



23 November 2013

Interview with:

Charlie McMenamin

Venue: Gasyards Arts Centre, Derry

The Memory Project, Smashing Times Theatre Company Ltd

FILE NO: ST0024

TC START 02:13:51:21

Q: Maybe you could start Charlie by telling us where you grew up and a bit about your family?

CHARLIE: [02:14:16:10] I grew up in the Bogside area of the city here and, not far away from here, near the interface where I now work at times, a place called Howard Street - that's where I grew up and that's where there were ...troubles...whatever people want to call it... that's where I first encountered it. [02:14:38:01] Because I woke up one morning and there was a barricade built outside my house. The barricade was to prevent people from the Unionist community and the Police, who were 99% Unionist, made up from people from the Unionist community at the time, coming in and attacking our community. But we, we were moved out of it and moved to prefabs on Foyle road, as part of that protection - to try and protect us - and while we were away our homes were wrecked by the B-Specials. [02:15:12:15] Several years later, not several years, but not too long after it....the British Army came into the North of Ireland and my Grandmother lived at the, the heart of it which was up at Butcher's gate - she lived in what we know as the High Flats - and my Grandmother would have sent me up with tea and sandwiches for the British Army - they were quite friendly at that stage - everyone welcomed them because they believed that they were there to protect us from the bad people in the Unionist community. [02:15:49:23] I didn't know, I wasn't taught that there was Protestants and Catholics...I wasn't... religion never really came into it for a lot of us... so I, I didn't really understand at that age so the first really bad experience we had was... Bloody Sunday... I lived in Creggan at the time and the march passed down [02:16:16:24] by our house, down Rathlin Drive. People were singing, I think it was 'we shall overcome', that

was the song and it always stood out in my mind. But later on that day... y'know 1000's of people passed out house, but later on that day people were coming back and they were crying and upset and we were hearing about all these different incidents where people were getting shot. First of all people were injured, shot and injured and then we heard people were dead. A fellow called Seosamh Mahon was shot from our street and other people in the Creggan area were shot dead. [02:16:58:08] I was young at the time, I just knew that 13 people had been killed and, and a lot of people injured. Bloody Sunday had the effect of..... Most people my age group were pretty innocent and wouldn't have really become involved in anything, I think..... throughout their lives, only for incidents like Bloody Sunday.... and you heard about incidents where other people from other communities were killed as well and British Soldiers were killed and Policemen were killed - you didn't really care because of what happened in your community. [02:17:36:14] So as I grew up in, in the Bogside throughout the years, we had the British Army there all the time, we had the RUC, it was a very oppressive atmosphere. I didn't really think about it that way at the time - just thought it was terrible the way they were harassing us and stopping us and it seemed so unfair and unjust, and they could raid your home, which they did on Motorman [02:18:02:14], at any time. All of the homes in the Bogside were raided, [02:18:07:23] a lot of homes were raided on a daily basis, so we grew up in that atmosphere where these strangers were in our city and they were searching our homes. And it's funny because I met, in the past 10 years, with a former British soldier who said that he joined the British Army to see the world and he ended up in a housing estate in Creggan that had the same type of houses that he had ...from where he came from in Manchester. [02:18:38:24] So.... as the years went on we had all those experiences - y'know I could have been arrested any day and held for 4 hours by the British Army, beaten and abused and stuff like that - that happened on a regular basis - didn't really pay much attention to us cos we were young and it sort of bounced off us y'know but... I'm sure it had an effect on some people I threw stones at the British Army, I threw stones at the Police, I rioted, I was up in court for rioting y'know so.... [02:19:15:09] I would still classify myself as innocent enough but.... the worst experience I ever had was at 16 years of age, I was arrested in April 1978..... Easter Sunday 1978, from my home, and I was taken to Strand Road police station, or barracks as we called it at the time, because it wasn't really known as a police station..... I had no parents with me, my parents asked could they come with me and they were told no, and they asked about legal and they said you can't get anyone legal for 24 hours or whatever. [02:19:59:05] So I was taken away in this armoured vehicle with about 7 British soldiers - heavily armed - and a policeman, as they called themselves... I was taken to Strand Road. I was stripped of every possession I had in my pockets, my shoelaces, my belt, all that, so everything was taken off me that....they're wee luxuries in life y'know, if you have a tissue in your pocket you'd like to hold onto it - they take it off you - they take everything off you, so you had nothing and you had nobody, so I was taken up a stairs [02:20:37:02] after a while - after seeing a doctor and everything else - told the doctor that, that I was tired, I was nervous - cos I was up very late the night before - I sat up listening to music till about 3, 4 in the morning - they raided our house at 5, so I had very little sleep - so I was taken up the stairs by two grown men and.... So, you know why you're here and stuff like that and they accused me of being

