INTERVIEW M23-SG6: SHONAGH STEWART

Interviewer: Dr Barry Hazley
Interviewee: Shonagh Stewart [pseudonym]
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Transcriber: Naomi Wells

Textual Note: Annotations and observations appear in square brackets (e.g. [pauses], [laughs]). Partial, interrupted or unfinished utterances are denoted by a dash. False starts, filler words and non-lexical utterances (e.g. 'um', 'hmm') are not generally transcribed. Time codes appear at ten-minute intervals in square brackets in bold type.

BH: Okay, so it's just about ten past six on Wednesday the ninth of December 2020 and I'm here with Shonagh Stewart just about to do another interview for the Conflict, Memory, Migration project. Just to say again Shonagh, before I begin, thanks very much for agreeing to do the interview and for taking the time out of your schedule to take part in this, we really appreciate it. So as I said there a few minutes ago, this takes a life history format and the first question I usually begin with is when and where were you born?

SS: I was born in Sheffield. My mum came over from Northern Ireland to study social work and stayed there, so that's where I was born.

BH: And what year would that be?

SS: 1991.

BH: 1991, okay, so can you tell me a bit about your parents then? You mentioned that your mum came over from Northern Ireland. What do you, whenever you were growing up, what do you remember her doing in terms of her job?

SS: In terms of her job, she was a social worker, most of my childhood, or all of my childhood, she was in child protection, so supporting kids who perhaps couldn't be with their families anymore. We didn't hear a lot, I think cos it was quite gruelling some of the stuff that she was doing, but sometimes there would be visits to a family once they'd been maybe placed with foster parents to see how they were doing, yeah, that was my main memory. I remember sometimes, not understanding at the time, but I think frustrations at me and brothers for, I guess we had everything quite easy, cos of what she saw other children going through I think, just like, sometimes annoyed at us for whatever we were doing, but when you look back you can understand.

BH: Does that imply then you had quite a comfortable upbringing?

SS: Yeah, I was really spoilt, yeah, still am [laughs].

BH: In what sense spoilt?

SS: Just incredibly supportive parents, both my mum and dad couldn't have done enough for me. I was very dyslexic, but my dad, he was a primary schoolteacher, kind of spotted that and got me the support I needed. It like, held me back at primary school, but then by the time I went on to secondary school like, I feel it was really helpful, and I guess with mum's experience in Ireland she, I guess around the eleven-plus, she failed that and I guess it made me think kind of if I'd have been through that system I'd have been held back, but we didn't have that and like, when I did my A-levels or whatever I, and at uni, kind of got top grades, but I think I'd have been held back if I was, had the experience maybe that she had at school.

BH: So where was your father from then? You mentioned there he's a primary schoolteacher. What was his background?

SS: He's from Grimsby, the east coast, quite a different family to my mum's family, very working class. My grandad was a joiner, kind of, much bigger fa-, I guess it's funny on my mum's side, both my grandparents were only children, my dad's side like, huge families, yeah, quite close-knit.

BH: And do you have any brothers or sisters?

SS: Yeah, two younger brothers.

BH: How many years apart were there between yous?

SS: Me and Connell, we had eighteen months and then Simon, he's five years younger.

BH: Okay, I don't detect any hint of a Sheffield brogue in your accent.

SS: No, I don't [laughs].

BH: How's that happened?

SS: I guess both my parents weren't from Sheffield, maybe that played a part, and I guess maybe the area we lived and the friends, a lot of my friends' parents, I gue-, all my friends' parents probably came to Sheffield through the uni and stayed–

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SS: Rather than being from Sheffield.

BH: And what did, how did you find school then? I mean, you mentioned dyslexia, but did you enjoy school?

SS: Yeah, I think I did, yeah, I had really good friends, really close friends. I was a bit of a swot and took everything way too seriously [laughs], but no, I enjoyed it, yeah, I think friends really made it, they're like, still my closest friends now.

BH: And did you have friends right through from primary school into high school or were they different people as you went along?

SS: My bestest, well, my closest friend when I was tiny, she left when I was eight and she's now in New Zealand, we kind of kept in touch, wrote letters to each other every week and still hear from each other, but I had a good friend Izzy who I'm still friends with, but she kind of took over from my other friend who went to New Zealand, but then when we went to secondary school we kind of palled up with other groups of friends and they're kind of the ones I'm in touch with now.

BH: What about outside of school then? Did you have hobbies or interests or leisure pursuits?

SS: Yeah, I think we're really lucky in Sheffield, we've got the Peak District on our doorstep, so I was out there every weekend, kind of going through the mud. A friend, one of my neighbours, we used to just do indoor rock climbing once a week that I really enjoyed, and then badminton was the other big thing I did.

BH: And when you went to high school or grammar school or whatever it was, did you have an ambition for a particular career or to go to university or anything like that?

