

Witness Statement of: Ismail Yagci

No. of statement: 1

Exhibits: 6

Date of statement: 1 June 2018

GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ISMAIL YAGCI

I, ISMAIL YAGCI, will say as follows:

1. I make this statement about the events that took place on 14th June 2017 for the purposes of Phase 1 of the Grenfell Tower Public Inquiry. I wish to give a further statement for Phase 2 of the Inquiry.

Background

2. I am a Core Participant to the Grenfell Tower Inquiry. My date of birth is [REDACTED]
3. I moved into [REDACTED] Testerton Walk in 1978. The property is a two bedroom maisonette and I lived there with my parents, my father Mehmet, who was [REDACTED] at the time of the fire, my mother Seyhan, who was [REDACTED], my sister, Hulya, who was [REDACTED] and her twin children, her daughter [REDACTED] and her son [REDACTED] who were [REDACTED]
4. The two bedrooms in our home are located on the lower level. My bedroom was on the lower level. My parents had the other bedroom. The kitchen and living room are on the upper level. My sister slept on a sofa bed in the living room. The children sometimes slept with her and sometimes in our parents' room. The balcony of the property overlooks the communal gardens that are situated between Testerton Walk and Barandon Walk. From the balcony, you can see the side of the Tower which faces those communal gardens.

5. I am currently employed as a salesman at a Mercedes Benz dealership. At the time of the fire, I worked for Porsche.

14 June

6. On the night of the fire I had gone to bed at around 8pm. That was a very early for me but it had been a really tiring day at work. Other than that it had been a normal Tuesday evening.
7. During the night I was suddenly woken up by the sound of screaming. I was very tired and at first I didn't realise what was going on. I didn't check the time immediately but I think it was between 1.30am and 2am. I heard someone saying 'help, help!' from somewhere outside the block. My first thought was that it might be a couple having a drunken argument outside or something like that. I then heard more screams and shouts. I could hear people shouting 'get out!' I started to realise that something more serious must be happening. There was also a knocking sound in the background. At first I thought the knocking was on my bedroom door. My sister opened my door and said that there was a fire at Grenfell Tower and that we had to get out the flat. I later found out that the knocking sound had been our neighbours knocking on the front door.
8. I decided to have a look outside my bedroom window to try and see what was going on. When you lean outside the window you can get a good view of Grenfell Tower. I could see about half of the Tower from that window. When I looked out, I saw that there was a patch of fire at the lower corner of the building. I decided to go up to our balcony on the upper floor to get a better look.
9. I remember my sister was up on the balcony too. I don't really remember where my parents were. I think they went to get the kids ready. I was completely focused on the fire. I saw blue flames first and then orange flames. It was a bit like when you spark a lighter. My sister was saying that the whole building was on fire. I could only see a small patch of fire at that point. I remember at the time telling her she was exaggerating and that it would be fine. I was aware that there had been a fire at the

Tower before and another more recently at Trellick Tower. I knew those fires had been minor and dealt with by the firefighters before they spread. I felt confident that the fire brigade was going to put this fire out quickly as well. My feelings quickly changed however as I continued to watch the fire.

10. I could see people silhouetted in their windows. I took a photo on my phone of the Tower. In the photo you can see someone silhouetted in the window. I realised it was these people who had been shouting for help. This photo is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/1**. I zoomed in and took another photo. This photo is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/2**. I could see lights from the windows where people were waving their mobile phones for attention. I could also see things on the ground outside the Tower. I saw a large shape on the ground that I thought might be a body. After I spotted it and realised what it could be, I didn't look at it again. It was the same with the people who were trapped in the Tower. I was trying to avoid witnessing it. It was too awful. It was hard to drag my eyes away from the fire itself though. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. At first it was just a patch in the lower corner and then very rapidly it spread.
11. While I was watching the fire, it suddenly moved. It moved diagonally up across the building. It moved very suddenly. It was similar to how quickly paper can catch fire. It's a strange image but it made me think of the bandages being set alight. It spread so quickly it was like the building was completely wrapped in something flammable. The flames were a bright orange and there was pitch black smoke coming off the building and floating upwards. I thought the smoke was unusual. I hadn't seen smoke that dark before. It didn't look grey or even a dark grey that you would normally expect. It looked pure black. I thought it looked more terrifying than the flames. I knew at the time that it was the cladding causing the smoke because you could smell plastic burning.
12. There were also masses of debris coming off of the building. I could see it was the cladding burning and falling off. It was still burning as it fell. There were small pieces and massive chunks of it raining down on the surrounding area. I could see that some of it was actually falling onto our block and into some of the balconies. We were very close to the Tower but further back from where the debris was falling. I was obviously

worried that the burning debris would end up causing a fire in our block as well. That was the point when I knew my family had to get out of our home as soon as possible.

13. I think I was watching the fire for around 15 to 20 minutes in total on and off. At one point I went back to my room to put some outdoor clothes on. I also grabbed my passport, my bank cards and keys. My sister and my parents were also getting things ready. We packed bags with clothes and supplies for the kids. We could see from how serious the fire was that we might not be able to come back to our property for a while so we were trying to make sure we were prepared.

