"How could anyone give up a baby? A derisory question often asked by those who have never had to face what thousand of mothers have endured in the past.

I will tell of what I know, from the perspective of a mother of a child who was taken from me and his father – his parents - and adopted into a strange new family in Perth, Western Australia in 1957.

In Australia from the 1940s to the 1980s there were thousands of babies adopted. The 'bumper crop' years were from 1965 to around 1972 when approximately 40,000 babies were adopted. For every one baby, there were 2 parents, and generally 4 grandparents, and however many siblings – so adoption has touched many more people than is generally realised.

As you all know when a girl, 'got herself pregnant', if she was fortunate, and the father of her child stood by her, and her family decided to pretend all was above board - and hope that the baby came late or was small - 'Shotgun marriages' were common, but whispered about as a keen eye was kept on the bride's waistline over the next months.

Some fathers walked away from their responsibilities; some were never told!

Some grandparents were too concerned about what people would think, that they refused to allow their generally underage daughter to marry, preferring that the cause of the shame and possible scandal in their family disappeared forever.

How many grandparents gave away their first grandchild?

Some mother's pregnancies were the result of rape, or non-consensual sex and the child was a reminder of trauma and pain. But surprisingly many of these babies resulted in the mother loving and wanting them, despite the manner of conception.

Most babies were the result of a loving relationship.

But now as we knew then of our own cases and later discovered there are many women who were coerced into signing away their rights to care for their child. Sadly in too many cases babies were not 'given up', or 'relinquished', as much intimidation, covert or blatant, was used to influence the mother that it was in the *'best interests of the child'*.

Time and again, mothers, under duress, made the decision after being told, *"If you love your baby you would give him/her up to a better life than the one you could give him/her."* The defining argument was, *"How can you afford to keep and bring up a baby?"* This was part of a constant pressure by family, churches, doctors, those who ran the "unmarried mothers homes", and the social workers. Healthy white babies were, and still are, a much-valued commodity.

The hospital files of single pregnant girls files were often marked 'BFA" assuming that the child of an unmarried mother would be adopted long before consent was taken and even if the mother had advised that she was keeping her child.

But what the majority were not told, a fact that **was** known to the almoners and social workers of the times, was that there WAS a Special Benefit to apply for, that was available to assist a mother to bring up her child:

This benefit is fully detailed in ***T.H. Kewley's book – Social Security in Australia, 1900-72*** *[2nd ed.] Sydney University Press. -* ***ISBN/ISSN:*** *0424066203 (pbk.) 042405020X :*

"Financial assistance to families with children was first introduced by the Fisher Government in October 1912. It took the form of a Maternity Allowance of five pounds (over two weeks wages for an unskilled worker) paid without a means test to both married and unmarried mothers. The measure was presented as an anti-poverty measure paid as a universal payment to avoid the stigma of charity. A similar payment had been introduced in 1911 in the UK, but it had been less generous and insurance based. The allowance received considerable public support and was claimed automatically in practically all cases of confinement by the late 1920s. It survived the cost cutting by Government during the Depression but was paid at a lower rate and subject to a means test from 1931 until 1943. The allowance was eventually abolished in 1978 by which time other child payments were considered to have made it unnecessary.

Assistance Extended to Sole Parents

Single women with children who were not eligible for Widow Pension because they were deserted wives who had not been deserted for six months, or who had not been married, or in a de facto relationship for the required three years, were given varying amounts of assistance by state government payments. In 1968 the Gorton Government began to partially fund that assistance under the States Grants (Deserted Wives) Act 1968. This form of assistance was the main income support for this growing group who were not catered for by the Widow Pension. Commonwealth expenditure under this Act increased from $1.9m in 1969-70 to $9.7m in 1972-73. Sole parents numbered 124 000 at the time of the 1966 Census. Their numbers had grown to 183 100 in 1974 when the first ABS Family Survey was conducted.

The Whitlam Government introduced the Supporting Mother's Benefit in 1973 to provide support for single mothers who were not being adequately catered for by existing arrangements. The rate of payment for this benefit was the same as for pensions in spite of the name it was given. Eligibility for Supporting Mother's Benefit did not commence until six months after the date of separation or birth of a child. As a result the States continued to provide assistance to single mothers until 1980 when immediate eligibility was introduced by the Fraser Government. That Government also extended eligibility to male sole parents and renamed the payment Supporting Parent's Benefit in 1977. By 1980 DSS payments were finally available to all categories of sole parents.