SS: Yeah, I don't know from what age, but certainly while I was in my last few years at school I was adamant I was going to be a special needs teacher. We had a really amazing headteacher. His mum like, you've probably had plenty of interviews, but his mum she was from the Czech Republic and she was during the Holocaust in a concentration camp, but managed to come out and she came over to Belfast I think, and I don't know if that's where he grew up, but anyway, he was amazing, and he was very much like, it's not just about kind of academic achievement, so we got every Wednesday afternoon off, so I used to volunteer in a special needs school.

BH: Right, okay, and did you then, when you stayed on to do A-levels and so on, did you go to university to study that?

SS: Yeah, I did my undergrad at Liverpool.

BH: Ah right, okay.

SS: Yeah, I studied history and did quite a few modules in the Irish history department.

BH: Ah right, okay, so whenever you selected to do that course in history or Irish studies, was that still with the idea of doing special needs?

SS: Ye-, at that time, yeah, I think so.

BH: Yeah, so at that time then, 1991 you were born, who would have been at the Institute of Irish Studies then, who were your teachers?

SS: I was trying to remember his name, it was an amazing bloke, he didn't have an Irish accent, he was older like, quite a dry sense of humour.

BH: Was he bald?

SS: I couldn't tell, ah this is really bad.

BH: It could've been, was it a history-based course, yeah?

SS: Yeah, and it was around the Troubles.

BH: It could've been Kevin Bean.

SS: Yeah, I think so, most of the stuff we were studying was like, Marianne Elliott's work.

BH: Ah of course, she was there at that time, yeah.

SS: That name sticks with me, yeah.

BH: Yeah, no, Kevin's fantastic, he's not there, he's actually retired about a year ago.

SS: Oh has he?

BH: But he, yeah, he was absolutely brilliant like, he was really, really good.

SS: I think they're one of the best seminars I had, he kind of got everyone in the room involved.

BH: So by the sounds of that then you enjoyed your time at university then, at Liverpool.

SS: Yeah, I think, I wouldn't change it cos I don't know what would have changed later, but I don't think it was like, academically I think it was a brilliant course and just, for me like, it wasn't just kind of your bog-standard English history that they want you to learn, there was kind of a lot on colonialism or whatever, and kind of encouraged you to kind of pursue what you wanted, but I think the city itself like, is very heavily into clubbing and stuff, or maybe just the group that I fell with in my halls, it wasn't really for me, that side of things. I haven't, I lived with an incredibly wild bunch and I'd be like, trying to hide in my room when there was these like, massive house parties going on and then like, rushing to the library the next day [laughs], but I think **[00:10:00]** what got me through was I did a lot of stuff with the climbing club, so I did a lot of bouldering in the evenings and things which I really, really enjoyed.

BH: Sure, that's an interesting phrase, bog-standard English history. Could you elaborate a bit on that?

SS: I guess what you get in school, kind of like, the Tudor period, World War One, World War Two, quite patriotic, kind of no engagement with kind of our responsibilities globally, what we've caused and are still causing, yeah.

BH: And why then did you select courses from the Institute of Irish Studies then?

SS: I think really just to, cos of mum and my family, wanting to understand more. It wasn't something I knew a lot about like, I'd obviously been to Ireland and everywhere, well, not everywhere, but a lot of the names are familiar, but there's like, history around it I wouldn't have known a lot.

BH: That's really interesting because my next question was going to be, you know, was Irish history and culture something that, you know, was talked about a lot at home? Did your mother kind of talk about that a lot?

SS: Yeah, my mum absolutely loves Ireland [laughs]. Like, there's not a restaurant we don't go to where we haven't, she hasn't told the waiter for half an hour every place they need to go in Northern Ireland [laughs]. I guess it was always there, I don't, I get, I don't think we, maybe we didn't ask like, I, I didn't hear a lot about the Troubles like, you heard I guess snippets, but we didn't, I don't know, I guess she lived through it, but she, I, she, I never got like, a narrative of what, when, I don't know, but maybe that's not a big conversation like, you'd hear snippets like, her friend, her best friend, she was, is Protestant and her husband's Catholic like, they had to be very careful where they lived, I don't know at what point she told me that, and kind of growing up knowing that I couldn't have had an Irish name if we'd have stayed, if we'd have grown up in Northern Ireland, or that was mum's perception anyway. I guess just snippets, but not kind of knowing, I don't know, just to find out a bit more.

BH: Sure, because obviously your name, Shonagh, and I think, what was it one of your brother's was called, was it Connell, did you say?

SS: Yeah, and then Simon's spelt the Irish way, they couldn't think of an Irish name, but it's spelt the Irish way [laughs].

BH: So those are very kind of overtly Irish names. When you were growing up were you aware of them as being Irish names?

SS: Yeah, I think so, kind of my biggest association was just growing up with a name that no one could pronounce [laughs]. Like, my whole class would have been kind of chiming it back at the teacher, and they got it wrong, but yeah, I guess so, and I guess we spent, we would, while my nana and grandad were alive we'd go there a couple of times a year to see them, so, over in Belfast.

BH: What are your memories of those trips over?

