself Irish." I was flabbergasted, and I said, "but you're American, you were born in America." He said, "I've lived here longer than I've lived in America, and this is where I've grown up, and how I've grown up, and the people I've grown up with. I consider myself Irish."

Masako's Story

From Japan to Northern Ireland via England and the USA

I lived in Surrey, England, from when I was 7 to 9 for my father's work, but when I returned to Japan, I forgot everything but the accent. I actually hated English when I was in high school … I was thinking, "oh, I'm never gonna use English in my life" …Strangely, I ended up being a kindergarten teacher at an international school in Japan. After working there for 9 years, the school closed. To brush up on my English, I went [on] to study as my speaking level was ok, but I struggled with the grammar. When I got the highest level … I then transferred to an interpretation course … That's how I was sent to the Tokyo Disney Sea project, where I met my husband …

I came [to Northern Ireland] in 2001 for a trial period to see if I could cut the mustard here. I never really experienced sectarianism, or I never really had discrimination against myself …though sometimes seeing the coloured pavements and flags saddened me when I realised the meaning behind them.

My husband's family were very kind to me, but I found difficulty finding close friends because people here seemed to be a bit more reserved than people in Japan … Over the years, I made closer friends, and now through storytelling, my social world opened up even more. Of course, everything is not perfect, but I am quite happy and content with being surrounded by people I care about now.

I love Japan, but Northern Ireland grew on me. I feel this is where I would like to live for the rest of my life.

Mary and Ciaran's Story

From Co. Cork to Northern Ireland

Ciaran: I was born on an island off the West Cork coast called Cape Clear Island, which is near Fastnet Rock … I was born there a long, long time ago. I went to primary school there, and Irish was the language of the home … I became involved in maritime affairs from my early twenties onwards. That's been my life. I came to Northern Ireland about fourteen or fifteen years ago, in 2008, as a result of a tender for the Rathlin Island ferry service that we won.

Mary: I actually grew up on the mainland, but it would have been the mainland town for the island where Ciaran comes from … I would never [have] dreamed of going out with anybody from that backward place, and I definitely wouldn't live there … I ended up then marrying Ciaran and moving to Cape Clear. So I ended up living there after all, and it wasn't so backward really.

Ciaran: The transition to Rathlin was not a big deal really, because it was one island to another one … It has a slightly different legal system, and a slightly different taxation system, and the accents. Apart from that the country is no different.

Mary: I suppose the mainland living is a novelty for us … it was very exciting to think you could go to a clothes shop or a hairdressers … One thing I think that was in our favour when we came, we didn't have any baggage about Catholic or Protestant. That was something that never really entered our heads … down south, I suppose we don't take religion as seriously.

This is a brass beer tap from the cellar of 'The Ship'. In the cellar we had two longish stillages, which were benches that the beer barrels would lay on. The brass taps would be put into the barrel end, for the beer to flow into the beer pipes, and be drawn up to the bar. A tricky thing to do. You hold the tap against the barrel end bung, and give it an almighty whack with a wooden mallet. That pushes the wooden bung into the barrel. As you can see it's tapered, so there shouldn't be any leakage.

Mick's Story

From England to Northern Ireland

I was born in a north Kent village in the southeast of England. This was between Dartford and Gravesend and called 'Green Street Green' (yes, really!). My parents ran the pub there, it was called 'The Ship'.

The Ship was popular with local farm workers as well as families from the towns, especially Gravesend, where quite a lot of people from other countries that settled. Mostly these were Sikhs and Hindus. A Hindu lad was in the same class at school. They were simply part of the community; Gravesend didn't have so much of the racism that south London had. There was none of the infamous signs saying 'No Dogs, No Irish, No Blacks'.