Some fortunate mothers WERE told of this Special Benefit and kept their babies – they were supported generally by their families or partners and insisted often having to insist against the will of the social workers who tried to talk them out of keeping their baby. The benefit had to be claimed and was not a generous amount but which obviously was enough, with support, to be able to help the family stay together: a much happier choice than the alternative. Not all families rejected the unmarried mother; many supported their pregnant daughters enabling them to keep the child within the family.

Small state benefits were also available: layettes, formula, foster care until parents or a mother got on their feet financially. None of this information was freely made known, as it should have been, as many in positions of power deemed that these girls had sinned against society and should be punished by having

their child taken and given to others more deserving. A particular view held by the religious sections of the adoption industry.

Quite a few mothers later married the fathers and went on to have other children, often mourning the loss of their first child, a full brother or sister to the children of their marriage.

Many mothers were so traumatised by the loss of their baby they blanked out the memory of their grief at the time, forever denying even to themselves the very existence of the child.

Some mothers, jilted or betrayed by of the fathers of their children, and having no family support suppressed the experience. Many later found later that they were infertile and never had another child, some even ended up adopting to replace the child they'd lost.

Many married, and never told their husbands or subsequent children of their first child, due to the shame that they were told they had brought upon themselves and their families, then years later when threatened by the existence of their child, refused to acknowledge them, and risk the consequences of the revelation of their deception.

Some women admitted the existence of their first child and were forbidden by their husbands never to mention it again, and to also deny their motherhood if the child came looking for them, necessitating the choice of recognising their child, or risking their marriage, and the wrath of their husband and possible disapproval of their subsequent children.

Some mothers, fully expecting to take that child home with them had their babies physically torn from their arms. I have been told that the most common perpetrators of this offence were nuns, full of punitive reproach for the sin that girl had committed. Girls who *"got themselves pregnant"?*

Some babies were taken by what is called "Rapid Adoption", mostly in Tasmania and Queensland. This occurred when a married mother whose child had not survived birth, accepted an unmarried mother's baby to adopt, to help ease her grief, readily signing Adoption papers. The natural mothers were told that their children had died during or after birth and signed documents purporting to be Death Certificates but which were in reality a 'Consent to Adoption' and were shocked and severely traumatised years later when their child contacted them.

Some adopters are gratified when the parents of 'their' child do not want a reunion, thus validating their role as parents. There are some mothers or fathers – generally in the minority - who simply don't want to know about a child they had relinquished: to some adoptees a heartbreaking rejection supposedly yet again.

It was 1957, (…) and I had been going together for quite some time and to our horror and shock we realised I was pregnant. We planned on marrying within a couple of years and were hoping that our parents would help us keep our child. But because his four grandparents, rather than braving the shame and whispers, preferred to save face and give him away; despatch him to a life with strangers. So I was sent to an unmarried mothers' home to wait for our son's birth.

Even then, being under the then legal age of 21 years we were told to sign consents for his adoption. His father and I signed away the rights to parent our son, not our parenthood, particularly as we desperately wanted to keep him. If we had refused to sign the consents, we were told he would be made a ward of the

state - and we wouldn't be able to keep him, as they'd put him in a home. Our little baby lying alone in a home for unwanted children, unloved and cared for like animals in a kennel? It was not much of a choice.

We and I did not know at that time that I was the legal guardian of our child. I could have revoked that consent had I known there was an option! But we were never told and never knew for nearly 40 years. The lies of omission that came from those who were there to help those in need! Hypocrites!

Mothers were often discouraged from giving the name of the father for the Registration of Birth. In my case I was told it would 'cause a bit of a problem.' This didn't make much sense but I gave her the details anyhow – and she kept them the proof being that his father was required to also sign an adoption consent.

The reality was that generally the almoners or social workers could not be bothered to follow up the 'putative' father to obtain their signature for the Consent to Adoption; hence many children when they finally see their original true birth certificate are dismayed to find that against "Father's name" it is left blank or 'unknown' casually scrawled in.

