



Mother and Baby homes

Unit 3

Activity 3

Work experience: Extracts from the recollections of Julia Carter

We got up about 6 am.

Mass was at 8 am. Breakfast was after Mass.

Breakfast consisted of porridge, milk, tea and bread — trays of bread. Then down to feed the babies.

...they'd make the porridge the night before and three pots would fit in the hay box and the lid would be put on tight, it would cook in that. ... The bread store and the milk store would be locked, padlocks everywhere.

There was a stove specially to heat hot water for baths, it would heat the kitchen taps and you would draw it out for the baths.

The Co Council put in great washing machines...and a wringer and a big thing for hot water in later years. In the earlier years there were only washboards and sinks.

The dormitory floors were done with beeswax polish. The children's play area had to be scrubbed each day.

We yellow-washed the dormitories, not whitewash. We would add yellow ochre to the lime tubs, and paint the big mighty dormitories. When Martha [second Mother Superior] came she wanted to change the whole place to whitewash and we had to go up big ladders and do all the yellow walls into white.

I was out on the land. It wasn't as monotonous as inside. We had chickens, pigs, and I cleaned out the sheds and spread the manure on the land. I cleaned out the glass houses and put in fresh clay. We had a little ass and cart bringing out a pile of manure to the different gardens.

Every Saturday evening we would brush the paths white to have them clean for Sunday.

Often I'd go out in the garden weeding rather than go in to the Rosary. I think it was the garden kept me sane. Oh, I loved the garden, it was like a sedative, the only thing I did love.

[Sr Patrick, an elderly nun, who used to walk in the garden with Julia] would always be telling me her love stories, she was natural, she was the only nun who ever spoke to me about life, as an equal.

The nuns were not friendly with myself or the other domestics, they were impersonal to us.

The nuns owned us: we knew nobody, only them.

The nuns would tell us not to be talking to local people in case they would be asking questions about the home.

Any troublemakers were sent off to Ballinasloe [Asylum] or the Magdalene Laundry.

The nuns took a house down by the sea in Achill every summer for a month or six weeks. We would take it in turns to spend a week with them. ... A yearly treat.

We'd get a coat in Mahers [a shop in Tuam] and other clothes, we'd just ask the nuns when we needed them, and we could pick our own type of shoes, we were never branded with the same clothes. Sister Hortense [first Mother Superior] would go to Dublin in the sales, Arnotts and Clerys, and order stuff that would be sent down by rail. We got blankets from Foxford in Co Mayo.

We would never, never be let out to a dance. Mrs Walsh [manager of the cinema] might invite us to a film and we would be let out to that.

You might be let go to the Novena in the Cathedral, but they would be watching you to come back. It was a world of its own in there. You were conditioned that there was no other life but this.

We were totally cut off from the outside world. I always felt that the outside world had an edge on us, that they looked down on us.

You'd feel you couldn't cope with the outside world.

[Mother Martha, second Mother Superior] ruled us with an iron hand. She had a set on us women who grew up in the home under Mother Hortense [first Mother Superior].

You couldn't argue with Mother Martha, she would give you a thump to put you into the middle of next week!

I was over 40 when Sr Martha came. She would keep after you. She thumped me, she would close her fist and bang it into my chest. You could not hit her back or you would be sent straight into the Ballinasloe Asylum. She thumped nobody only me and she never apologised to me.

It never dawned on us that the nuns were wronging us or that we were entitled to our own lives. It was later when the new nuns came to the Home that they asked questions and why us grown women were still in the Home.

I was always self-conscious to this day. That place would leave that mark on you. If I met two people on the path, I'd imagine they'd be saying 'that lady was reared in the Home, reared on the rates [taxes]'.

Families outside used the home as a threat on their children, that if they didn't behave, they would be sent there.

I still feel that people look down their noses at me. I wouldn't like the Gilmartin Road [where Julia lived after she got married] people to know I came from the home.