SS: I loved it, yeah, I worshipped, well, both my nana and my grandad. He, when I was two, he had an aneurism, so that left him kind of paralysed down half of his body and with very limited speech, but I just worshipped him, I couldn't wait to see him, yeah.

BH: So what were those trips like? What kind of things did you do when you were there?

SS: Ate a lot [laughs], I don't know, just fitting into their lives really, go to church with them, go eat a lot [pauses], just potter around. I think from the age of eight I, every summer I would fly over just on my own–

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SS: And spend a week, which I absolutely loved, just cos it was hard for my nana to come over and leave my grandad, I think they'd have been over a lot, in like, they did as he was less, as he got more frail it became more difficult, so, but yeah, those, I loved it, but yeah, it really was, garden centres, eating [laughs], going to church and that kind of thing.

BH: And what kind of church was that? Was that a Prot-, your mum's from a Protestant background, isn't that right?

SS: Yeah, Methodist church, my grandad was a Methodist minister.

BH: Oh of course, yeah, I forgot about that, yeah, and what was that like? I mean, was churchgoing something which was part of your upbringing in Sheffield?

SS: Yeah, we went to a Methodist church.

BH: Oh right, really, yeah.

SS: My brother would be kicking and screaming every [laughs] Sunday, being dragged along. I guess I didn't know any different, I quite enjoyed it, I went, I think up to the age of sixteen I was probably the one that just kind of went with it. Connell absolutely screamed, he hated it and he'd do anything he could [laughs] to get out of it, yeah, I, I don't know.

BH: Because yeah, like, I completely forgot that your mum came from a Methodist background, so that was actually part of your experience of growing up in England as well then.

SS: Yeah, and that's where she met my dad, at a church as well.

BH: Ah right, okay, and what about, you know, your name Shonagh and so on? When you went in to I suppose a Protestant Methodist church in Northern Ireland, did anybody raise any eyebrows about that?

SS: No, I don't think anyone did. I'm Shonagh, my parents, they have spelt it the Shonagh way with a fada, but I'm, they call me Shonagh. I think their neighbour, mum's neighbour when she was growing up, had that name.

BH: Right.

SS: I don't remember anything really. I get, I never, I always thought I'd go over and meet like, a million Shonaghs, but I didn't meet anyone [laughs], maybe that we were hanging out with.

BH: I suppose at that time, if you're born in 1991, when you had memories of going over it was kind of the end of the Troubles. The peace process I suppose would have probably have started by then, whenever you're around the age of eight I suppose.

SS: Yeah.

BH: Do you have any memory of the conflict in Northern Ireland or at least any traces of it?

SS: I think my youngest memory, I think I'd only gone over with my mum, and I was telling mum when she was telling me about the interview she did with you, we were walking down just onto the beach and I, it was s-, I've no idea what it was, it was an anniversary and there was a bloke stood with kind of a massive gun and like, my image was it was kind of like a, at least height level and I just remember mum walking past so chilled, but I guess at that point I'd never really come across a gun and my instinct would have been to do a massive U-turn and walk like, as far away as I could, and I remem-, I don't know, I think I remember feeling she was a bit unsympathetic, but she was kind of like, well, it's not loaded, and I was like, uuuhh [laughs], but I don't know, I guess for her it was quite a normal thing, I don't know, but I remember that really stood out. As I got older, I can't remember the news when I was little, but certainly every time, every kind of week that I would spend in the summer with them, there wasn't an evening on the news where there wasn't, for me it seemed like, a car bombing being reported or something, so, and you would never, you'd just be so unaware, that you wouldn't know that was going on at all, back in England, but it, for me it seemed every night there was something like, a petrol bombing of a car or something.

BH: And did your grandparents or anybody else, did they talk to you about what the stuff in the news was or why this guy was standing with a gun kind of thing?

SS: No, I don't think so, no, I don't think so. I remember once we were all over, and I'm guessing I was sixteen, I'm not sure, maybe I was older, but Connell had gone for a run from my nana's house and he'd been a while, and I remember mum getting really worried cos I think he'd gone out in an England shirt, had very short hair and she was like, people are going to think he's a soldier, I remember that, and they were quite anxious. He'd run like, down to what she would have said was a more dangerous area and she was scared people would hear his accent.

BH: Sure, yeah.

SS: But he was absolutely fine, he was just running [laughs].

BH: And did anybody pick up on your accent when you were over there, not just your brother, but yourself?

SS: I don't know, I'm sure they heard it, I don't remember it being a big thing like, mum had a really good **[00:20:00]** friend and we'd always hung out with her family and they had children kind of just a bit older and younger, maybe they found it funny, we absolutely, I wished I had an Irish accent, I'd come back pretending after two weeks that I'd got one, that couldn't be-, no, I remember it in reverse just kind of wishing I had an Irish accent, but I don't really remember if they picked up. I guess we were always with my nana, I don't know.

BH: Why do you think you wished that you had a Northern Irish accent?

