

The Kidnapping of Dr. Herrema

by Ciarán O Griofa

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 a member of 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, with a strong republican background, and Brian McGowan and John Vincent Walsh, both from the Republic. The primary reason for the kidnapping was completely personal to Gallagher. The aim was to secure the release of three republican prisoners, the most important being that of Dr. Rose Dugdale. This English-born daughter of a British Army officer joined the IRA out of a sense of adventure and rebellion against her upbringing, and she and Gallagher had fallen in love. She had been arrested in the aftermath of a failed IRA bomb attack and was imprisoned in Limerick jail. The objective - or at least the original objective - of the kidnapping was to trade Dr. Herrema for Dugdale 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 Gallagher hoped to pacify his former IRA colleagues, who by this stage had him on a wanted list.

During the following three weeks a massive search of virtually the whole of the twenty-six counties was carried out by over 4,500 Gardai, supported by the army. Ironically, just a few days before soldiers

from Sarsfield Barracks had been on an exercise in the mountains around Templeberry in Co. Tipperary, where a small group of soldiers acting as "robbers" were hunted down by soldiers in vehicles with the aid of a helicopter. Now they were involved in such an operation for real on a much larger scale and with much higher stakes to play for.

In Ferenka itself on the morning of the kidnapping it seemed a usual day. The company was notorious for its dismal industrial relations record and 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

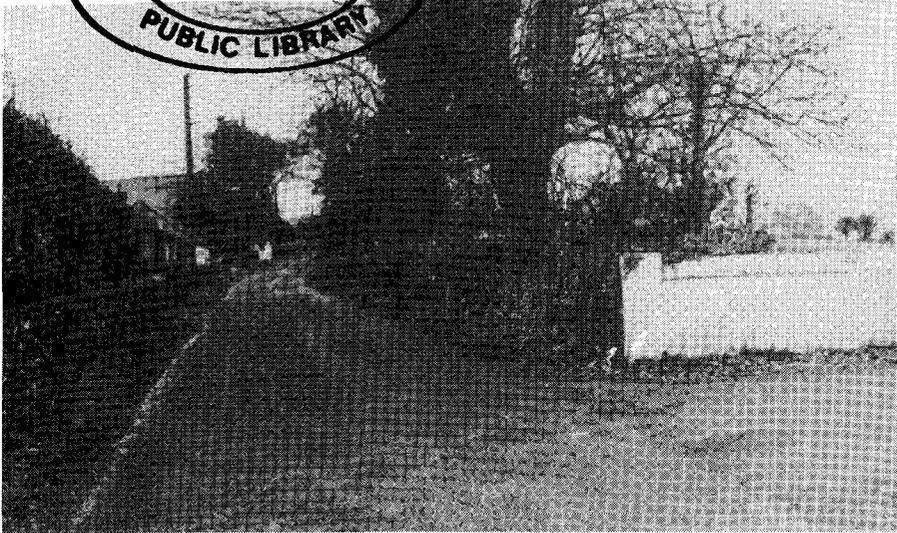
international pressure would be brought to bear on the Government to meet their demands. Part of this pressure would be the media attention that would focus on Ireland and Limerick. It was decided in Limerick that the attention should be used to register the anger of the people and their abhorrence at 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 Mungret 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.



Monaleen Road showing the gateway where the kidnapers waited for Dr. Herrema.

Condemnations of the act were issued by many, including the Bishop of Limerick, all the major political parties and the Junior Chamber of Commerce of Ireland, which was holding its annual convention the same weekend. In an unprecedented move, the proceedings were interrupted so that a motion of condemnation could be put to the floor, proposed by Mr. Denis Leonard, then President of Limerick Junior Chamber. It was passed unanimously. Meanwhile on Radio Eireann, Cllr. Jim Kemmy took on the thorny issue of the politics of the kidnapers. In the Limerick Leader of 6 October 1975, he was reported as saying that "the kidnapping had discredited the Republican movement in Limerick", although it was not his intention to append the blame to any particular branch of the Republican movement.

For the next two-and-a-half weeks the whereabouts of Dr. Herrema and his captors remained unknown, and Garda and Army searches continued unabated, first starting in the immediate Limerick City area, then spreading out into Counties Limerick, Tipperary and Clare. When this yielded no fruit, the net was cast further afield, but with so many potential hiding places it was like looking for a needle in a haystack. The press printed an appeal from Limerick Chief Superintendent, Tom Kenny, to "have a good look at your next door neighbour - these people could be in the house next door."

However, it was not such an aid that helped the Gardaí finally discover where Dr. Herrema was being hidden. A number of mediators had been contacted and negotiations about a ransom for the Dutchman had begun - Gallagher's aim now having been revised in the face of Government resistance to the prisoner releases. Now he was negotiating for a ransom of two million pounds and a flight out of Ireland to a Middle Eastern country. The final details were being arranged when Gardaí finally tracked down some of Gallagher's co-conspirators and found his present hideout, a house on an estate in Monasterevin, Co. Kildare, where he,

Marian Coyle and Dr. Herrema were ensconced.

Early on the morning of 21 October, Special Branch detectives, backed up by army snipers, attempted a lightning raid on the house in St. Evin's Park, Monasterevin, in an effort to free Dr. Herrema. However, Gallagher and Coyle had retreated to an upstairs bedroom of the house with their captive, and on the door being broken down, Gallagher opened fire blindly. The element of surprise had been lost to the police, and it was obvious the room could not be rushed without the risk of Dr. Herrema being shot. With Army and Gardaí sealing off the area, there began a siege of the house which was to last for eighteen tense days.

Army armoured cars were brought into position, snipers placed at strategic points, and bugging devices and other listening equipment were borrowed from the British police. Command headquarters was set up in nearby Kildare and the long wait began. It turned into a war of words and of the mind. With the kidnapers cut off from aid from their supporters and dependant on their enemies for basic supplies of food, water and clothing, it was a battle of wits and psychological strength for the life of Dr. Herrema, the kidnapper's only asset in the situation.

Another major feature of the siege was the intense media coverage it received, as dozens of journalists, photographers and radio and TV crews descended on the small town. In the many long hours of the siege when nothing was happening the journalists made news out of their own presence, such as the various problems they had with accommodation, very often sharing beds on a rotational basis. Other teams rented caravans. Even before the siege had started, the Limerick Leader carried a column by Seamus Ó Cinnéide which carried many references to the positive comments journalists covering the Herrema story had to give about Ireland in general.

As the siege wore on, Dr. Herrema himself seemed to be dealing well with the tension and confinement. He kept talking to his captors, having conversations with

Gallagher about industrialisation and monetary matters. He tried to befriend his captors in an effort to make it harder for them to kill him. A minimum amount of food was allowed into the room from the Gardaí occupying the ground floor. Eventually, late in the evening of 7 November, the kidnapers, exhausted and with no hope of gaining their demands, gave up. Gallagher complained of extreme pain in his neck which was later surmised to be psychosomatic, his subconscious looking for a way to give up without seeming to give in.

Dr. Herrema was sped to 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 of his two captors, Coyle was by far the most ruthless, while Gallagher was far more reasonable. The kidnapers 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 sail-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.

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