

Playhouse of Horrors

They believe they were young guinea pigs in military mind-control experiments during the Cold War. The war is long ended, but their torment lives on.

By Jim Bronskill

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When she speaks of the Playhouse, Mary describes a chamber of horrors. She remembers an elevated platform with walls, but no ceiling, where she served as a child guinea pig. Scientists implanted a device, through her right nostril, behind the eyeball, then suspended her above the platform. Surges of electric current controlled her movements. "It was horrible, because my head was conscious, but they made my body do things, and I couldn't stop it," she says.

"It was like being a robot."

Mary has no official documents to substantiate her stories of the room she says her tormentors called the Playhouse. Dates are fuzzy, names of towns and buildings uncertain. Her childhood is still much like a jigsaw puzzle scattered on a tabletop. But she has assembled enough pieces to arrive at her unshakable conclusion she is a victim of Cold War mind-control experiments.

Mary was born in 1947 in Halifax, shortly after her father left the army. She spent most of her early years in southern Ontario, and recalls being taken from home in cars, small civilian aircraft and military planes. She believes she was experimented upon at locations in upper New York State and at Canadian Forces Base Uplands near Ottawa. Her memories include sensory deprivation experiments, electroshock, drugging, sexual abuse, and other unspeakable acts.

She suspects some of the treatments were intended to make her forget the horrors. In recent years, memories have come creeping back, piece by piece. The identity of Mary, not her real name, is being withheld to protect the privacy of her parents and siblings. Family members say she had a normal upbringing, and that there is no substance to her claims.

Investigating the history of government-sponsored mind experimentation of people has been largely an exercise in frustration for those who have delved into the subject. Alleged victims rarely have documentation to support their claims and records are extremely difficult to obtain.

Alan Schefflin, a California law professor and researcher, has been pressing the U.S. government since the 1970s to reveal the full extent of its involvement in mind

control. Mr. Schefflin, who teaches at Santa Clara University, co-authored a 1978 book based partly on a flurry of material released by the Central Intelligence Agency under freedom-of-information legislation. The documents shed light on the CIA's extensive behavior-control projects, including work by McGill University's Ewen Cameron, who brainwashed patients in Montreal with agency funding. But many records had already been destroyed. Still other files remain locked away to this day.

"A person who claims to have been a victim of government mind-control programs is generally not going to be believed and is going to be considered mentally ill," said Mr. Schefflin. "And, indeed, a lot of people suffer from the neurotic delusion that they were victims of mind control. But not all of them are delusional. Otherwise there would be no victims. We know there are victims, because we know the experiments were done."

Mary acknowledges her stories are downright bizarre. She has frequently doubted her own sanity. But she takes comfort in the fact she is not alone. In March 1995, New Orleans therapist Valerie Wolf and two clients traveled to Washington to address a U.S. presidential advisory committee probing government-sponsored radiation experiments on humans in the decades following the Second World War. Ms. Wolf told the committee members the two women had been subjected as children not only to radiation doses but mind control and pain-induction techniques including electric shock, use of hallucinogens, sensory deprivation, hypnosis, dislocation of limbs and sexual abuse.

Chris Denicola recounted being made available at a young age by her father for secret government procedures in Kansas City and Tucson, Arizona intended to turn her into a spy assassin. She said the experiments, conducted between 1966 and 1976, have left her with a multiple identity disorder. "I believe it is by the grace of God that I am still alive," Ms. Denicola told the committee. "These horrible experiments have profoundly affected my life." Her marriage has since broken down and she now goes by the name Chris Ebner.

Claudia Mullen recalled being abused from 1957 until 1984, a pawn in the U.S. government's efforts "to create the perfect spy." Both said they were conditioned to carry out clandestine assignments. Ms. Mullen described her role in entrapping prominent men in sexual blackmail schemes at a lodge in Maryland. "I would love nothing more than to say I dreamed this all up and need to just forget it. But that would be a tragic mistake. It would also be a lie," she told the committee. "The saddest part is, I know for a fact I was not alone. There were countless other children in my same situation and there was no one to help us until now."

Therapist Wolf, born in Vancouver, lived with her family in North Bay before moving to Hamilton to attend McMaster University. She holds a master's degree in social work and has been a trauma therapist in Louisiana for the past 24 years, a track record that has helped bolster the claims of her clients and others who believe they are mind-controlled. Ms. Wolf is used to hearing disturbing stories, but the tales of laboratory horror have taken their toll. "I have nightmares sometimes," she said in an interview. "I mean it affects me."

