
THE ENIGMA OF FRANK RYAN

PART TWO

by Michael McInerney

AT AN early stage of World War Two its danger to Ireland affected Frank Ryan's life, and so began the now 40-year-old mystery which has surrounded his name since. An international campaign was launched to secure Ryan's release, stimulated by an Irish committee representing all labour and republican interests. Even Cardinal MacRory, Ryan's old opponent and, at one stage, by Pope Pius XII, supported the call for his release. In Madrid, the Irish Ambassador, Kerney, had been at the receiving end of the appeals and had used every possible channel to Franco to get Ryan out.

By late 1939, soon after de Valera had recognised Franco's Government, Kerney wrote Dublin that he was now confident of Ryan's release. Since that recognition Kerney had used every diplomatic device to win help from Franco Ministers and officials. He contacted British, American and other diplomats to secure Ryan's freedom. He also worked with a Spanish lady, the Duchess of Tetuan, a descendant of Red Hugh O'Donnell of Tirconail, beautiful, dark-haired, who had visited Ryan in jail and had been captivated by him. She had great personal influence and access to Franco.

In spite of every pressure, however, by March 1940 Franco still refused to release Ryan. "He is my most important prisoner," he stated on one occasion to Kerney. In the Spring of 1940 Kerney's Spanish adviser, (but also adviser to the Germans in Madrid) a Senor Champourcin, suggested to Kerney that they might try to use German influence on Franco. After much hesitation, and aware of Dev's anxieties about Irish neutrality, Kerney at last agreed. No objection was raised by Dublin. Soon Ryan was approached in Burgos jail by a German Abwehr officer in Madrid and told that he could be released and sent back to Ireland. But he would have to undertake to make things difficult for England in Ireland, if they did so. Interested, but very worried about this proposal, Ryan confided in a Spanish comrade prisoner - Angel Palaccio - (whom I met in Madrid 40 years later) of his distrust of the German officer and the Spanish and German fascists. He told Angel that he would never do anything to prejudice the anti-fascist struggle, and that he certainly would not take the nazi side in anything.

This was early June 1940 and Churchill and a new anti-Hitler government had taken over from Chamberlain in England. Ryan's supreme hope, however, was to return home, so he kept listening. If he could use the Germans to get home, then why not? Anything to avoid 30 years in jail. But he still demanded many guarantees from the Germans and laid down that he would not accept any conditions about his activities in Ireland.

At last Franco agreed with the Germans that he should release Ryan, but not in accordance with the terms that Kerney had expected. Kerney had been led to believe that Ryan would be handed over to him (Kerney) and that he would arrange his return home. Instead, however, Franco's terms were that during the night of July 25th Ryan would be handed over to German Intelligence secretly but would have to swear solemnly that he would never again return to Spain. Through Champourcin, who also still adviser to Germany's Embassy in Spain, Kerney was advised that the Germans would either take Ryan back to Ireland or send him to the United States, where he could work with the neutrality lobby there. Germany feared the entry of the United States into the war. Guarantees were given for Ryan's safety in Germany and his freedom from any possible action by the SS, the Gestapo or other such organisations. The Germans also agreed that the transfer could be overseen by the Irish Embassy in Spain.

Kerney now believed that Frank Ryan's ordeal was

over at last, that he would be taken to France and from there go by U-boat to Ireland. But at the last moment the German Abwehr took over complete control of the transfer. At 2 a.m. on July 25th Wolfgang Blaum, Abwehr Chief in Madrid called to the jail at Burgos, accompanied by two armed Falangists and civil guards. Ryan was awakened, ordered to dress, and taken to Blaum's car and driven to Paris. Clearly Ryan had little if any choice about leaving Spain. Champourcin, who was at the jail at the same time, followed the cars to the border; was recognised by Ryan whom he had met, and saw the transfer of Ryan to the Berlin Abwehr officer, Kurt Haller, who drove Ryan to Paris.

Through all this Ryan had no doubt as to whether all this was due to nazi altruism. The nazis hoped to use him for their own devices in Ireland in their war against England. At this time, of course, all Europe, apart from Soviet Russia, was under Hitler's rule. Ryan placed no real reliance on German help for Ireland. His knowledge of history told him that the Germans had not fulfilled Casement's hopes in 1916. History also told him that in 1912 the Kaiser had negotiated with Carson, the Ulster leader, who sought German aid to resist any attempt by Asquith, England's Prime Minister, to impose Home Rule on Ireland. Yet he considered himself lucky to be able to return to Ireland—even with German help.

