Elaine Leahy (nee Deane)

Subjects:

Infant nursery
T.B. Whooping cough
Mother reluctant to admit Elaine
Domestic servants prone to discipline kids
Older girls looked after sick kids
Protected at nursery
Treatment room
Eyes placed in glass overnight (labelled)
Olinda
Fall of Singapore
General McArthur
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List of clothing for Olinda
Depression
Church of England girls' home, Glenroy
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Casual atmosphere, freedom, happy, chaotic,
Cook drunk in the d'stairs loo etc.
Mary Dent ran away with the bus driver
Different housemothers, different expectations
Hard to adjust back at SKR
Pet Dog for walks at Botanic gardens
Mr Green new headmaster, new methods
Workshops
MacRobertsons Girl's High School
Telephonist training PMG
St Dunstans School for Rehabilitation

People:

Vi Dempsey
Elizabeth Lindsey
Stan Hedger
Miss Holden
Miss Palmer
Miss Bryan
Miss Dunkerton
Uncle Jimmy
Edna Whitehead
Shirley Devine
Lois Allen
Bill Henderson
Mrs McAuliff
Dolly Walker
Mrs Jenkins
Mr Dent
Mrs Dent
Peter, Paul, Mary Dent
Mr Green
Miss Betty DiHogard
Mr Ken Bunn
Miss Gorman

Elaine Leahy (nee Deane)
Date: 27th Nov. 1990
Questioner: Alan Nuske

I was admitted to the infant nursery of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind in February 1935. I was only 22 months old at the time, and my mother was most reluctant to place me in the nursery, but it was a case of necessity. My father had just died; after his death, I'd contracted whooping cough and pneumonia, and I spent 3 to 4 months in the infectious diseases hospital where it was found that I had a spot on the lung; my mother had been told that it was obvious that I had been in contact with a TB sufferer, which was right because we were living with my paternal grandparents, and my paternal grandfather was dying of TB at the time. When I came out of hospital, my mother was told that I was not to be placed anywhere near a known TB sufferer, so I couldn't go back to my paternal grandparents' place to live. Where to go? My mother had to earn a living, so the eye doctor who was treating my eyes at the time told my mother that if she placed me in the newly opened infant nursery at the RVIB, it would be about the best place that he could think of for me to be trained; he felt that that was the best place for my mother to send me. My mother was most reluctant to place me in an institution for the blind to start with, and an infant nursery; so it was a traumatic experience for her; she was told that on placing me in the infant nursery, she was not to come back and see me for a fortnight; I believe I screamed my head off for most of that fortnight. A dear friend, a schoolmate of mine, Vi Dempsey, was told on several days to come out of classroom, and wheel this dreadful baby, that had just been admitted to the nursery, around the school grounds. Vi has since told me that I got her out of a lot of lessons that she didn't like very much, including arithmetic; so at least my fretting served one good purpose.

Alan: Do you remember much about the nursery?

Indeed I do, because it was the years I spent at the nursery which I would say were the secure years of my childhood; my childhood became quite insecure from the day I left the nursery, but those years were very secure. The infant nursery was presided over by a mothercraft nursing sister named Elisabeth Lindsay, who was a very strict disciplinarian; her discipline was consistent, so we knew exactly how far we could push her, and how far to go. She had a very well trained staff of nurses to look after us, and for quite a while, there were really only 3 young infants in the nursery; I believe that before I came, there were 2 other little ones, but the superintendent at the time, Mr. Stan Hedger, had a very strict rule – the children who came to the RVIB school should have only one handicap, and that handicap was blindness; he would not tolerate a child, at the school or the infant nursery, with any other handicap. So every infant who could not be properly assessed was placed in the infant nursery on a type of probationary period, and if they failed that probationary time by showing signs of mental retardation or deafness, their parents were told to take them away. So for quite some time, there was only a very small number of we children there.
At the age of 6, I graduated to the school of the RVIB, and it was at that stage that things started to go awry for my life. I was terrified of the older children, I was terrified of the house mistresses we had – Miss. Holden just struck fear and terror into me; I don't remember that woman saying one kind word ever to me; I even mistrusted Miss. Palmer who I've heard my fellow schoolmates remember as a very kindly woman, but I can't remember her as that; she came across as a very bland and