Ms. Wolf's clients, including Ms. Denicola and Ms. Mullen, have specific memories of doctors and scientists. They claim to have overheard names, caught glimpses of documents and remember faces.

Many of the men they recall have affiliations with the CIA and American military. Some were involved in the human radiation experiments that have now been extensively documented by the presidential advisory committee. Others took part in CIA-funded research into hypnosis, brainwashing and other mind-control programs revealed in the late 1970s, the best known being MKULTRA.

Wolf now has nine female clients, ranging in age from 28 to 53, who have childhood memories of experimentation by the military or CIA in institutional settings. She is struck by the similarity of her clients' stories and their physical ailments, including thyroid problems, cysts, brittle teeth, multiple sclerosis and other muscle and connective tissue diseases.

In early 1995, when word spread that Ms. Wolf would appear in Washington, nearly 40 other therapists from around the United States contacted her to tell of clients who had reported being used in mind-control and radiation experiments. Ms. Wolf pleaded with the committee to recommend further investigation and called for the release of classified documents. "It is important that we obtain all of the information contained in CIA and military files to verify or deny our clients memories."

The post-war years were marked by growing western fear of communism as the Soviet Union and China flexed their muscles. The CIA began exploring the use of hypnosis and drugs in the late 1940s, and the research intensified in response to fears that the emerging Communist powers were using brainwashing techniques or chemical substances to extract confessions from prisoners. In 1950, the agency began project BLUEBIRD, testing various chemical agents, lie detectors and hypnotic techniques. The project's name was later changed to ARTICHOKE, said to be agency director Allen Dulles's favourite vegetable.

Canadian and British officials met members of the CIA at Montreal's Ritz-Carlton hotel in June 1951 to discuss possible avenues of research into behaviour

control in an effort to better understand methods that might be applied by totalitarian regimes. Two years later, the CIA initiated MK-ULTRA, a wide-ranging exploration of techniques involving the use of chemical agents to alter minds in the interest of secret agency activities.

The 1959 publication of the novel *The Manchurian Candidate* by Richard Condon popularized the notion of military-sponsored mind control. The bestseller, later a movie starring Frank Sinatra, featured a Communist plot to brainwash a captured American soldier in Manchuria, programming him to assassinate the U.S. president.

Unknown to most North Americans, western researchers were trying to unlock many of the same secrets. MK-ULTRA funds were dispensed through cover agencies to some of the period's leading researchers, including psychiatrist Ewen Cameron of McGill University's Allan Memorial Institute in Montreal. With the help of CIA money from 1957 to 1960, Dr. Cameron used sensory deprivation, sleep induction, LSD treatment, intensive electroshock and repetition of taped messages in an effort to treat schizophrenia and other disorders by wiping the memory clean and reprogramming the mind to behave differently.

Canada's Health Department also helped fund the activities, before enormous public controversy erupted over his brainwashing work. Debate continues today about whether Dr. Cameron knew of the CIA connection or was an unwitting collaborator.

As John Marks noted in his book *The Search for the Manchurian Candidate*, a former associate said Cameron truly cared about his patients and felt the end justified the means in trying to make them better. But others feel nothing justifies what they deem Cameron's flagrant violation of ethical standards.

A lawsuit resulted, after lengthy delays, in a CIA settlement with nine elderly Canadians in 1988. Some 80 people received Dr. Cameron's full "depatterning treatment" at the institute, and the Canadian government eventually paid millions of dollars in compensation to survivors.

Alan Schefflin, a California law professor long interested in government mind-control experiments, believes the full story of government interest in mind control, including experimentation on children, has yet to be told. "We know beyond any shadow of a doubt that the CIA and army mind-control programs were much bigger, and much broader and much more extensive than we have knowledge of at this time."

At age 20, Mary wed her sweetheart, but the union unraveled. She has been unable to sustain a relationship since. A promising career in television production

fizzled, as did almost everything else she tried. In 1986, she moved, with her daughter, to the Ontario city in which she now lives. Two years later she suffered a complete breakdown. The demons that shaped Mary's past appear to have left telltale signs. In April, she turned 50, a milestone several years younger than her gray braids might suggest. She has been diagnosed as suffering from post-traumatic stress and a dissociative disorder that involves the presence of different personality states, or identities. She now receives disability payments after being on and off welfare for 17 years. "I've really been in crisis my whole life. That's the bottom line."