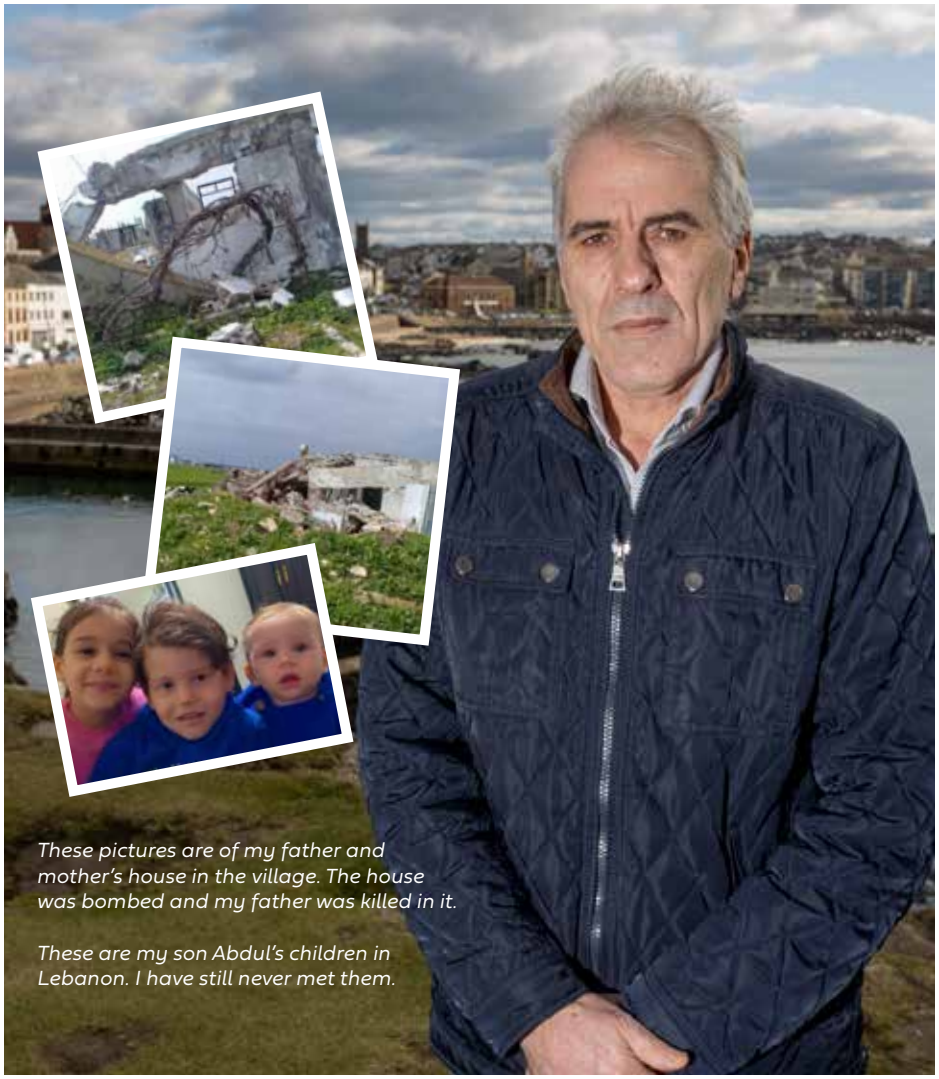
In my early twenties I went to Birmingham, doing a four-year BA Sociology course and took a job as a 'Community Worker'. That was a real eye opener, I could see, and be part of, the living conditions of many 'Inner City' people. Later I worked for the Councils' Publications Unit, we would have to do any information leaflets in at least five languages and more, depending the budget available.

When we (my wife Christine - who was and still is an ESOL Teacher - and I) where getting nearer retirement age. Having come over to Northern Ireland two, sometimes three times a year, visiting family and friends, we thought, "If we're going to move, let's move 'back' to N.I".

People were (and are) very friendly, and very inquisitive. That's definitely a plus point for living here. There's certainly more good points than there are bad points. I am concerned about attitude to people of different cultures, that's not good, and there's pretty overt racism here I think, but it's slowly improving!

Mohamad's Story

From Syria to Northern Ireland via Turkey



These pictures are of my father and mother's house in the village. The house was bombed and my father was killed in it.

These are my son Abdul's children in Lebanon. I have still never met them.

I was born in in Syria, in a town called Homs ... I had my own business, money, and a good house. Everything was fine until the revolution started. As soon as the revolution started everything was destroyed ... [The regime] gave [militias] permission, they can kill, they can rape women, they can steal everything, they can burn. They can do anything they want ...

One year after the revolution I told [my family] they should go ... As soon as they left to go to Lebanon, twenty days and we got surrounded by army, and I couldn't leave for four years. I had to stay there in the same area ... Sometimes we'd be eating the trees because there'd be no food or no electricity. When we were surrounded, there were snipers, and they targeted the kids, or maybe pregnant women ... I lost lots of friends and family members, and I can still remember how the women were crying, and all the kids were hungry. The situation was terrible at this time, I still remember it, and I still feel it even now.