SS: [laughs] I don't know, I really liked it, people just sounded really happy. I guess I associated it kind of like, I loved going over there, it was like, family and, I don't know, just quite jolly and it seemed like everyone was, I don-, it just sounded nice to me.

BH: It sounds like you quite enjoyed these experiences whenever you went over.

SS: Yeah, yeah, I loved it.

BH: But was your brother, did you say your brother was less interested or was that more to do with church?

SS: He hated church. I think, I think he liked, I think I was quite lucky maybe just being the oldest, having the weeks when I went over, and I think that I was through that like, quite close to my nana and my grandad. I think later on, it was after my grandad died, but Connell went over and helped my nana a lot. She came over for her last two years of her life to England and he spent time and helped her pack. I think that was, he got to know her a lot better that way. Simon, my youngest brother, I don't know why, but he absolutely hated going to Northern Ireland [laughs], he was really rude about it.

BH: Is that right, yeah?

SS: Now he's, he likes it and last time we were over he was really interested and wanted to go to Derry, but he absolutely hated it when he was younger, I don't know [laughs], I really don't know what it was, he was quite funny with my grandparents as well, probably just youngest child.

BH: And what about then the other side of your family, your father's parents from Grimsby? Did they talk about Irishness or were they interested I suppose in your mother's background and the fact that I suppose yous went over to Belfast quite frequently?

SS: Yeah, my mum doesn't get on with them [laughs]. I, I, I only know like, but I think one of the first comments, it could've been to do with the Troubles, I just thought, I'd have no idea, but kind of offhand comments about Ireland from, I think both my, from my grandparents,

but also I think from their parents, and I've never up till now ever thought it had anything to do with the Troubles, but I don't know, they were quite, not very nice, and it's still not great between them [laughs], my mum and my grandparents on that side. I guess I'm quite–

BH: So you think that maybe they, they weren't that enamoured with that fact that your dad had married your mother [laughs].

SS: I've no idea like, I excuse, they're very centred in their like, they haven't really left Grimsby and they don't think anything's better than Grimsby and I, I don't know, I just kind of put it down like, my nana at sixteen like, it's just very different backgrounds like, she was in Austria travelling at like, sixteen and had quite a wider worldview, whereas they like, they'd been abroad once in their whole lives, I don't know, I put it down to that, but I'm not sure [laughs].

BH: Would I take it from that that they never went over to Northern Ireland?

SS: I don't think they ever have, but I could be wrong. Certainly when my nana and grandad would have come over to England they'd have all hung out and there's photos and I think they got along fine and they, when my nana was in England they would've, she just for her last two years was here, and they came and stayed with her and things, but they never, I think it would've annoyed my mum slightly cos like, they would have never gone over and like, my nana was quite housebound, certainly towards the end of my grandad's life, they would have never thought to have gone over and like, seen her.

BH: Yeah, what about other Irish people I suppose in the Sheffield area? I mean, I know that there used to be an Irish community in Sheffield, certainly, maybe sort of after the Second World War, maybe less so by the time you were growing up, but like, were you aware of an Irish community when you were growing up in Sheffield and did you have any kind of any interaction with it?

SS: I wasn't aware of an Irish community at all. The only person I can think of was my friend Priya. Her mum Renu came over on the same boat with my mum, they both came over and did social work.

BH: Right, okay.

SS: We were like childhood friends and always met up and I guess her experience of Nor-, it was obviously very different, they were, her grandparents were Indian, but similar to me she just couldn't wait to go over and see everyone in Ireland and her cousins and just have, well, I don't know, she just seemed very excited by it too.

BH: Is that right? So did yous both talk about that then?

SS: Yeah, she loved it, her, I don't know, it was quite a large family and I think Renu was the only one, no, there's others in Canada, but quite a lot still of Renu's brothers and sisters still live in Ireland, so I considered, Queen's was my second choice after–

BH: Oh really, right.

SS: Yeah, and her, Priya's cousin, showed me round, he was lovely.

BH: So that's kind of two things then. The fact that you had Queen's as the second choice on the UCAS form and then the fact that you took courses off the Irish studies syllabus at Liverpool suggests that, you know, you had an interest in Irishness or Irish history and in Irishness as an identity.

SS: Yeah, yeah, I guess so.

BH: Were you aware of that as part of your identity then or was it just something that was kind of an educational theme?

SS: [pauses] I don't know. I don't know if I thought of it as an identity thing. I think I kind of regret in a way, it would have been amazing to have had those years where I could have seen like, my nana and grandad a lot more. I, yeah, I don't think I put it down specifically because I would have been able to study Irish history there, I'm sure I would have wanted to. I think more, maybe more just I liked being in Ireland.

BH: Did the experience of studying aspects of Irish history at Liverpool, did that have any impact upon you?