In Paris he had comforts, like a bed, a bath and decent food, that he had certainly not enjoyed in Burgos Jail. Yet he felt insecure until he met there a young German friend named Helmut Clissman, whom he had met and liked in Ireland in the early thirties with another young German, Jupp Hoven. Both now told him that they were attached to the Abwehr and that they had urged Admiral Canaris, Abwehr chief, to secure his release from Spain on the grounds that if Britain were to attack Ireland to occupy the ports (returned to de Valera by Chamberlain in 1938) Ryan would be a great organiser of Irish defence and win the IRA to de Valera in his resistance to England.

There was little rest for Ryan in Paris and after a few days he was suddenly taken, not to Ireland, but to Berlin where, unknown to Clissman and Hoven, he met, for the first time, Vessenmayer, Ribbentrop's adviser on Ireland, Vessenmayer was also a colonel in the dreaded SS, Hitler's special terror organisation. He was briefed by the adviser on German's policy of full support for Irish neutrality and of Hitler's readiness to aid in Irish defence if England attacked Ireland. But Ryan was not told that Vessenmayer, three months before, had secretly brought Sean Russell, IRA Chief-of-Staff, to Berlin from New York and was planning to send him back to Ireland by U-boat. Russell was to take with him a radio transmitter and plans for IRA activity in Ireland when Germany invaded Britain. A red-pot flower would be placed on the German Embassy window in Dublin as a signal for action by Russell and his men. Ryan, however, was told nothing of this.

Vessenmayer later suggested to Ribbentrop and army and naval chiefs that Ryan also should go with Russell on the U-boat and that the two Irishmen, representing both wings of the IRA, could step up Irish activity against Britain. First it had to be established that the two men, so apart and so bitter in Irish politics, would be prepared to co-operate in Ireland. To establish this both men were invited to a meal with some War Chiefs in the famous (as described in the preface) Wilhelmstrasse (Germany's

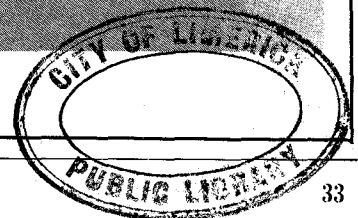
White House or 10, Downing Street) at staggered times. Meeting unexpectedly in Berlin the two Irishmen would be bound to reveal their true feelings. And they did. As already described, immediately on recognition they expressed delight, as indeed most Irish men or women would have done if suddenly meeting a fellow-Irishman in such strange, bizarre, almost unimaginable conditions. One could imagine Cathal Goulding and Rory Brady exchanging friendly greetings today in such circumstances.

"Would you like a lift home in my U-boat, Frank?" asked Sean. "If you're serious, Sean, I certainly would. Sure, I'd go home to Ireland with anyone," replied his old enemy. (It was Russell who had expelled Ryan and his friends from the IRA after the Republican Congress had been formed in 1934).

Two days later Ryan and Russell, with armed Abwehr officers, travelled by train to Wilhelmshaven and on the journey Ryan recalled later how he and Russell were kept strictly apart, and not allowed to talk, just as they had been separated after that meal in Berlin. On August 8th, only just a fortnight since he had left the Spanish jail, Ryan was on board a U-boat with Russell, bound for Ireland. Silence was also strictly enforced on the boat. Soon, however, disaster overtook them. Russell became very ill and died on August 14th, just 100 miles, or a day's journey, from the Irish coast. He was buried at sea with full German naval honours, wrapped in the German naval ensign. What about Ryan's hopes of home? According to German Foreign Office papers, he was directed to return to the German base. He had no other choice but to do so and was held there for almost four years.



Frank Ryan with some Irish comrades in Spain.





Frank Ryan.

'Rescued' from a Spanish fascist jail by the German nazis, he had remained with his 'rescuers' for four years and died in their hands.

The news leaked out over the months after the U-boat tragedy of Ryan's whereabouts but none could explain how such a radical socialist, anti-fascist and generally-loved man could find himself in nazi hands. Few except the Irish Government knew of his transfer under armed guard, and Franco had announced formally that "he had escaped with the aid of American friends". He could have been anywhere. The Irish Government was silent for neutrality reasons. Churchill could create serious trouble if the secret leaked out. Even the German Ambassador in Dublin, Herr Hempel, was not informed. And many, even of his friends in Ireland and England, came to believe he had indeed gone over voluntarily to the nazis.