14. We left the block through the exit furthest away from the Tower going out to Whitchurch Road. Lots of our neighbours were coming out as well. Many people were in their pyjamas and dressing gowns. I think most people probably thought they were going to be able to go back into the building soon. Not everyone would have had the view of the Tower we had so they wouldn't have seen how dangerous the falling debris was. There was nobody telling us where to go and what to do.

15. We stopped outside the exit on the communal green between Testerton Walk and Hurstway walk. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. There were so many people screaming. I could hear children shouting for help. It was so awful. I kept thinking about if it was my niece or nephew up there. I was horrified.

16. I kept hoping that it would rain. I was hoping for anything that might have some effect on the fire. I remember there was a helicopter in the sky and I kept wondering why they couldn't drop water on the fire the way they do in other countries when there is a forest fire or other disasters. I think the helicopter was just there to film the Tower for the news. I was looking at every window, trying to spot people. I kept thinking about ways that they could get out of the building.

17. There was so many people. You could tell that because of the smoke some of them couldn't get too close to the windows. People were shouting things like; 'help us, help us, save us please!'. I saw someone waving a white cloth near the top of the building. I later found out that this had been Nadia Choucair. Nadia had been the teaching assistant for my niece and nephew. It was traumatising to find out that it had been her. I kept thinking about her warm smile and how nice and friendly she has been. It was

awful to think I had seen her trapped and screaming for help like that. At one window there had been two kids. One second they were there and then a split second later they were gone. I don't know what happened to them. I couldn't go on watching the Tower any longer.

18. We had decided to head towards our car which was parked nearby in Sirdar Road. The idea was that my parents, with the children, would take the car and get out of the area. However as we were walking to Sirdar Road, we realised it was going to be impossible to drive anywhere. The roads were obstructed by police cars and fire engines. Even those vehicles couldn't get near enough to the Tower so they were filling up the surrounding streets. We still had a clear view of the Tower as it burned. I took another photo while we were on Sirdar Road. This is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/3**.
19. I left my parents, my sister and the kids at Sirdar Road. I wanted to be closer to the fire to see what was happening, I thought I could see if anyone needed help. Even if it was just helping elderly residents with their bags when they were evacuated or something like that. I wanted to be my community.
20. I ended up back on the communal green between Hurstway Walk and Testerton Walk. Lots of my friends from the Walkways were there. Everyone was in shock. None of us could believe what was happening right in front of us. There was a lot of emotion in the crowd. People were shocked but they were also angry. Even then people were talking about the cladding. People were asking what sort of flammable cladding was put on the building. They were saying if it wasn't for the cladding then the building wouldn't be burning so fast. You could smell the cladding in the air. It was the smell of burning plastic.
21. TV crews were showing up and some of them were on the communal green. The reporters were asking the residents questions and if we had any photos. I think the TV crew was foreign. I think they might have been Australian. I didn't want to speak to them. I didn't want to talk to outsiders who were reporting on what was happening. I was more worried about whether or not people in the Tower were getting help.

22. I spent a lot of the night wandering around. I was like a zombie. It was overwhelming. That time feels like a blur so it is hard for me to put it in order. There are particular images that really stand out in my memory. During the night, I tried to walk around the Tower. My head was always up looking at the Tower. People were dying while I was watching. Everywhere you went there were people watching and crying. I think I circled about three quarters of the way around until I got to an area near Kensington Aldridge Academy which was cordoned off. The firefighters were spraying the Tower with water. The water wasn't even reaching the top of the Tower.
23. During the night while I was off on my own I was regularly checking in with my family. My mum was very worried and she wanted to know where I was. I was also on the phone a lot with my sister too. She had gone off on her own as well.
24. I remember at one point I went towards Latimer Road station. There were already lots of people there when I arrived. People were gathering there because they weren't sure where else to go. There was a point between the underground station and the newsagents where you could get a really good view of the Tower. We could all see it was totally ablaze. I took a photo and this is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/4**. At one point I could see three children stood on a windowsill. They were small and so I thought they must be very young children. A gust of the black smoke covered them for a moment and when the smoke cleared, the children had disappeared from the window. It was shocking. Like the children earlier, it is an image that I have tried very hard not to remember or think about.
25. At Latimer Road I saw some police officers kitted out with shields like they were riot police. There were other police officers there asking the crowd if anybody had inhalers. It was for the people who had managed to get out of the Tower and were having breathing problems. It was hectic. There was a lot of commotion. People watching wanted to know what they could do to help. Lots of people were crying. Other people were asking the firefighters and police officers why they weren't doing anything to save the people still in the Tower. I overheard a lot of arguments. Some of the crowd were asking why the people in the Tower had been told to stay put for hours. It made me think of my dad. He is the sort of person who would listen to what a figure of authority such as a firefighter or a police officer tells him. If they had told

him to stay in the Tower, he would have stayed. The thought of that scares me. I know now that many of the people who stayed in the Tower didn't survive. That is not to knock the firefighters that were there, as I do think that they did the best job that they could. There was only so much that they could do with a fire that was so out of control. At the time though, people were so emotional watching the fire unfold. There was a lot of confusion, anger and despair from the people in the crowd who were watching. We were helpless to do anything.