SS: Yeah, I, yeah, I learned a lot, and I guess I would have then come back and spoken to mum and my nana about what I was hearing. I, one of my nana's cousins, he was like, growing up, the loveliest person like, couldn't have done enough for us, always met us at the airport to pick us up, kind of you would be like, no, no, you don't have to do this, but he would always kind of go the extra mile if he could, he just seemed like the sweetest like, little man, and his sister Peggy, we'd always visit her, she was lovely and like, yeah, just a very caring person. But he, I found, I don't know how it came up, but I was obviously talking about the Orange Order and then it turned out he'd been in it, it's like, what, like [laughs], I, how do you put the two together like, so that was quite interesting to find out about. I guess the other thing is [laughs] my mum would, with one of her best friends, the ones we'd have always go to see the kids, I was talking about Ian Paisley or, I don't again remember how it came up, but she'd been to go and hear him talk. I don't know, for me it would be like going to hear Nigel Farage talk or something like that, kind of shocked that she'd want to go and hear him preach or, and she said she was just interested to hear what he was saying, and we talked about it recently after she did the interview with you and she said well, we'd just heard that he had buckets that would overflow, so we wanted to go and see. Her friend as well had a dad as a Methodist minister, but still like, why would you want to go and hear that kind of person speak. **[00:30:00]**

BH: So it sounds like having pursued this interest in Irish history at Liverpool, you found yourself confronted on the one hand with an interpretation of Irish history, and in particular a portrayal of Orange culture in Northern Ireland, which jarred with your lived experience of Protestant people in Northern Ireland.

SS: Mmm, yeah.

BH: How did you reconcile the tension between those two things?

SS: [pauses] I don't know really [pauses]. I guess I just remember feeling really like, disappointed like, how can, I don't know, it's just kind of such a contradiction like, I know it's taking it totally out of context, but this bloke that was kind, but then how could, I don't know what he was doing, but whatever he was doing to kind of make other people's lives a misery like, it's just strange, and I guess to know that it's in your family like, I'm sure probably it went wider than I know. But I guess I don't, the other thing was I went, I was over with nana and we were on the train to Belfast, to Dublin, and some of the things I was saying I was getting completely wrong like, from naming kind of the politicians on which side of the party they were on, so how far my understanding really went I don't know.

BH: What was it about the Orange Order that you found out whenever you studied at Liverpool?

SS: My memory was just kind of how they'd kind of go and whatever kind of protest there was to demand kind of the rights of nationalists they would be there like, countering it and just making anything, they were trying to push a lot harder, kind of the counter-protests, just.

BH: So that kind of implies then I suppose that in terms of your learning about Irish history, it was a nationalist viewpoint that you found yourself adopting, is that right?

SS: Yeah, I think so, yeah, the people whose, I just, from everything like, kind of from living conditions to kind of opportunities.

BH: And when you relayed this stuff to your mum how did she respond?

SS: I don't think she'd have disagreed with anything, I think [pauses], I think she'd be really pleased, I think she was pleased and is pleased that I took an interest and was studying it. She never tried to contradict anything like, I think, yeah, I think she would have, she was always very sad she didn't get more of a, well, not understanding of the Troubles, but understanding of Irish history like, she wanted that, she wished my grandad had grown up in the South of Ireland, she wished she could have spoken Irish like he did, I don't know, she just had this real hunger for Irish history, I, yeah, it'd be interesting how she would describe Hick and how she kind of reconciles that, I don't know if she does. She would have said like, she wouldn't have disagreed with anything, I think, I can't remember the bloke's name, the man, he was amazing and kind of pushed this, something like the social nationalist party, but I can't remember, but he was, he kind of drove forward the peace process.

BH: John Hume?

SS: Yeah, and had a very modest life like, she would have said my grandad supported a lot of that, but she never tri–

BH: She never tried, what were you going to say?

SS: Well, she never con-, like, I think she was quite, she kind of agreed with what I was saying. I know one of her friends, her friends who had to be very careful where they lived because one was Catholic and one was Protestant, the woman who was Protestant, her friend was a police officer and he was killed, he was, I think he might have been sixteen or eighteen, he was really young, and he was killed while he was on like, as a police officer, but her, they were, another friend who was also Protestant, but staunchly nationalist, she would never say to mum's friend that she was sorry that her friend had been killed like, which seemed quite shocking to me that like, whatever was going on, but she thought it was justified even like, even a close like, her best friend, she couldn't say like, she was sorry, I thought like, for her it was just par for the course I guess.

BH: So you were kind of, you found it odd kind of the strength of the opinions of some of these people.

SS: Yeah, yeah, I guess, I guess your best friend loses her friend, and they're still really close friends and they were over at the daughter's wedding, so it obviously didn't harm relationships, yeah, I, I guess I don't understand, I haven't lived it, but, just not to the–

BH: After you'd done your studying at Liverpool, did that harm any of your relationships when you went back to Northern Ireland?

SS: No, I don't think so. I think I just said a lot to my nana, I don't know that she would have agreed [laughs] with everything. Mum always says my nana couldn't stand Gerry Adams, but no, it didn't harm anything, maybe, I don't know if she was pleased that I was interested in Irish history, I don't know [laughs].

