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## Veronica Smith, campaigned for an apology to women 'railroaded' into giving up their babies – obituary

As an unmarried Catholic mother in London in 1965, she said, 'I honestly felt if I'd murdered someone it might have been more acceptable'

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Veronica Smith, who has died aged 83, endured decades of sadness and trauma after being forced to give up her daughter for adoption in 1965; in 2010 she co-founded Movement for

an Adoption Apology to campaign for a formal apology from the British government to the many unmarried mothers “railroaded” into giving up their children in the postwar years.

One of six children, she was born Veronica Anne Agius into a Roman Catholic family on December 28 1940 and brought up in Walton-on-Thames, Surrey. Her father was a lieutenant colonel.

After education at the Ursuline Convent in Surbiton, she trained as a nurse and was working at Butlin’s holiday camp in Bognor Regis when, aged 24, she became pregnant during a short relationship with a Red Coat. “I went to a GP and he said all he could offer me to try to end the pregnancy was a douche, then he told me to have a hot bath and drink gin. It didn’t work,” she told the Daily Mail.

“I wrote to my elder sister. A letter came back, saying: ‘Don’t worry. It’s sorted.’ And I remember the train journey to Victoria. I was crying, scared. I had no idea what would happen.”

Her sister had booked her into a Catholic Crusade of Rescue hostel in South London, in effect a corrective institution for unmarried pregnant girls, where she scrubbed floors as a penance for her sins. There, like the others at the hostel, she was expected to knit booties, a hat, leggings and a matinee jacket for the baby she would have to give away.

“My elder sister and mother told me: ‘Daddy must never know about this. The disgrace would kill him,’” she recalled. “I honestly felt if I’d murdered someone it might have been more acceptable. I’d committed a mortal sin and in the eyes of the Catholic Church I’d never go to heaven.”

Her mother told her husband that his daughter was working abroad. She “used to meet me every fortnight or so at Wimbledon Station, and she’d bring airmail paper so we could concoct a letter for my father about my job overseas”.

Veronica gave birth to a baby girl at a private maternity hospital in Guildford on March 2 1965 and called her Angela “because she looked like an angel in a painting”. After a week the baby was taken away and Veronica was given a drug to stop her breast milk.

The child was fostered, then adopted, and Veronica was told to forget about her. “I shut it out completely,” she recalled. “My life was stolen, really. I didn’t have any proper relationships and put all my energies into work as a nurse.”

She rose to the level of Nursing Officer at the Royal Free Hospital in London, second to Matron. Her father died without knowing her secret, while her mother's connivance in the loss of her child caused a rift that was never healed.

Then in 1990 Veronica's menopause began and she had a breakdown: "Perhaps it was because it was the end of my fertility, but something seemed to unlock in my head and all my grief came tumbling out."