26. I stayed out all night wandering. When it got to the morning I decided to go into work. I just wanted to get away from it all. I wanted to stop thinking about the things I had seen. I thought if I was at work at least there would be something else to focus on. I called work and told them that I was coming in. However I knew that if I was going into work, I would need my collections card which was still in the property. I have to have the collections card for when I go and pick up cars. I told a police officer that I had to go back into the Walkway and he escorted me back to our property.

27. In Testerton Walk there is a partition which cuts the block in the middle. Our property is on the side that is nearest the Whitchurch Street entrance rather than the side which is nearest Grenfell Walk. As I was going to my property I glanced through a window in the partition, I could see shapes wrapped up in plastic on the other side. I think they were dead bodies. It was a shocking realisation. I went into the property to grab my collections card. While I was inside, I went out onto the balcony again. I took another photo and this is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/5**.

28. It was now light and the fire had been burning all night long but I was stunned when I realised that there was an elderly man at one of the windows. I called my sister and I told her to run find someone and tell them there was someone in the Tower who needed to be rescued. After that I grabbed my collection card and left. I found a firefighter and told him about the man in the Tower. He communicated to someone else on his walkie-talkie. I later found out that it was the dad of one of my friends who lived in the Tower. It was only after I saw his face on the news that I remembered him from my childhood. I hadn't even realised he lived in the Tower at the time.

29. After that I didn't want to witness anything else. I wanted to go to work and to try and forget about what I had seen. I went to work at around 6am.

Aftermath

30. We had TV screens at work and the Tower was all over the news. My colleagues were shocked that I had come in to work. I told them that I hadn't been able to stay there watching the Tower any longer. At least work would be a distraction. It was so difficult concentrating at work that day. I was so tired after spending the whole night wandering and my mind kept going back to the Tower.
31. When work finished I went back to the area. I wasn't sure where my family was as I wasn't able to get hold of them by phone. I thought they were probably at St Clements Church so I headed there. As I passed it I saw the Tower was still on fire and there was lots of smoke coming off it. It was eerie. At first I couldn't find my family at the church. I ended up back at Testerton Walk but I was told we still weren't able to go back in. I started to panic a bit as I didn't know where my family were. When I called again I got through and they told me they were at the Church. I went back and found them. The Tower was still burning at half past ten that night. I took a photo and this is exhibited at Exhibit **IY/6**.
32. I tried to avoid the aftermath of the fire in the days that followed but it was impossible. The fire at Grenfell Tower was all over the news, it was everywhere. My sister kept updating me about the people that had died. She told me that Nadia had died. I had seen her whenever I dropped the kids off at school. She was always really friendly and polite. A really nice woman. It was later that I found out she had been the woman waving the cloth that I had seen on the night.
33. We had also known the El-Wahabi family. I had gone to school with one of their family members. He wasn't in the fire. I also knew Jessica Urbano Ramirez as well. She was the niece of Manfred and Carlos Rodriguez who I went to primary school with and grew up with. There were lots of other faces that I recognised even if I didn't know them well. We were a community. People would open doors for each other.

People would say 'good morning' and 'how are you?' to people that you saw around the estate. You got to know people on the Estate.

Impact

34. At the time of the fire I was working at Porsche in West London. I couldn't concentrate after the fire. I had really enjoyed my job but I wasn't able to put 100% into it anymore. I couldn't sleep following the fire and that combined with Latimer Road station being closed led to me being late for work. I ended up being asked to leave my job. This really made it difficult for me financially and I went into debt. I am now working at Mercedes Benz [REDACTED]. It is a much longer commute.
35. Following the fire, we initially went back to our property. It was difficult being there. I didn't want to look outside my bedroom window. I didn't want to open the window. There was a horrible smell of burnt meat. There was ash on the balcony and some of it came into my room. I kept thinking that it could be someone's burned body. It could be one of my neighbours. It was so upsetting.
36. It was also difficult living there in a practical sense. There was no gas and no hot water. I had to go to a friend's house when I wanted a shower. We managed for six weeks before we realised we couldn't go on living there. We ended up in a hotel and we've been there ever since. A hotel is not a home. Sometimes it feels like a prison. Outside my window there's a brick wall. I can also see a tower block from the window. It's not what I want to see everyday. Sometimes they test the fire alarm. It always scares me. My family should be together as a unit to support each other but we are staying in separate hotel rooms. I have recently been offered temporary accommodation by the council.
37. I don't want to go into detail in this statement about the impact that this has had on my life but it has had a huge impact on my life. It has had a detrimental impact on my work and as a result I was asked to leave my job at Porsche. My sleep has been affected. It has been really hard. The fire still affects me. I have recently seen my GP about having counselling.

38. This community is where I grew up. I saw the Tower everyday. It was just a part of my life. Now I try my hardest to avoid seeing it. Our community is really hurt. I just hope we are able to heal.

39. I want to make a further statement as part of Phase 2 to discuss the wider issues including aftermath of the fire.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and for it to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed: 

Dated: 1 - June - 2018