BH: After that then, after finishing your degree, did you continue to investigate or enquire about Irish history, politics, history and so on?

SS: I don't think I really did, no. I went like, I don't think I saw everything in a new light, but continued going over to Ireland, less so once my nana died and once she came over to the UK, but we'd still, my parents at least would try and still go back once a year, and being with them maybe, maybe you see things a little bit differently.

BH: What about in your life over here then, you know, with your friends at university and what you've done since, in terms of your job and so on, does issues around Irish identity or history ever crop up?

SS: Well, I work for a Palestinian charity now and a colleague, she, it was in Southern Ireland where she's gone to do part of her masters, she went there, and I just remem-, I just was interested how she would kind of interpret the Troubles or like, kind of what's going on in Ireland with kind of the comparison of kind of the parallels maybe with Israel and Palestine, but I don't know more than that really.

BH: Yeah, cos obviously, yeah, a lot of republicans in particular would see an analogy between Palestine and Northern Ireland, and in fact you'll often find the kind of Palestinian symbolism and flags and so on around parts of nationalist Belfast. Were you aware of that whenever you took that job?

SS: Yeah, I think, after I was in uni I was a teaching assistant for a year in the school that I volunteered in, but then I went to Palestine for seven weeks and I think from there like, I realised just how much solidarity there was with Palestine, and as well in kind of Scotland as well, with the Celtic football team.

BH: The Celtic football team, yeah, were you interested in football?

SS: No [laughs], no, but I remember on the Irish course like, even just kind of everything like, just it the, was it Kevin Bean you said, his name?

BH: I think, I think you're talking about Kevin Bean, yeah.

SS: Yeah, I think it was him, it just kind of how everything was kind of down to kind of what football shirt you wear kind of dictated your kind of identity and where you're from like, again, I remember that standing out to me as well like, **[00:40:00]** you could just look at someone and see what football shirt and know kind of if they were nationalists or unionists.

BH: Yeah, yeah, I'd say that that's almost certainly true in Glasgow, yeah, possibly even in Edinburgh. So what did you do then in terms of your career then? You were a teaching assistant and then you began work for that organisation.

SS: Yeah, I, so I did a year at the special needs school, still kind of with an eye to maybe going into special needs teaching, but I'd grown up, my dad was a teacher, kind of being, growing up, told don't go into teaching [laughs], so I kind of, that's why I thought about special needs teaching, I thought maybe that would kind of circumvent some of the issues with teaching, but when, it was through the Methodist church, we had really good friends when we were sixteen, they were a family from Iran and they were taken in the middle of the night, detained and deported back to Iran and had to go into hiding, and I think growing up I was always really interested like, in kind of fair trade and in kind of economic empowerment, but I think that was the first time I really kind of thought about human rights, so when I was, I think I just wanted to leave it, I went, for half the year I went to Germany [laughs], thinking Germany was much better than England like, they wouldn't detain people and blah, blah, blah, didn't really want to think about it, but then at Liverpool I was really lucky, for my dissertation I looked at kind of the historical backdrop to the policy of immigration detention, which was the best thing I did, so yeah, I kind of had two thoughts like, whether I really wanted to go into the teaching, but kind of at the, I was also very interested in kind of working kind of on refugee rights around kind of particularly immigration detention, so I, I don't know, maybe from the start, but I was saving up anyway while I was a teaching assistant to do a masters in applied human rights at York University.

BH: Ah right, okay.

SS: That I did, and then it was kind of by chance, I'd been in Palestine before doing the masters for the summer and I guess I'd worked quite a lot with people with disabilities kind of in Germany and the UK, and I guess just something I was thinking about as kind of like, how is this impacting, I don't know, with families not able to kind of expand their houses, kind of living above each other, kind of navigating checkpoints, how is it if you've kind of got cerebral palsy and you're on the ninth floor. So I ended up when I was doing my masters looking at kind of approaches to disability rights in Palestine cos a lot of, a lot of organisations are kind of still putting kind of a medical model to disability, and just by chance the organisation where I work, they had done a research piece on kind of their approach to disability rights, and they had a four-month kind of assistant role down in London, and I was never ever going to go to London, but I just thought for four months it'd be good, and then ended up kind of staying on and getting a promotion. I don't think any of it was planned, but it kind of happened that way.

BH: When did your interest in human rights begin, when did you become interested in that?

SS: I think through the experience, the family that were taken and detained and deported, kind of through their experience, it was like, a family of four and there was kind of eight police officers that came in the middle of the night, didn't want anyone to know about what they were doing and just kind of everything they could have done to make it cruel on them, they did. They were then sent back to Sheffield with an electronic tag and then taken away again. I think through that.

BH: So was that a good course, the masters you did at York, was that a good experience?