unfeeling woman who was just going about her duty. We had domestic servants who took it upon themselves to discipline us, even though that was not their role.
At school, I was a slow learner – a very slow learner. We had a marvellous infant teacher named Miss. Brian who had taught blind children for many, many years before I came along, and she had the good sense to teach us Braille right from the start. But even the patient Miss. Brian became impatient with this slow learner that she had on her hands. I began to develop serious health problems, which I suppose, even compounded my learning difficulties; I had a "left right" problem which became a dreadful bane of my life when I graduated to Miss. Dunkerton's grade. My mother wouldn't even believe that we had a teacher named Miss. Dunkerton – she said, "no dear, it must be Miss. Duncan", so from that time on, things just didn't go right.
At about the age of 8, I'd had 2 serious operations on my ears which resulted in 2 bones being taken away from the back of my ear, so I was terrified of anybody touching my head. I was just a nervy and jittery, and I think perhaps, a little spoilt child at the time, because while I was ill, everybody gave in to me; uncles and aunts, and even Uncle Jimmy got special leave from the army to visit his little niece that he thought was dying (well that's what he told his captain).

Alan: Did they look after you well at the institute when you were so sick?

No, no. From what I can remember, although the 2 housemistresses presided over the girls' section of the school, the only caring and actual looking after, was done by the older girls; each small girl was allotted to an older girl. The older girl that I was allotted to was a very kind hearted soul named Edna Whitehead. Edna had spent most of her childhood at the RVIB school – she was kindness itself, but she was a little bit of a rough diamond, and I had trouble relating to her. At the infant nursery, we were taught to speak correctly, and foul language was not tolerated – even the subject matter was vetted carefully, so it was very much a culture shock when I came to the RVIB school. I became so ill at one stage – it was a Wednesday, and I was trying very hard to hang out until Friday, till my mother came to pick me up to take me home for the weekend; by this time, my mother had remarried, and was developing a solid and secure home for us; I was hanging out until Friday, and apparently I must've fainted, and one of the older girls found me in the garden, told Miss. Holden, and insisted that I be taken to hospital. It appears that I was taken to hospital not before time – the infection in my ear was very close to the brain tissue at the time, and the doctors had informed us that a few more hours would've been too late.

Alan: From the treatment point of view, they bandaged you and looked at your wounds, and did all those things …

Oh yes, yes. The occasional band-aid, treatment, yes; and because I had an artificial eye by this time (at the age of 7, I had to have an eye removed), twice a day I had to visit a room called "the treatment room"; that treatment room served all purposes; the sewing for the school was performed, and there was this little morning and nightly ritual where children who had artificial eyes would come and have their eyes bathed, children with eye infections would have their eyes bathed, or a splinter taken out of their finger, or any little thing that might happen during the day – a cut or a severe bruise, etc.

Alan: The eyes were placed in a glass overnight.

Oh, indeed they were, yes, and labelled just in case we didn't get the brown eyes and the blue eyes all mixed in the morning; I didn't realize at the time, how funny such a situation could be, if the eyes were not labelled, because I doubt if we children could recognise our own eyes.

Alan: Because you were a person who had a considerable amount of sight, did you yourself to be, in any way, a greater or a lesser person amongst the totally blind? Was there a division?

No, not at this particular stage. There was no real division, except that there was a conscious pairing of children in our early years; I was paired off with a little girl called Shirley Devine(?) who was, fortunately for Shirley and myself, a good friend; Shirley was totally blind, and I had a little sight, so the pairing meant that I could help Shirley. Shirley was a very good student, so although I did not think of it at the time, I gather that the thing was that Shirley could help me with my particular learning difficulties. It turned out that Shirley and I became very, very strong friends; we were friendly, right up until we were in our twenties, when Shirley disappeared out of my life; I've grieved over the fact ever since.