involved in the murder of a policeman, and straight away I panicked I went 'what policeman?'. I wouldn't know, y'know, you're taking to the wrong person - this went on for hours - they kept swapping policemen and, and I think it was about 4 hours altogether this went on for before... and these were all big men, some of these men were I'm not going to say what age I am now but some of these men were my age now and they were pretty big strong sortaguys y'know and very oppressive [02:21:28:03] you know right up into your face, chair beside you y'know. You could picture me 16 years of age, I was no size then like and I had no sense, y'know I didn't, I had absolutely no sense, I would, I would say I wasn't the brightest spark on the block y'know so..... after a few hours they kept..they brought in all these papers and files and stuff, 'you were seen in this area and this is where the shooting happened and this is what that happened and there's a shooting happening there so many years ago maybe you were involved in that, maybe you weren't involved in the murder, maybe you were just involved in this wee shooting or maybe hijacked a car or something', they kept at me and kept at me and.... 'are you in the junior wing of the IRA'....stuff like that. [02:22:36:16] I kept denying everything and kept saying no I'm not involved in anything, I wasn't involved in anything - then they started slapping me about, pull my hair.... making me stand up, making me sit down, telling me that I was never going to see my parents and stuff like that and telling me also that.... they were going to tell people in the community that I was a police informer – very, very strong psychological stuff [02:23:06:18] so.... at one stage one of them just came into the room to me - big guy - I could tell you his name but I'm not going to mention it, because I don't even think he deserves to get his name mentioned, right up to me and at me and at me and at me and I just said 'what do you want me to say?..... what do you want me to say?' So I admitted... he said 'look if you admit being involved in this organisation, we'll get you out and you'll see your parents and we'll get you out on bail and stuff and we'll get off in the court case' sounder..... under threat I signed the statement [02:23:52:12] and..... admitted being involved in the Junior wing of the IRA which I wasn't and.... I thought ' this is good, it'll be over and done with nowy'know, and I'll get out of here and I'll be able to tell my mother and father that I only done it to get out of the place - so the minute I made a statement, two more came into the room and they said we're only startingso they gave me, issued me with a warrant that they wanted me to tell more when I come up in the next interview and I decided..... At that stage that I was going to ask to see a doctor when I go downstairs because of, I felt they had been pulling at my hair and stuff and I had a slap on the ear as well and my ears were buzzing so when I went down the stairs [02:24:50:22] there was a radiator in the cell and on the radiator was a screw, and I got a plastic cup, or a plastic spoon and started screwing the screw out, and I got the screw out and then I started hacking at both of me wrists, on both sides,and There were a lot of blood and stuff like that and so I just sat there - I didn't know what to do - it wasn't really making an impact y'know because it was quite blunt - and I always say to people y'know if I had had a Stanley knife I'd have been dead now [02:25:30:19] or if I had had a sharper implement I'd have been dead now. That's how oppressed I felt, and how hurt I felt at that stage, and how fearful I was of going back up to be interviewed..... so... when all this is happening there was a lot of movement outside, there was a lot of shouting and bawling and stuff, apparently they