SS: Yeah, it's really good. They set it up to give human rights defenders from around the world kind of six months' respite to come to the centre and kind of just do a bit of research, so, you can, you're studying alongside people who, every kind of process, you're studying it, the UN or kind of they've done it or been there, so yeah, it was amazing, it was very practical. Their big thing was that it was kind of like a, that there should be a kind of a bottom-up approach to human rights, so kind of coming from the people who are affected, but I think my only criticism of it would be we did like a, we were really pushed to do it, we did a field visit to South Africa and we partnered with an NGO there and, yeah, I, it cost a lot to get out there and there's all these, in my group anyway, cos it was kind of the privileged people that could afford to get out there, cos you paid it yourself, and we were doing interviews in the townships and we'd have been far better off just kind of giving that money to people in the NGO to conduct themselves, cos I'm sure people couldn't relate to us anyway, but everything else was amazing and really helped me in the job I'm in now.

BH: What is your job now, where are you working at?

SS: It's an organisation called Medical Aid for Palestinians, so we're a humanitarian development organisation, but I'm in the campaigns and advocacy team, so we kind of, we do a lot of parliamentary campaigning. In February I was out with three Labour MPs, we take kind of delegations of MPs when we can get out there, at the minute it's all virtual, just kind of challenging, it's all, everything we do has to kind of relate back to the right to health, but just challenging what are the kind of political reasons why our programmes exist. A lot

of kind of comms, kind of supporter engagement and campaigning and supporting people to kind of raise issues with their MP, and then I've been really lucky like, a big part that I've done is kind of a push on disability rights, so done quite a lot of engagement with the UN around that and supported mainly colleagues in Gaza, but for kind of them to brief UN committees and things.

BH: And where are you based now, what part of the country are you in?

SS: I'm in Sheffield. I was in London for three years, but with the lockdown came up to Sheffield and I don't think I'm going back [laughs].

BH: You're not going back, no?

SS: No [laughs].

BH: During this period then, both I suppose, you know, after university and so on, do you ever encounter other people in England talking about Ireland or Irish history or the Troubles?

SS: I don't think I really do like, I think my friends would be interested and would ask me. I always just tell them oh well, when mum came to England she would, when she went into shops like, automatically she'd just kind of open up her bag cos she was just used to being se-, I don't know, it doesn't really go much beyond that, not really, my biggest would be just talking with mum.

BH: Do you think English people in general were interested in Ireland or are interested in Ireland?

SS: I don't think they really had access to it like, when I did Irish history one of my good friends off my course, she was English, she did it with me and there were quite a few pe-, English people taking it. I don't think unless you have access to that, I don't think it's rea-, you have any way of understanding it like, I remember on the course [laughs], I can't remember the name of the English politician either, but it was kind of like, at the kind of outset of the Troubles like, being told that the prime minister at the time in the UK like, had no idea on a map where kind of, he was visiting a primary school in England and had to kind of be shown a map on one of the classroom walls of where they were actually talking about like, I think there's such a disconnect.

BH: Yeah, that's quite unusual I guess. Northern Ireland's a part of the United Kingdom.

SS: Yeah [laughs].

BH: So you think that basically there isn't really a strong perception of Northern Ireland at all amongst the people that you've known in your life.

SS: I don't think so like, I think my friends would be interested in Ireland, but I don't think they would know a lot like, when I was at uni me and my best mate we went over and had

like, a week with my nana, which she really enjoyed, but I don't remember it really being much of a history **[00:50:00]** trip, and she was studying history at uni and now is like, a lecturer in history, but I guess she had some questions, but.

BH: Yeah, what about then the whole Brexit situation, which I suppose is quite contemporary to you in that it's something which has happened I suppose, 2016 was the referendum, did that prompt you to reflect upon Northern Ireland in any way? Were you interested in that process from the point of view of Northern Ireland?

SS: I guess I didn't think, maybe I should have thought more [pauses], yeah, I, it pushed mum, maybe selfishly we've all now got Irish passports because of Brexit.

BH: Ah right, okay.

SS: But that was just thinking of ourselves.

BH: Do you know why, why your mum wanted yous to get Irish passports in that context?

SS: She'd always wanted us to have Irish passports, but I guess it was kind of the link with the EU still [pauses], yeah, I gue–

BH: Keep going.

SS: I didn't think deeply about it, but just wondering how it works kind of with the links like, does it sever it further or make it even harder kind of with the links between kind of the South and Northern Ireland, but–

BH: Yeah, obviously during that period the DUP become quite visible within British politics. Were you aware of the DUP, who they were?

SS: Yeah, through, I wouldn't have known if I hadn't have done the Irish history course.

BH: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

BH: And did you, did that like, provoke any kind of reaction in you?

SS: [laughs] I guess I just knew kind of what I could expect from them.

BH: [laughs] What did you expect of them?

SS: [laughs] Nothing. I don't, I don't know, very right-wing policies kind of, I guess quite close, well, closely aligned with the Conservatives.

BH: I would take it from that then that you wouldn't be a Conservative voter.

SS: No [laughs].

BH: No, so would you parents have been Labour voters as well then?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

BH: Yeah, and were your parents interested in British politics, as in the, English politics I suppose?