Alan: I suppose Olinda is the next important phase ...

Olinda was the next phase. When I was 8 years old, we heard of the fall of Singapore, and General MacArthur decided to set up his headquarters in the city of Melbourne, and everybody was so grateful that the Americans had finally come into the war in an official basis, and that General MacArthur had decided on Melbourne to set up his base; the city fathers decided that anything General MacArthur wanted, General MacArthur got. So the saying goes that he looked down St. Kilda Road, and said "well, I'll have all the public buildings along there".
The RVIB was taken over, under the direction of General MacArthur, by the Royal Australian Airforce as a rest and recreation facility. The government had seconded a guest house at Olinda (which is in the Dandenong Ranges, just outside Melbourne), and we children were shipped up there. The decision must've been very hasty, but the organisation was very thorough; our mothers received a notice home saying "half a dozen of this, half a dozen of that, half a dozen singlets, half a dozen nightgowns, half a dozen knickers, 4 petticoats, half a dozen blouses, 2 skirts, 2 pairs of shoes ..." most of which, for children of our age who were depression born babies, half a dozen of *anything* was just beyond any imagination – we were lucky if we had 2 knickers or 2 singlets or 2 skirts; it was really the era where you wore whatever wasn't in the wash at the time, and you had a good dress for Sunday. It was rather a shock; I remember a group of mothers meeting in the street beside the RVIB school in Moubray St. – there was Shirley Devine's parents, Lois Allen's parents, Bill Henderson's parents, and my mother; they were looking over this list and saying "how could we afford this?". Eventually, in a bus, we all went up to this unknown place, which seemed to us to be at the other side of the world. As I said, we were depression born babies, very few of our family members had cars, so that was a long way for us. In the first evening, we all felt rather devastated; we were all meek and mild, very uncertain of our position, totally disorientated. But it wasn't long before we were taking over the place, and wrecking it I'm afraid. We had very few staff members up there; the staff members we did have were actually a breath of fresh air. Miss. Holden decided that she could

not come with us, and I'll never forget the day that she announced this; lo and behold, she called all of we girls into the music room, and told us that she unfortunately had other work to do, and she could not come with us to Olinda; but upon her brow (and I believe she touched her brow), she wanted us to all know that she loved us very dearly – this all seemed, to this 8 year old, most hypocritical – I could not comprehend the words at all.

So, minus Miss. Holden and Miss. Palmer and dear old Mrs. McAleuf(?) and Mr. Hedger, we all found ourselves at Olinda. And we found ourselves, suddenly, with quite a young staff looking after us. I've learnt since, that some of the girls who were looking after us - cleaning the premises, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of us - were taken from the Church of England Girls Home in Glenroy; they themselves were only 16 or 17 years old, so it was very much a case of children looking after children. One of the girls who came to look after us was 16 year old Dolly Walker. Mr. Hedger had, as his little weekender, a cherry orchard at Menzies Creek which is not far from Olinda in the Dandenongs, and his next door neighbours were the Walkers who had 8 children. As Dolly Walker told us, Mr. Hedger came over to see her father one evening, and said "can you spare one of your girls?"; Mr. Walker said "yes, I can spare Dolly", so Dolly came over to look after us at the great age of 16.

We had another very kindly soul – a Mrs Jenkins whose husband was in the Australian Air Force and who had been reported missing; she felt that she could come and look after us, and try to forget her worries about where her husband might be. It appeared that the good Mr. Jenkins did eventually turn up, but the marriage wasn't very happy and, I've learnt since, that they'd parted; apparently, Mrs. Jenkins learnt, quite well, to get along as a single person while he was missing – well, facetiousness aside.