arrested a large group of men in Derry that day, who were marching in uniform, it was Easter Sunday [02:26:01:02] and they had arrested them at the border and they brought them all in so there was all this shouting and bawling and stuff.... and people kept lifting the ...the hatch and slamming it down, and looking in and shouting in at me and stuff - I think it was the policemen - you know people would be saying 'is that him there? Yeah that's him there, he was involved in the murder of a policeman.... y'know blah blah blah'..... so when they did open the cell eventually to give me food, which I didn't eat, cos I wasn't..... I just didn't feel at that stage that I cared about anything... but the blood - they seen the blood and stuff so I thought, they'll take me to hospital and I'll tell the people in the hospital [02:26:46:17] what happened and what's going on and why I done it and stuff like that. They sent for a doctor, the doctor took me in and..... He looked at my hand, asked me why I done it and I told him, I told him what had happened up the stairs and he wrote everything down and he put bandages on my arms and I said to him 'is that it?'. He said 'that's it'. 02:27:13:19 I said are you not going to send me to hospital? No, no, no, he said I don't think the injuries are bad enough.... and about 15 minutes after it, after I seen the doctor, I was taken back upstairs again and they were laughing at me because I had tried to cut my wrists, made it worse for me..... so it was the same sort of scenario for the next 48 hours. I hadn't seen my parents, I hadn't seen any legal people to tell me not to do it [02:27:50:22] but I admitted being involved in 3 attempted murders, collecting information, membership of the Junior wing of the IRA, all based on what they'd brought in on files, they saidy'know what about this - everything was around that area near the barracks cos I lived not far away from it anyway, so these grown men had convinced me in 3 days in Strand Road that I was involved in something and that I had taken part in all sorts of incidents that I knew practically nothing about. [02:28:28:06] I went to jail, I spent 3 years in prison, luckily enough I didn't do as long as a lot of other people.... because I was so young, the Judge decided that he was going to give me a chance. I pleaded guilty but I pleaded guilty under duress, my legal people had advised me that if I fight the case, that I could get 20 years in prison and I wasn't...I was when I went to court, I felt just as oppressed by what my legal people were telling me as I did at the hands of the police. [02:29:05:23] In the meantime, we had found out that when one of the shooting incidents happened, I had been somewhere else and we were able to produce evidence of that during the bail application but my legal people told me it doesn't matter, that charge might be dropped but the rest of the charges will proceed, and I felt that because there was a discrepancy with one charge that if we went to court that the rest would be thrown out because there was no proof, only my evidence - the only evidence they had was what I said, what I admitted, I admitted being involved in hijacking a car but they had no evidence, no statement from a person who had a car hijacked. The police put all of this into my mind and into my head [02:29:52:03] and, and to me they call themselves policemen but they weren't policemen per se, they weren't real policemen.... I done 3 years in prison and when I came out of prison, I came out very angry. It was the start of the hunger strike campaign. I got involved in that, and I've been involved in every aspect of political struggle in this city ever since. And in 2007 I took my case through the criminal cases review commission, back to court and I got all of my charges cleared, got my name cleared, it took a long time but I knew I would do it eventually. And the reason