After four years they started to negotiate with the UN about this area, they would transfer most of the wounded people and civilians to Idlib, beside Turkey ... I went to the UN in Turkey and I told them the situation. They said we will try to apply for family reunion for you in the UK, and after seven years I came here. The first day I came here my family came from Lebanon, and we met here in Belfast one hour after each other, after seven years ... when I left them, they were really young, really small. When I saw them at the airport they were almost my height.

My [eldest] son is called Abdul; he is in Lebanon. When he left Syria, Abdul was fifteen, sixteen years old, now he is 27. He has three kids; I haven't met them ... That's the only thing we suffer from, except that, everything is good now for us ... There are no words to explain how much love we have seen here, and everyone was helping us. There are no words to explain how much we appreciate it ... We feel this is our country. We will live here until we die, this is our country now. Your country is not the ground you are living in, it's the place you feel safe, and you feel happy.

Naresh and Indu's Stories

From India to Northern Ireland

Naresh: I was born in a place called Bajwara, it's a small place in Punjab in India ... I grew up there up to the age of sixteen. My father left to come to the UK in 1960, so I followed him after three years ... In those days all the Indians ... used to work as commercial travellers. They would go out to peoples' houses, and sell clothes or shoes or anything they needed.

During [the Troubles] we had a shop in Ballymoney ... we used to get Catholics, we used to get Protestant people coming into the shop, I couldn't distinguish who was who.

We got so friendly with everybody, everybody helped each other. After that there there's a different story altogether. They invited me to join BCRC, Building Communities Resource Centre in Ballymoney, to be their board member. I am the Vice Chair there, and I have been there helping the communities for the last ten, fifteen years.

Indu: I was born in a place called Kalka, it's in north India ... [but] was brought up in place called Ambala ... I came here to Northern Ireland after my marriage ... I had no intention to get married ... [Naresh] was looking for a bride from India, and I thought to myself maybe it might be an easier life there.

When I came here it was a bit of a culture shock ... I stayed home and I looked after my in laws and my husband, and then that became my role ... [until] I opened my own business here, I had two shops one in Ballymoney, one in Portrush.

I got a lot of love from my in-laws and my friends here, and my neighbours were very, very friendly and very welcoming ... we feel part of this culture as much as anyone else ... The time went on, this is my home now, and it's just good memories for me.

Penny's Story

From New Zealand to Northern Ireland

I was born in Christchurch, New Zealand. That's where I grew up ... Mostly barefoot, constantly at the beach, running round on a bicycle, swimming a lot, it was all we ever knew. Aged about eighteen I moved to the west coast of the South Island of New Zealand ... a communist commune [where] I skinned possums for a living for a couple of years. It was quite a good living ... possums in New Zealand are a noxious pest, so it was a good fur trade going at that point ... then moved to Wellington. From there I came here.

My husband now, at that stage, was heavily involved in community development, trying to get some programmes as part of rural regeneration ... Through the kind of work he was doing we met a man called Jimmy McCartney, he ... had been talking a bit about community projects and community development. He said to us that he had some land on Rathlin and would we like to come and have a look.

I saw Rathlin and just went, "if this is a possibility I'd like to grab this with both hands," and it turns out it was possible. Actually I've never regretted it since ... we are just very proud of how much this brilliant little community has just been kindness ... The first winter was a big shock, in a teeny tiny stone cottage, but that was our choice, and it was ours, and nobody could take it off us. We got potatoes planted, starting renovating the place, got a little dog, fell further and further in love with Rathlin, and slowly, slowly, slowly got to know the people.

Richard's Story

From St Vincent and the Grenadines to Northern Ireland via the British Virgin Islands, Canada and England

I was born in St Vincent and the Grenadines, and that's where I grew up. I should tell you it's in the heart of the Caribbean where the weather is just great year after year, except for when we have a hurricane.

I came to Northern Ireland for a short visit to meet the lady that I'd met online, then I went over to England where I finished my studies and my internship. Then I came to Northern Ireland. Just before I came to Northern Ireland I got hitched ... Getting a full-time job here is like taking the teeth out of the hens.

In Northern Ireland it is cold, and it rains a lot ... So, I turned my backyard into a mini orchard. I have pears, plums, cherries, apples and various vegetables. All in a small area, and each year, while enjoying gardening I get fruits and vegetables to eat. I have a little greenhouse where I grow my tomatoes and so on ...

In Northern Ireland frankly speaking, all I find from the kids and teachers in school is nothing but welcome. I go to the shop, and I get welcomed. I walk the streets and I get welcomed.

