

# Abortion inquiry witness exposed web of corruption



**MARGARET (PEGGY)  
BERMAN  
RECEPTIONIST**

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### Kevin Childs

In 1968, Peggy Berman was told she would be dead of cancer within 18 months. But it was her heart that ultimately gave out, while surrounded by family and friends, free of decades of worry and having just heard good news about her two grandsons. Such serenity contrasted sharply with a tumultuous time when she appeared in a public inquiry into police abortion graft, campaigning for reforms that ultimately came only with a judge's ruling.

Peggy burst into the public limelight when she named as corrupt many senior and prominent members of the Victoria Police Force. Three were later jailed.

Peggy began life in a Catholic children's home in Broadmeadows. She was raised by her grandparents in an atmosphere of Irish working-class grit and humor. A credo instilled in Peggy by her grandfather, a retired railway worker, is recounted in *Why Isn't She Dead!*, a book that we wrote together about abortion corruption: "Always join the union, never be late for work, and if you fall off a tram lie there — you'll get a million quid."

Her early schooling at the Sisters of Mercy in Geelong left harsh memories — school completed without an education. She remembered being sent home because her hand-me-down dress was too short. At her funeral, her son Peter spoke of how families such as hers had a powerful belief in education as a way of bettering themselves.

During World War II, Peggy worked in a rope factory, a cannery, a woollen mill, a meat works, a glass factory, at pea picking and at Ford making mines. Moving to Sydney, she worked at Crown Street Women's hospital as a housekeeper, witnessing unmarried pregnant women being used as

free labor in prison-like conditions while they agonised over whether or not to give up their babies for adoption.

Back in Melbourne she found work in a sandwich shop at Melbourne University where she revelled in the being able both to attend lectures and go to the theatre. There she met a profound influence on her life, Norval Morris, then senior lecturer in law and a founder of the department of criminology, who later became an adviser on crime to a US president.

Morris, an emeritus professor and former dean of the University of Chicago Law School, last month became the first recipient of an award by the John Howard Society for his prison work. Peggy, as a former communist, would have enjoyed that.

Peggy entered the world of illegal abortionists by being employed on the third floor of the Bank of New South Wales building at the corner of Bourke and Russell Streets. Professor Morris recommended that she take the job and supported her move. Without this backing, she would not have contemplated it. She had been confronted by a dilemma she was often to see — that of a conflict between religious training and life's reality, the need to care for children and save marriages, and the plain economics of not being able to afford more children.

One of her jobs was to pay bribes to the late Detective Sergeant Fred "Bluey" Adam, a tough, monosyllabic, old school detective who made sure that the doctors were told if there had been a complaint or a raid was due.

As Peggy was to tell a public inquiry, this continued at the East Melbourne clinic, with patients from every walk of life, from factory floor to Government House.

Twice divorced, Peggy ran something of a salon at her home, also in East Melbourne, entertaining her left-wing friends, rising unionists, politicians, diplomats, academics, painters, psychiatrists and former criminals. By 1960, she was also paying off Inspector Jack Matthews, chief of the

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Homicide Squad. Detective-Sergeant Jack Ford lined up next for thousands of pounds. Once she told Matthews that she would never tell the police anything. His measured reply is now in criminology textbooks: "My dear, it is not what you say, it is what we say you say."

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Eventually the abortionists were raided and charges were laid. Into the scene came the extraordinary figure of Dr Bert Wainer, a campaigner for abortion reform. Peggy also received help from journalist Lionel Pugh, who was to die in mysterious circumstances.

With *The Age* incensed about sworn allegations of corruption, reporters were invited to listen to tape-recorded calls involving the police. In an extraordinary campaign, 26 sets of tapes and transcripts were sent to political leaders, cabinet ministers and newspaper editors. William Kaye, then a QC and later a Supreme Court judge, was named to head an inquiry. Over four months, he heard 50 hours of evidence from 130 witnesses, plus 50 hours of submissions.

Seven policemen had been named. In early 1970, Peggy gave evidence for 10 days. In the ensuing trial, Matthews, by then a superintendent, and Ford, an inspector, were each jailed for five years. Another detective, Martin Jacobson, was jailed for three years. Adam was acquitted and died soon after.

Peggy is survived by her son, Peter, and two grandsons.

Kevin Childs met Peggy Berman when he was an *Age* reporter and co-authored her story.