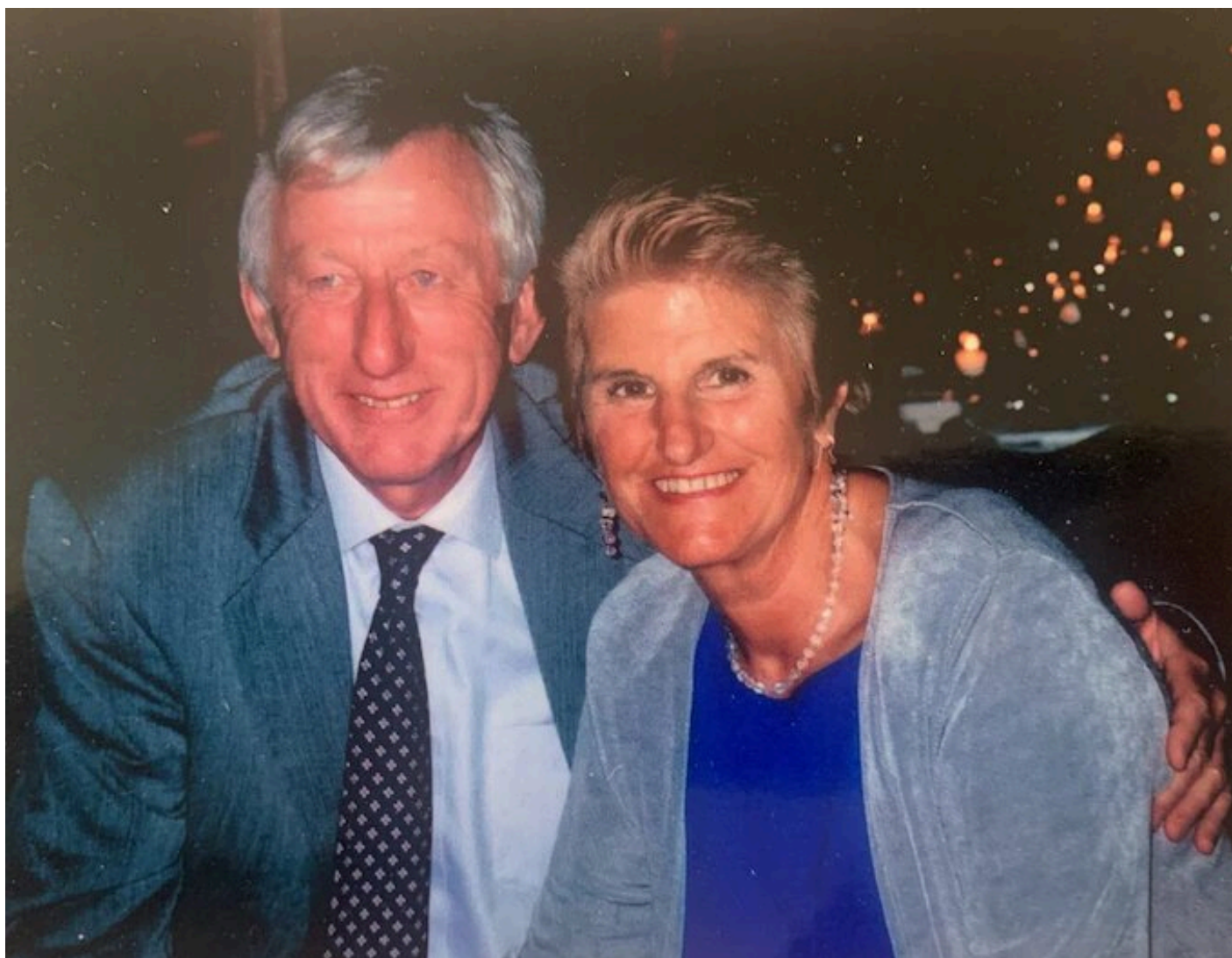
Veronica reunited later in life with her daughter Rachel, who had been raised in Canada by academics CREDIT: Courtesy of family

As she slowly recovered, Veronica set about tracing her child and discovered her in Canada. Christened Rachel, she had been adopted by an academic couple who had emigrated there, and with whom she had had a happy upbringing.

While Veronica was relieved to know that her child was loved by her adoptive parents, her attempts to establish some sort of relationship proved difficult at first. Meanwhile, she had moved from London to Seaford, East Sussex, where in 1993 she met Roger Smith, a divorcé with grown-up children. They married and Roger supported her efforts to build a relationship with Rachel.

The moment she had been waiting for came in 2008 when an email arrived from Rachel, telling Veronica that she had had a baby. Within a year Veronica had met both Rachel and her new granddaughter, and she treasured the memory of the day when Rachel “walked in with her toddler and all her baby stuff as if she was at home and gave me a big hug. It was wonderful.”

In Seaford Veronica set up a group for women whose children had also been given up for adoption, and soon discovered that between 1949 and 1976 an estimated 185,000 mostly unmarried women in England and Wales had been cajoled, like her, into giving up their babies. Many of the adoptions had been arranged by agencies run by the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and the Salvation Army.



Veronica Smith with her husband Roger

In 2010 after the then Australian prime minister Julia Gillard issued a public apology to Australian women in a similar situation, Veronica co-founded Movement for an Adoption Apology (MAA) in the United Kingdom to press for the British government to issue an apology.

In July 2022 a report by the parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights called on the government to issue a formal apology, saying that it bore the ultimate responsibility for the “pain and suffering” of women and children caused by “public institutions and state employees that railroaded mothers into unwanted adoptions”.

The Scottish government was the first to issue a formal apology, in March 2023. The Welsh government followed suit a month later. The British government, however, responded that, while it was “sorry on behalf of society for what happened”, a formal apology was not appropriate as “the state did not actively support these practices”.

Veronica Smith is survived by her husband, her daughter and granddaughter, and by two stepdaughters and a stepson.

**Veronica Smith, born December 28 1940, died June 29 2024**