The Kidnapping of Dr. Herrema

During the mid-1970s the Ferenka steel cord manufacturing plant at Annacotty was one of the major employers in the mid-west region, and indeed one of the largest factory complexes in the state. Locally, the factory is remembered for its somewhat chequered history regarding industrial relations, which was one of the factors leading to its closure in 1979. But nationally it is remembered for a more dramatic reason, the kidnapping in 1975 of its managing director, Dutchman Dr. Tiede Herrema.

On the morning of 3 October 1975, Dr. Herrema drove out from his house onto the Monaleen Road on his way to an early morning meeting at the plant. A short distance down the road he was flagged down by what seemed to be three men in the Garda Síochána. However, upon asking Herrema his name, the “Garda” drew a revolver and ordered him out of the car. He was bundled into another car, which sped away from the scene. So began an extremely tense drama which was to put Ireland, and Limerick, on the world map for all the wrong reasons.

The bogus Garda was in fact Eddie Gallagher, from Donegal, an IRA leader who had fallen out with his comrades-in-arms and was now operating to his own agenda. Also in the car were Marian Coyle, 21, from Derry, an IRA leader and two others, one of whom was a close personal friend of Marian Coyle and a senior IRA member. The other prisoner was another senior IRA man with whose release there were dozens, if not hundreds, of official and unofficial disputes during the factory’s lifetime. This day was one of those days.

Mr. Tony Walsh, then secretary of the Ferenka section of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, remembers driving into work and finding an unofficial picket at the gates. The strikes were also a symptom of the low morale that pervaded the plant, something referred to by several former employees to whom the author has spoken. When the news surfaced that Herrema had been kidnapped, there was a mixed reaction, many thinking the news to be a joke. However, when it became clear that it was indeed a serious situation, concern became the primary emotion.

To the union representatives and management in the plant, along with the public representatives of Limerick in general, it became apparent that something had to be done quickly to distance the city and its people from the terrible deed that had occurred. The kidnappers had been banking upon the fact that Ferenka was part of a large Dutch multinational corporation, AKZO. They hoped international pressure would be brought to bear on the Government to meet their demands. Part of this pressure would be the media attention that would focus on Ireland and Limerick. It was decided in Limerick that the attention should be used to register the anger of the people and their abhorrence at what had happened.

On the day after the kidnapping, Saturday 4 October, a large demonstration and march was held in the city, organised by the unions and middle management at the plant. Three thousand people attended, comprising factory workers and members of the general public. The march was led from Pery Square by the Mayor of Limerick, Thady Coughlan, through O’Connell Street, William Street and Munaget Street. At City Hall in Rutland Street a statement was then read to the crowd. It maintained that: “the abduction of Dr. Herrema is completely unrepresentative of the positive feeling which Limerick, and indeed Ireland, adopts to companies bringing factories and jobs to this country.” It then went on to state that there had been no industrial dispute ever in the factory, something which has been contradicted time and again by former employees.

Later Mayor Coughlan went to Limerick Prison to appeal to Rose Dugdale to tell the kidnappers to release Dr. Herrema. She refused to talk to him and the mayor commented that “she must be the most cold-blooded, callous person that could be encountered.” Her parents, who phoned her with the same intention as the mayor, received a terse response: “I don’t interfere in your business, you don’t interfere in mine.” An appeal to the same effect to the other prisoners in Portlaoise Prison was no more successful.

Dr. Herrema’s Hillman Hunter at the spot where it was found.
The final details were being arranged when Gardai were looking for a way to give up without seeming to give in.

Dr. Herrema was spied on the Dutch Embassy in Dublin to recover from the ordeal. He later told Mr. Ted Russell, former Mayor of Limerick and the only Irish director on the board of Ferenka, that his two captors, Coyle was by far the most ruthless, while Gallagher was far more reasonable. The kidnappers and their associates received a total of 71 years in prison for their crimes. However, on at least one occasion, the kidnapping did bring about the effect the leaders of Limerick city feared regarding foreign investment in the region. While the siege was on in Monasterevin, a British company about to buy a sailing-making factory at Miltown Malbay, Co. Clare, issued a press statement to the effect that it was not going through with the purchase because of high wage costs, and the kidnapping.

Dr. Herrema was given honorary Irish citizenship by the State, was presented with an illuminated address by Limerick County Council, and though the City Council debated the idea of giving him the freedom of the city, this did not materialise. However, the Mayor of Limerick did host a reception for Dr. Herrema and his wife on 7 December that year as a token of their respect for him.

In 1979, after only five years in operation, Ferenka shut down. It was not, however, as Tim Pat Coogan suggests in his book The IRA, as a result of the kidnapping incident. As well as the uncomfortable nature of industrial relations in the plant, AKZO had set up another plant elsewhere to manufacture a new product designed to replace the one produced in Limerick. Its closure was a significant loss to Limerick and the region, while the kidnapping was a tense and dramatic aside to an unsatisfactory part of Limerick's recent local history.

Sources:
Irish Independent, 7 October 1998.
Limerick Leader, October-November 1975.
Walsh, Mr. Tony: Interview with author, 4 February 1998.