To my anger and distress, my son's was the same, but he was very happy to learn that his father did want him, and also despite being left off his Birth Registration, had been named and had signed the Adoption Consent – albeit also unhappily and unwillingly. Fortunately as (…) had signed I was able to have our son's birth certificate amended to include his father's name – 40 years after his birth.

My son only learned of his adoption ten years ago at the age of 37! *"They were going to tell him, but the opportunity never arose."*

Before he learned of the circumstances of his birth, and we met, he had wondered aloud to his partner if he was adopted *'as he had nothing in common with his folks'*, as he calls them. But despite not being close he tells me he respects them; they have given him a good life. Every family is different in the way they relate to each other. No doubt he was wanted, but as can be in natural families, his parents were rather aloof, detached, with no displays of affection. He is not close to his adopted sister.

His adopters resent my re-emergence in his life and reacted with anger when I appealed to them for a baby photo. I had only seen him once together with (…) , through the kindness of a compassionate (a rarity) nurse, looking through the nursery window of the hospital and for years carried a picture of that little face in my memory.

Our son happily met his father and his siblings, and has been unreservedly accepted. He was later a pallbearer at his father's funeral. He had also worked for his uncle for many years, their relationship unbeknown to them.

My son has his Mum and Dad. I can never be Mum to him. But he refers to me as his mother. With his two little daughters, my granddaughters, he calls me their Granny. I don't 'own' my other two children from my subsequent marriage, or him any more than any parent; natural or adoptive, 'owns' their children.

By the way, in Victoria, the legal term is 'natural' mother or father. But ***I am his mother***, not his 'birth' mother or his 'natural' mother – his other mother is the 'adoptive' mother. Some adopters weren't happy with the children they received, and returned them! Therefore the answer to that uncertainty is obvious; the returned children still had a mother, but who were not allowed to keep them, and the adopters who was never mothers, were still not mothers!

There are many support groups worldwide of women, and some men: mothers and fathers who have

been separated from their children by adoption. There have been Inquiries into the Past Practices of Adoption in other states of Australia, than Victoria, revealing that many immoral and unlawful acts have deprived parents of their children.

A group, to which I once belonged has been lobbying for an Inquiry, so that the truth behind many fraudulent adoptions can be revealed and the iniquities exposed, so that our children can fully understand that many/most of us did not willingly 'give up' or 'relinquish' our babies! So that the can understand that they were not unloved, unwanted and rejected!

The Bracks' Victorian Government came to power promising an Inquiry in the lead up to the election that put them in office, but has since bowed to pressure from a politically affiliated minority and reneged on their promise.

But since then the Apology Alliance of Australia lobbied for the historical event of The West Australian Government apologising to mothers and their babies on October 19th 2010.

We were told to *'forget about our babies'* and *'get on with our lives'*. How? How could a mother forget a child she had carried and given birth to?

But after a lifetime of not knowing, many parents need to know whether their child was alive, was well and happy, and had lived the life we were told we could not give them, that we owed to our children, had in fact transpired. In fact as we age, the need to know intensifies not lessens, and so it is with adoptees. Both sides have said they hoped they did not die without knowing either their origins, or the welfare of their child.

Stories of abuse and cruelty to adoptees anger us, especially those who have been denied access to information, particularly here in Victoria, which is not as advanced in Adoption Law Reform as other states of Australia.

There have been many suicides by mothers and adoptees separated by adoption. Those children's identities were obliterated, and false birth certificates issued to cover up a very lucrative market during the 1950s to the 1980s for white healthy babies for infertile couples, and to hide the shame and scandal for 'respectable' families.

Many adoptees feel guilty and do not want to offend or hurt their adoptive parents and conceal the search, or and suppress their intention of searching, and wait until they die, before they seek out their families of origin. They search to find their own identity. Quite often they find to their detriment that the mother or father for whom they had been searching has died in the meantime.

Adoption, in theory, was regarded as the answer to a social problem; infertile couples and children who for some reason or another were unable to remain with their family of origin, but due to the secrets and lies adoption has engendered in the past, sadly for many it has not provided the solution, but a lifetime of regret and grief.

Barbara Maison