The years at Olinda (and there were only 2 of them) were most significant years and I thank those years now, for giving me my initial confidence in finding my way around, learning to be independent, learning to think for myself. Before we went to Olinda, a child of the RVIB (especially in my age group) was not expected to think for oneself at all – you just obeyed orders, and you obeyed the strict regime; and you went along with that. But all of a sudden, we found ourselves having, in many respects, to fend for ourselves; we were still fed 3 meals a day, even though on a couple of occasions, the cook became too drunk to cook for us, so we had instant meals like Weeties and mandarins for tea – but we felt that was fun, and the fact that it wasn't quite nutritious didn't bother us. We were quite amused that the cook was lying dead drunk in a gents' toilet downstairs in the basement. The porridge had weevils in it – it didn't add to the taste of the porridge, but when you're hungry in fresh country air, you tend to forget the taste of weevils after a while.

At the age of 11, the war was coming to a close, and we came back to the building at St. Kilda Road; there was another culture shock (a very sad one), because all of a sudden, after finding such freedom at Olinda, we very soon had to knuckle down to restricted space and a strict discipline all over again. We had a series of house mothers, matrons … totally different in personalities; we children were expected to adjust, instantly, to the new house mother no matter what her standards were. We had house mothers who wanted to play ball with us all day; they wanted to teach us basketball, cricket; they had us running at quarter to seven in the morning – running down the Botanic Gardens; we had a pet dog. Then she would leave us, and we'd get another house mother who didn't believe in such exercise and wanted to keep us to our music practice and our homework – a strict regimented basis. And then she would leave, and we would get an utter nut who really, didn't have any idea how to look

after a group of children at all. Then we got a dear melancholy soul who had unfortunately only just lost her only daughter through the illness of diphtheria; she was still grieving very much when she came to us, and some dear soul had told her "if you look after the little blind girls, you'll forget your troubles"; of course it didn't work that way – not one of we little girls could take the place of her dear little child. She felt that we were all too bold and cheeky and undisciplined – we just didn't resemble the poor little child she lost at all; so the poor woman took solace in gin, and she was very much worse for wear at times, and we found ourselves covering for her. By this time, we had got used to covering for people because up at Olinda, many of the young girls who worked there entertained the young lads of the village who hadn't been called up by that time, and some of them were driving the local buses (shuttle buses from Ferntree Gully to Olinda); they would entertain the lads in their bedrooms, and of course, we were paid off in lollies (we didn't see many lollies, so this was pretty fair payment to us); so we'd keep guard at the end of the corridor, and gave signals when we felt that the matron or someone in authority was coming along.

It was at this stage that even our schooling took a very good turn for the better. After the unfortunate experience of dear Mr. Dent, and I think that some of my ex-schoolmates have actually spoken about dear Mr. Dent …I wonder if they've mentioned that we had the Dents on mass up at Olinda – Mr. Dent, Mrs. Dent, and the 3 children, Peter, Paul, and Mary; it was very sad for the Dents – Mary ran off with a bus driver, Peter was called up, and Paul took up bus driving - his father, had hoped that he was Oxford University graduate material but he took up bus driving; for the Dent family, it was all a very sad experience, and one day they just disappeared. So a new headmaster was brought to us – a Mr. Greene; we were quite amused about his name, but we found that this Mr. Greene had a totally different and refreshing attitude towards educating; his motto for educating was "plant an idea in your mind, and work on it, work around it, become interested in it, research it". He didn't teach by rote – lining us up against a wall and making us recite spelling and tables (which was the norm beforehand). I responded favourably to Mr. Greene's form of teaching. We also had another new breath of fresh air in the form of a petite litt le teacher Miss. Betty DeHoogard(?); we were told that we were getting a new teacher named Mr. Hoogard, and we thought "oh no, not another man teacher", but "Mr. Hoogard" turned out to be a sweet little petite lady in her early twenties who also had a most refreshing attitude toward educating which I warmed to very dearly.
So all in all, the Olinda experience was, to me, a turning point in my life; I shudder to think how I might've turned out … I think I might've turned out a vegetable …