I remembered when I just came to visit once, it was in Coleraine. One night I was out, and I heard somebody shouted, "Go back where you came from." It stays with me, but if one person says that, could that in any way affect my relationship to anyone else in Northern Ireland? Absolutely not. The people are friendly and welcoming, and I feel very much at home here.

Roberta's Story

From Chile to Northern Ireland via England

My mother was from Vienna, from the Austro-Hungarian empire, [she was] Jewish. My father was a Christian Catholic from Yugoslavia on the border with Italy. My parents met in a refugee camp in Italy. [They] arrived in Chile in 1948, and I was born in 1949. I was born in Santiago [and] studied in Santiago

Augusto Pinochet and the military took over [1973-1990]. It was a junta and [it] dismantled the social tissue of the country. I had to flee the capital. I went to the south of Chile to work at the university there. Chile has had four Truth Commissions. I worked for the second one... The first and second only dealt with people who were dead; executed [or disappeared]. From that came research on survivors of torture. My work at the Truth Commission was extremely interesting. I learned about the country, and about life, more than anything I had ever learned in books.

[I] came to live in the UK at the age of forty-nine [to work with] War Resisters' International. I was six years in London. [When] I came here I responded to an invitation to look for a new way to deal with the past in Northern Ireland ... textile language ... [for] things you cannot explain in words. [In] an arpillera, you see that the story is told, but it is told also with the positive. It's been a very interesting journey.

Sabrina's Story

From China to Northern Ireland via Dublin

I was born … in Dalian city, in the Liaoning province, in the northern part of China … Dalian is a beautiful city, it has three sides surrounded by mountains, and one side to the sea. It's a seaside city and its famous for being beautiful and good weather. … I was qualified as a nurse, and before I came here I was a senior nurse …

The big change, I moved. The first time I came to Dublin, not directly to Northern Ireland … when I was in Dublin I thought that the culture or traditions were the same [in Northern Ireland] because it's the same island and the same people from the ancestors, from the root, but when I come over here, oh my god its totally different.

I went into work in a nursing home and it didn't feel really good. It felt like they were looking at me in a different way, as if they don't trust me at all … within the nursing home other workers, the local workers, this a very tightly knit community … I can't say that caused bullying, but most times they just put me in the very heavy-duty area … they fired me because [they said] I was being investigated by the Police, and probably pending prosecution. Nobody ever came to tell me that there is a case against me with the Police.

… now the situation has got so bad I actually tried to commit suicide … I'm feeling so down, and worried all the time. The only strength I have to carry on is my children, other than that I can't find any reason to stay in this world.

Viktorya and Anna's Story

From Ukraine to Northern Ireland via Poland and Georgia

Anna: I was born in the beautiful town of Chernigiv in Ukraine … All my family was born in Chernigiv, apart from my son Mykyta, who was born in Kyiv … Chernigiv was one month under Russian siege. It now has the title of Hero Town … The Russian army surrounded Chernigiv, and bombarded it badly … but they never managed to enter the city.

Viktorya: My husband used to be an officer in the Ukrainian Army … he graduated in Leningrad, St Petersburg now, it was an academy … When Ukraine became independent in 1991 it was a question, a challenge, for each officer. Which side are you going to be on, Russian, or are you going to be Ukrainian? My husband decided he was going to be as a part of the Ukrainian Army, but his brother decided he was going to be a part of the Russian Army, we could not even imagine this situation.

Anna: You try to understand, but your brain cannot, at a certain time it's maybe just shutting down, and to understand for real, it's difficult … in the 21st century it's difficult to imagine somebody can just start a war just like that.

Viktorya: The first ten days of the war we stayed in Kyiv, this was the time that Hostomel and Bucha were taken, and Kyiv was constantly under shelling … What we witness, it's horror, it's beyond horror. It's crowds which don't end, and people with bags, and animals, and cages.

Anna: We travelled from Warsaw to Georgia … Georgia is a beautiful country, however the traffic from Russian people fleeing to Georgia is massive … and it was not safe for Ukrainians to stay there … I am a big lover of Facebook, and suddenly I found the [UK's] Homes for Ukraine programme … within one month we have a sponsor … People are very, very open and kind here. They don't pretend, they are who they are, and they don't want to pretend they are better. They are who they are, and they're kind.

Viktorya: Dreams are changing, but people remain the same.


A WORLD OF
STORIES

T:buc
Changing for the better, together

Museum Services

COLERAINE MUSEUM | AT COLERAINE TOWN HALL