that started is because I took part in a programme towards - called 'Towards Understanding and Healing' [02:30:41:23] and it allowed me to tell my story. Up until theny'know everyone was saying y'know that didn't happen and this... even the politicians at the time were saying it didn't happen. John Hume, went to John Hume, he didn't want to know, done nothing for me, done nothing for my mother while I was in prison..... said that the police that if the police made the allegations then there must be some sort of fact in them, so I was left, all those years feeling.... knowing that a wrong was done on me ...and knowing that there was no justice, no fairness and no..... equality depending on where you came in the community. [02:31:27:10] So.... 2007 as I said, I went to court, the judges were flabbergasted by what they were reading and what they were seeing and they said it should never have happened. I got my name cleared and, and I've also, I've been compensated for what happened to me so. And it wasn't about compensation, it was about doing the right thing, and several other people since have taken their cases back to court as well and won them on the basis, the same basis as myself. [02:32:00:09] There was one case that followed me which is upcoming very soon - a case called the Derry 4. They were in the same position, they all admitted being involved in a murder of a British soldier who was shot on Valentine's day in 1979 and they ended up in prison along with me as well, so their case has been thrown out of court since as well, same detectives were involved in my case I think it was just symptomatic of the whole police force, or service, or whatever they want to call themselves, at the time, that..... it was rife right across it, that they were just... they wanted to right up the books, clear the books and the easiest way to do it was to get people like myself to admit to being involved in stuff that we weren't involved in. [02:32:52:07] So.... in recent years, I've been involved in..... with groups like the Peace and Reconciliation Group and the Alexander House Interface Group, it's being going about 10 years and it started off when the young people between both communities were fighting with each other and it was getting very serious, it was affecting the lives of the elderly people in the area so a large group of people from our area decided that they were going to take it on –and especially challenge the sectarian nature of some of it and... [02:33:33:06] I've used my experiences from being in prison myself, being arrested by the police and helping young people to move away from that, that sort of violence, that they were getting involved in ...and..... The greatest payment for me..... out of all the....the years is when young people come to me now and shake my hand and say thank you very much for helping me.... I always think it.... and it really, really rewards me to see that happening because when I was their ages, no-one stood up and fought my corner for me and that's what I do now with young people. I fight their corner for them, and any young people who are in trouble with the police, I will go and fight with the police, for them[02:34:23:11] I've done it on the streets and I've done it in police stations ...and, and it's about making change and it's aboutsmall change that we make but it makes a bigger difference to the overall picture here. And I have to say..... one of the young people that I tried to help, going back after 10 years, it was a young boy called Ciaran Doherty. Done everything I could for him, tried to get him away from it, and I have to say for the young people now, the message that they should get is, Ciaran Doherty was found dead several years ago, he was found shot dead, the person who found him was me. And I have to say that..... the effect of that to me is that I done all I could for Ciaran

Doherty to try and get him away from it and..... my message to young people now is live your life, enjoy your life, live for Ireland, don't die for Ireland. [02:35:28:23]

Q. Thank you very much.

End TC 02:35:37:22

File ST0026

Part 2 of 2TC

Start 02:35:37:23

Q: What was it like to have that experience of using your body to act out some of the . . (in the workshop)?

CHARLIE: [02:35:47:19] I've done some of that before, today I found very difficult y'knowbecause . . . y'knowwhat I said earlier, the story I told earlier. I always say sometimes my story is not important as other peoples' and I've had people say that to me as well. I don't care where people come from, what their story is ...or.....or..... how my story affected me ,everyone's story is the same, my.... what happened to me affected me, it affected my family, it affected my friends, some of my friends are dead because of what happened to me. [02:36:27:18] So..... today...it's good to express it and it's good to hear other peoples' stories, and as I work with the Bloody Sunday families over in London and down in the Guildhall, in the past as a support worker, I only thought I knew the story of Bloody Sunday. I got the real live stories from those people during the time I was in London and the time I was down in the Guildhall, I got their real lives....I didn't know.... And a lot of people in Derry didn't know their stories, and still don't know their stories and I would love to just see it just come to.... [02:37:11:13] That they would have some sort of closure because the pain, I feel, for them is still there. And today to me, seeing some of what Kay said as well.....is..... I relive it, I relive it every time I hear it, and I relive their.....the pain that I've heard them talk about in the past, every time I hear it. [02:37:37:16]

Q: Is it important to have an opportunity to tell your story?

CHARLIE: [02:37:41:18]. . . Well until I had an opportunity to tell my story, I was always looked at as a terrorist, a gunman, a bad guy, and not understood. But I always say that some of what happened to me is a microcosm of what has happened right throughout Ireland from the 1920's onwards where people suffered, people were divided and people suffered pain because of struggle and because of what happened in Ireland and I always say if we can unite and work together and hear each other's stories, and acknowledge each other's stories, we can go a long way. I've heard a lot of stories and I've acknowledged stories and people have acknowledged mine as well. I went to Israel in 2008and.... when I told my story, the first person to come up and shake my hand and say he believed the story was a policeman, not a former policeman, a policeman and he

acknowledged it and he said that he will make sure in his duty and his work in the future, that no-one will do, on anyone else, what was done on me, or anybody else in my community.

Q: [02:39:00:20] Ok thank you very much.

End IV

End of Interview