Now I jump to the years of 1946, 47 and 48 when I was in my early, quite rebellious teens. It was at this stage that I did notice … maybe it was there all the time but I just became aware of the fact that we partially sighted students (that was the terminology in those days – partially sighted and totally blind), were actually … not left behind, but our interests and our particular learning abilities and skills were not promoted to the extent of the totally blind children. In my particular age group, we had some very talented totally blind children, and their talents became quite visible and noticeable at this particular stage, and of course it was quite natural that their talents were promoted because at that particular time, the RVIB was relying 90% on charitable donations, and that was not easy during the war years and the post-war years; it was not easy to get the charity dollar from the public – especially when there were so many needy causes such as displaced persons and refugees, war orphans. So the entrepreneurs of

the school (and we must say here that Stan Hedger was the entrepreneur to beat them all) naturally projected the positive side of the education facilities at the RVIB, and he (Mr. Hedger) would prefer (and it would be more convincing) to promote a totally blind child with talents; so I did feel at that stage, that I was allowed to coast along, and I was not particularly tutored in any field that I showed any promise in.

At the age of 16 – 2 days after my 16th birthday, I left school. It was the standard norm that if you did not have any particular future in mind, any particular ability to go forward with your education, then you left at 16 and it was just the next natural progression to go to the workshops at the back of the institute. At the time, they were not sheltered workshops – they were actually trade workshops where the girls worked in the brush factory; they sat and made brushes and brooms all day and, to me, this just seemed "the end"; it just seemed to be oblivion – I couldn't even bear to think about it, and yet, I had no particular talents to carry me over into any other field. So leaving school was a very devastating time for me because I honestly didn't know what the future held. I think I speak for all partially blind children at the time … except a couple of my schoolmates who did manage to get placements at MacRobertson Girls High School – they had quite a deal of sight at the time and were almost what we would call "borderline visually impaired people". So at this time, my mother had been reading that in America, several blind people were employed as telephonists (we now refer to them as switchboard operators, but in those days, the terminology was "telephonist"). She had also read that Saint Dunstans School for Rehabilitation in London were training blind telephonists, so my mother felt that that was an employment pursuit that I could follow. To add to this, myself and most of my schoolmates were brought up in the great protestant work ethic theory that one earned one's living as soon as one was able; my family was no exception to this rule. So I knew that from the moment I left school, I would have to earn my living one way or another. My mother made an appointment with the then acting superintendent of the RVIB – Mr. Ken Bunn. I had known Mr. Bunn for many years – right from the infant nursery days when we would call him Uncle Bunn. My mother tried to explain to Mr. Bunn that she would like me to be trained as a telephonist; Mr. Bunn thought that this was a stupid idea – only a mother who loves her child could possibly think of such an idea; so he patted me on the head and he said to my mother (not to me) "oh look now, get these silly ideas out of your head – she'd be much happier in the factory with all her little friendies ". So he promptly dismissed my mother and myself, so my mother, fortunately, took it into her own hands to write to the postmaster general at the time, and he wrote back stating that his department would gladly train me to be a telephonist – as long as my mother found a position for me beforehand. My mother wrote back to say that this was really back to front thinking – how could she secure a position for me before I was even trained and proved myself? Then there was an election, and a new postmaster general was installed; this new postmaster general wrote to my mother and stated that his department would agree to train me, and my mother was to take me to the central exchange in Melbourne that very next Monday, where I was to undergo a 6-month course in telephony. I turned up the next Monday to find that I had assigned to me (just myself) a central exchange monitor – a lady by the name of Miss. Gorman; I was Miss. Gorman's only charge, and she was to train me for 6 months. Well, there wasn't all that much training, and the training was completed within about 5 to 6 weeks. My mother was then able, through friends (and I'm afraid that she called upon the press), to find me a very secure position in a

section of the great Email group of companies; this particular section was a plastic manufacturer very near our home – in walking distance from our home in Brighton.

Back to my infant nursery, just briefly, I must state that we little girls were quite convinced that God was a woman. We no doubt thought this way because most of the people in authority over us at the time were women. The little boys at the infant nursery insisted that God was a man, and they insisted that on the hot days, they should have the hose when they were cooling off because after all, God made the rain, and God was a man – so if we had any little fights amongst us, this was the subject that we felt very strongly about; the girls insisted on having the hose because God made the rain and God was a woman; the boys were just as insistent on their point.