SS: Like, compared to my friends like, they're very like, outspoken about politics. We didn't really have much discussion growing up like, I'd always know that they'd vote Labour and would, I guess the biggest discussion would be more just around kind of at the time Michael Gove and what he was doing with education, with my dad's work, but we didn't have a lot of discussion around politics, but I don't think I fully appreciated like, even going over like, it wasn't till I did the course that like, in Ireland you'd be voting like, there, my nana wouldn't have had kind of Labour, Conservative like, I didn't understand that like, so maybe even just with my mum coming over it was different, I don't know.

BH: Yeah, completely different political system, yeah.

SS: Mmm.

BH: Yeah, do you still go back to Northern Ireland now?

SS: Yeah, not that often, last was, not this summer obviously with the coronavirus, the summer before, but we don't, it's quite sad, my uncle came over as well to England, and my nana and my grandad were only children, so we don't really have any immediate family, and my grandad, cos he was a Methodist minister, he'd have moved every, they moved every four years, so there's no, I guess for me I would go back to Belfast and want to kind of see everything, cos that's where I always visited, but I, my mum, when we do go we tend to just go like, Portrush, Portstewart, she really likes that there.

BH: Yeah, do you think that connection to Northern Ireland has had an important influence on your life?

SS: I think so, but I think it's more the people like, I think growing up with my grandad like, I never knew him as anything else, but I guess that had a big impact growing up alongside and respecting someone so heavily, who was disabled. But I think my nana more than anyone like, but more like, you wouldn't have known and I, it wasn't I think until really she died or just before I realised that she was the bigger one on me like, she did everything like, always put my grandad first and he was kind of front and foremost, but it was only cos of how she was and how selfless she was, so maybe the people, but I, yeah, I guess so, but more, yeah, them.

BH: Yeah, so the connection is really about, it's about the human relationships and the family connection.

SS: Mmm, yeah.

BH: Yeah, less so about the political identities.

SS: I guess so, yeah.

BH: Yeah, what about the, you know, the Methodist kind of context as well, is that an important part of it?

SS: I'm not Christian anymore [laughs]. When my grandad died and he was a Methodist minister I was like, well, do I want anything to do with this religion, and I think at the same time the family was kind of detained and deported, so I was kind of like, oh some religion. I guess I still have a like, a warm connection with Methodists. At work I went up to speak to a group about the work we do, but it's not like, I'm not part of a church now or–

BH: Was there a point, you know, during your adolescence when you began to move away from, you know, your mother's and your grandparents' church?

SS: Yeah, I think when I was sixteen. I think it was a combination of revising really hard and not having the time to go to church, so maybe just naturally, but I think also like, yeah, just, I guess I was quite angry with a lot of things going on, but particularly kind of if there was this God that we'd been, I don't know, where was he when this family were taken away or why did he make my grandad kind of live being able to talk to people for fourteen years, so.

BH: Yeah, what about your brothers then? Do they still have any connection with Belfast or Northern Ireland?

SS: I think they'd still be really keen to go if we go over on holiday, I think they would be quite keen to go. I think connection, again, probably with my nana and grandad like, we still talk about them a lot, yeah, I think if they went we'd go probably as a family.

BH: And would you say now that, you know, that connection, you've already said that it's, it's about kind of the human relationships, you know, would you describe yourself as partially Irish? In other words, do you see it as an aspect of your cultural identity?

SS: I was thinking about this before the talk. I don't know like, definitely I know I'm half Irish, but I think, I grew up in England, so I think there's a bigger part of me that's, I don't know, English or taken that identity.

BH: Yeah, would your, what would your mum say about that, you know, would she talk about you as being partially Irish?

SS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I think she would always tell us we're half Irish [laughs].

BH: Yeah, she's give yous all Irish names, so she–

SS: Yeah, yeah [laughs], like a reminder.

BH: [laughs] I think I have asked most of my questions, but kind of the final question that I usually kind of ask is, is there anything which I haven't asked about which is important, something that I haven't, anything that I haven't touched on **[01:00:00]** which you want to talk about?

SS: I think you've covered most of it, most of the things I was thinking before I think you've covered.

BH: Well, that's good, it's always a good sign [laughs]. Okay, well, unless you have any other stories or any other things you want to add, I think that's my line of questioning done.

SS: Oh brill, thank you, I really enjoyed doing it too.

BH: Listen, thanks very much Shonagh.

SS: Well, good luck with it all.

BH: Thanks, yeah, and thanks for taking the time for doing that, really appreciate it.

SS: I'll be really interested to read it when it comes out.

BH: Brilliant, and if you want to know more about the project and you want to see any reference to the material–

SS: Yeah, that'd be great.

BH: You know, at any time, you know, just drop me an email.

SS: Oh that would be fab, thank you.

BH: And I can pass you on anything we've published or anything like that.

SS: Amazing, thank you so much.

BH: Not at all, okay Shonagh.

SS: Good luck with the rest of it.

BH: Alright, thanks now, bye bye.

SS: Bye.

INTERVIEW ENDS