But he had not. Yet many thousands continued to think of his German period as if Ryan had lived in some 'twilight zone'. To them Germany was a closed chapter, and they continued to think of him as an Irish hero in Ireland and in the Spanish War and the Spanish jail, about which much was known through prudent leaks from Government sources. But many, even still, cannot visualise any circumstances in which Ryan could have survived - even for four years - in the land of Hitler and his dreaded SS and Gestapo. They are fearful, too, of inquiring too deeply.

They forgot that Ryan was a man of enormous and varied experience of war, capture, jail and threat in both Ireland and Spain, used to situations demanding quick decision and also much subterfuge.

He knew the Marxist theory of recognising the contradictions of capitalism and imperialism and exploiting them in the interests of freedom as indeed Lenin did in 1917 on 'the Kaiser's Finland train'. Perhaps Ryan thought he could do in Ireland what Lenin did in Russia. But events were to leave his plans still-born.

Ryan knew, of course, that the nazis did not 'rescue' him because they liked him. They knew the power of nationalism in Ireland—indeed in every country, even in the USSR, as Stalin recognised after Hitler had invaded Russia—and that the one thing that would draw all republican Irishmen together would be an invasion of

Ireland by British forces. Such an event, which they were convinced would happen, would bring men such as de Valera, Ryan, Russell and many other political enemies into an army for the defence of Ireland. In such an army would be all shades of politics, conservative, liberals, labour, communist, socialist, perhaps even fascist.

Ryan knew the Germans were aware that his influence could draw the IRA and de Valera into one camp and that he and Russell would join left and right. And so for two years they held Ryan 'in cold storage', awaiting a favourable moment to use him. And all the time they swore they were arranging his journey home. Friends of the nazis believe they failed because of the war, but surely with all its power and might and resources the Germans could have taken Ryan from the French coast to Ireland. They took Casement in 1916, at a much more difficult time, and many of their own agents, in the war years of 1939-45.

During those years Ryan remained unharmed because he was an influential Irishman and the Germans wanted friendly relations with de Valera, who knew that Ryan was in their hands. Ryan talked to them about Ireland and the war and answered political questions, but he had to talk to someone. He never once, however, spoke on the German radio to Ireland, much though the Germans would have wished him to do so.

Indeed for two years he maintained a secret correspondence with his old friend Kerney, the Irish Ambassador in Madrid, whom he had met both in Ireland and in Spain. He also wrote secretly to another Irish friend, Gerard O'Reilly in New York. In this way, and others, he kept in touch with Irish affairs.

Two years later, however, after disastrous war changes in Africa and Russia, Ireland no longer loomed as a peripheral area of war, and Veessenmayer and the Foreign Office lost all interest in Ryan, though he was allowed all material needs. Within months he became seriously ill, though cared for by SS, medical men and in SS hospitals. He died on June 10th, 1944.

Anxieties about neutrality prevented de Valera from pressing for his return home after he had been held in Germany for more than a year, though he would have welcomed his arrival from the U-boat in 1940. Since his death no statement has been issued that would rehabilitate Ryan.

On this question de Valera, in an interview with this writer, shortly before his (de Valera's) death, told me: "I am very pleased that you are writing the biography of this great Irishman. Frank Ryan always put Ireland first in everything he did or said, at home or abroad. He has earned his place in history." Hundreds of other men and women paid their tribute in interviews with me. Jim Larkin, in a public statement at the Irish Trade Union Congress in 1939 gave a most colourful and eloquent appreciation of Ryan and his work.

In my own view, after the total collapse of all his hopes in Spain, his supreme and only hope was to return to Ireland and he would have used the "devil himself", as he said, to attain that. But yet, it must be remembered, he was taken from Spain under armed guard. He had no choice. With the prospect of an English invasion of Ireland his main desire was to be at home to fight against England as he had done in 1921 with de Valera, Russell, and even O'Duffy. It was that thought in the minds of the Germans that sent the U-boat to Ireland in August 1944. At the same time he would have done nothing to aid nazi Germany.

One sentence of Ryan written to Kerney in the summer of 1941 seems to me appropriate to conclude this article on Frank Ryan. It reads: "If I am ever asked to do something I don't like, don't worry...I won't do the dirty...And when you plant my tombstone, let it be of granite like my stubborn cranium contents...Not for nothing did I earn the nickname—'The Mule' in my schooldays in St. Colman's Fermoy."

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