The memories have returned in flashes, one by one, a process she likens to a filament exploding, illuminating pieces of information. Five years ago, vague recollections of hospital settings and electricity led Mary to the local library, where she signed out a book about the Montreal brainwashing experiments. She remembers leafing through the volume in her kitchen later that day and seeing a photo of Ewen Cameron. A wave of fear and nausea washed over her. She became hysterical. "I felt I was going to die."

The picture, she says, triggered a flood of memories, and she now believes that Dr. Cameron was among her tormentors. She recalls him in connection with electricity doses, drug experiments and repetitive playing of songs, including "Home on the Range." She suspects the doctors were trying to program her so that later hearing a specific song would cue her to perform certain actions.

Mary sheepishly revealed her suspicions to her therapist. But she doubted even herself until she learned Claudia Mullen told the presidential commission that Dr. Cameron had given her shock treatments at Tulane University in New Orleans. Mary experienced conflicting emotions. "I was devastated, because it brings home the reality of it," she remembers. "But it was a relief, because I said to myself, I'm not crazy."

Valerie Wolf has also wondered whether her clients were truly victims of government experimentation, but the detailed nature of their stories has alleviated her doubts. Wolf remembers Ms. Mullen saying that Dr. Cameron, who spoke with a Scottish burr, called her lassie, a nickname that baffled the southerner. "Why did he call me that, Miss Valerie?" asked Mullen. "Did he think I was a dog?"

Some time later, at a conference, Ms. Wolf watched a television news program featuring old footage of Dr. Cameron in which the doctor entered a room, put his hand on the shoulder of a patient and called her lassie. "I about fell off my chair," says Ms. Wolf. "Little things like that convinced me. Nobody calls anybody lassie in the deep south of the United States."

Several years before Mary's memories began to surface, she found herself expressing them visually in a series of intricate collages composed of pictures cut from magazines. They are at once beautiful and unsettling, each featuring dozens of colourful images. The more disturbing include shaved heads, racks of tools and bodies suspended in mid-air.

Mary maintains her tormentors applied strong doses of electricity to her right hand to prevent her from writing about the horrific experiences. She says it was both physically and mentally painful, as the memories returned, to create a series of line drawings illustrating various experiments.

The pictures are more chilling than the collages.

They feature doctors, emaciated children, babies, chambers, electronic devices, beds, helmets and wires. One drawing is of Mary, shoulders dislocated, wrapped in mummy-like bandages. In another, she sits in a chair, electrodes attached to her body. Others allude to monkeys and cages, depictions of lab settings that terrify her still. In several drawings a tiny guardian angel flutters nearby.

She says her memories, like those of Denicola and Mullen, have come spontaneously, without use of extraordinary retrieval techniques such as hypnosis. While Mary was recording memories on paper, Wolf and her clients were half a continent away in the U.S. capital, sharing their own stories with the presidential committee.

In its October 1995 report, the committee, though concerned with experiments involving radiation, did recommend "all records bearing on programs of secret human research" from the late 1940s through the early 1970s "become a top priority for declassification review."

Mary later joined several others from across North America in a lobby group, the Advocacy Committee for Human Experimentation Survivors – Mind Control, or ACHES-MC. The group now has about 35 active members. It has identified 19 Canadians, or their surviving families, who feel they were used in mind-control experiments.

In April, at a Chicago conference for abuse survivors, ACHES-MC members and supporting professionals taped a video letter to Prime Minister Jean Chretien and President Bill Clinton.

Wayne Morris, who has produced a series of programs on mind control for the radio station at Toronto Ryerson Polytechnic University, helped make the video,

which featured brief statements from 16 people who believe they are victims. Seven health and legal professionals, including Wolf, also lent support with taped messages. The accompanying text called for the declassification of records, a presidential hearing to identify all US government-sponsored research involving covert mind control experimentation in the United States and elsewhere, criminal prosecutions where warranted and appropriate remedies for victims.

The Canadian government has yet to respond. The US Department of Energy, which funded many of the radiation experiments, answered in late July on behalf of the White House, misspelling both Mary's actual name and that of the advocacy group in the reply. "The Clinton Administration is deeply concerned about individuals being used in secret experimentation without consent," said the letter. It is noted that in March an interagency committee of the U.S. government had decided, in response to the radiation committee report, to take steps to declassify additional documents on human experiments and do an independent review of the CIA's record-keeping system. In addition, the CIA's internal watchdog would review the agency's human experiment programs, and the president had signed a directive to strengthen the rights and protection of people taking part in secret government-sponsored research.

Alan Schefflin doubts the promises of further disclosure will amount to much. After several boxes of CIA documents were released under the U.S. Freedom of Information Act in the 1970s, the flow slowed to a trickle. In the interim, says Schefflin, rumour, speculation and false information have filled the void.

Valerie Wolf has deliberately avoided reading the small but widely circulated literature on mind control to ensure she doesn't prompt her clients or plant suggestions in their heads. She instead forwarded information from clients to Schefflin, who confirmed that some statements were both true and nowhere to be found in the published material.

"I felt that there was a reason to go forward in believing that some of what she was hearing may be true," he said. But Schefflin and a few others who take the subject seriously are severely handicapped. There are no research institutes, no grants and despite promises, no firm indication the US government will pry open its secret files. And without the necessary documentation available, it's impossible to determine whose stories to believe.

"I can't prove, without having the documents available, that what anybody is telling me, or part of what someone is telling me, is true or not," said Schefflin. "But I can tell you it's not out of the realm of possibility. And if it's not true, it will be true of someone else who has not come forward."

Psychiatrist Colin Ross, a specialist in multiple identity disorders, has heard numerous stories of government experimentation from patients since moving to Texas from Canada six years ago. "It's really hard to tell how much of it is real. On the other hand, there's all this documentation that a tremendous amount of this stuff did go on. So the stories aren't impossible either."

Dr. Ross recently completed a manuscript based on the countless hours he has spent in libraries and archives uncovering information about government experiments on people and other unconventional research conducted by doctors and institutes across North America. Evidence that researchers have exposed children to LSD doses, radiation and other potentially harmful substances leads him to believe mind-control experimentation could also have occurred. "All kinds of unbelievable stuff has in fact been done to kids."

Schefflin notes that 149 MK-ULTRA projects involved work with children at juvenile facilities, but the records disclosed to date do not paint a complete picture. Muddying the waters are claims from some patients and survivors of other forms of organized abuse—from satanic cult activity to Masonic rituals, for which there is little evidence.

Claims of government mind-control experimentation have been greeted with skepticism by proponents of false memory syndrome, who say the recollections—and many other memories of alleged child abuse—are often delusions. The U.S.-based False Memory Syndrome Foundation has helped thousands of North American parents accused of incest. Critics, however, point out that some members of the foundation's advisory board have received funding from the CIA or other government agencies. For instance, in 1962, CIA front organizations gave \$60,000 to the laboratory of Martin Orne, now a Pennsylvania psychiatry professor and foundation adviser.

Schefflin has just written a book that questions some research used to support the existence of false memory syndrome. He believes the success of the syndrome's advocates in spreading the message has prevented some victims from coming forward.

Government and media indifference to the mind-control issue has left Schefflin discouraged. Ross is more optimistic, saying the climate is right, in the wake of the radiation committee's work, for further openness.

Wolf believes the truth about child experiments is slowly emerging, but wants to stall the disclosure as long as possible because officials realize the news will be met

with outrage. "People will be very angry that this was done to children by the government."

Schefflin is dismayed that intelligence and military agencies have essentially been able to carry out mind-control research on unwitting people with impunity, a lapse he feels will spawn further injustices. "They will be even more empowered to conduct even more outrageous experiments on even more people," said Schefflin. "It's an inevitability."

Mary is close to completing a social work degree after years of part-time study. She does occasional work at a battered women's shelter. But her preoccupation is clearly with the past. Four cardboard boxes of files about the history of behavioral research sit at one end of her living room. Nearby is a stack of videotapes on the subject. As she speaks, Mary's steely eyes gaze probingly into the distance, into the mists of childhood. Recollections of the Playhouse still haunt her. She says she has sudden memory flashes and, as they wash over her, she clutches her nose in fear.

When she applied for disability payments, at the urging of her daughter, Mary stated plainly on the form she was a survivor of government mind-control experiments and attached copies of her drawings. The wheels of the bureaucracy rolled into motion and the clinical diagnoses were made. Whether the evaluators believed her stories or not, she began receiving payments. Though it was a form of validation, Mary says on another level it left her horrified. She chokes back tears, then pauses before speaking. "There should be no such thing as government experiments on children."