

EDITORIAL

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Taboo subject

THERE is a new taboo subject in Limerick. Other parts of the country seem painfully exercised by it. But Limerick—city and county—remains largely silent about immigration.

Admittedly silence is infinitely preferable to the overt race hate spewed out in Dublin, for example, and it is extremely unlikely that racism here runs as deep or as wide as it does there. Then again, however, immigration here is not what it is there.

Limerick's new settlers generally are neither pitiable fugitives from persecution nor despised economic migrants. They are typically multi-national executives, academics and business people. They evoke not hostility but admiration.

How different is the scene in Dublin, Wexford and Ennis, where often penniless and penniless asylum-seekers are concentrated. A result of this concentration, at least in Dublin, is that the immigrants are unjustly portrayed as spongers competing with needy natives for entitlements. And, sadly, there are politicians prepared to exploit such fears.

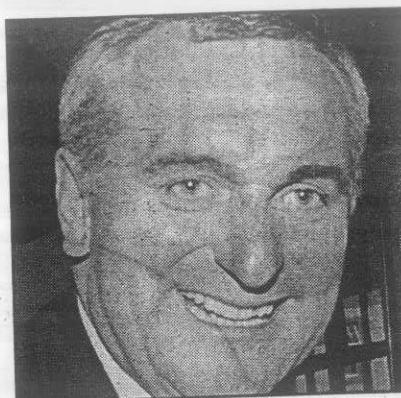
It is regrettable that there are not sufficient politicians prepared to responsibly address this whole issue. That being the case, it is hardly surprising that successive governments have failed miserably to take effective action. Instead of properly formulating policy they just made it up as they went along. They still do.

Thus we have the Taoiseach saying one thing in Australia, the Tanaiste saying another and Opposition leaders saying something else. Yet all no doubt privately agree on what is needed: dignified treatment for all seeking entry; a fast and fair system of deciding asylum applications; implementation of the convention whereby applicants must seek asylum in the first country in which they land; a well-coming immigration policy geared to the capacity of the economy.

Racism undoubtedly exists in this country but this is not a racist country. The vast majority of citizens would favour compassion while not wishing to be seen as a soft touch. This is one subject on which political consensus is not only realisable but essential for social stability.

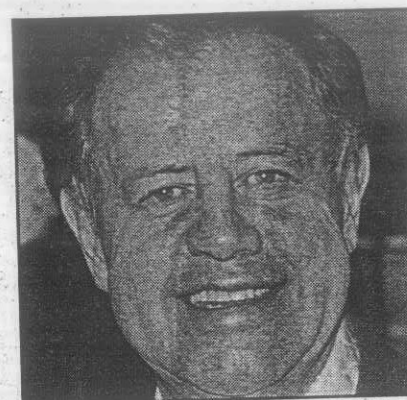
The silence in Limerick is obviously preferable to the inflammatory invective elsewhere but it is no substitute for constructive politics.

A hot potato



Prison ships in the Shannon?

WHAT next, prison ships in the Shannon? Taoiseach Bertie Ahern cocked-up Down Under when he seemed to favour interning immigrants. But Fine Gael leader John Bruton and Labour leader Ruari Quinn protest too much. When they were in power they didn't have a proper immigration policy either. On second thoughts, prison ships not in the Shannon but on a sea of crocodile tears?



Breathtakingly brave Brendan

LIMERICK'S second most famous adopted son, Waterford-born singer Brendan Bowyer, has given many star performances in his long and glittering career but his television appearance the other night was something special. And it was for real: he talked honestly about his alcoholism. He was breathtakingly brave. In fact it was the performance of his life—and it will save lives.

FEAR TUATHE



TOM BROWNE

THIS is the month when most of our trees and shrubs put forth their buds. In the past few weeks there may have been early signs of growth, stunted by the cold at times but the rising temperatures in April spurs the little green leaves neatly encased in their protective shells to burst into maturity.

For some reason unknown to me, but possibly buried in the deep layers of my subconscious, I'm always inclined to hanker after the blackthorn at this time of year. In October, too, of course, I'm always on the look out for a nice thorny plant that can be fashioned into a walking stick.

The blackthorn at any time of year is an attractive plant but is particularly appealing at the end of March and in the first few weeks in April. There's a lovely hue on the blackish/blue bark and as the month progresses, the plant becomes covered in a mass of five petal like white flowers. Then the plant dons its vibrant green cloak. As the months pass by, the marble sized bluish sloes droop from its branches, providing a splendid ingredient for either wine or gin. The sloe is a bitter tasting fruit, crisping the lips when the juice is bruised out between the teeth. However, if pressed with a finger along the gums the juice has great cleansing properties and along with whitening the teeth, destroys the tarter. In the old days in West Clare, in the few places where the plant grew, the juices when crushed

BRENDAN HALLIGAN

Heartbreak in city hotel

WHEN the Ambassador of Israel, Mark Sofer, paid his respects at the Jewish Burial Ground in Castletroy the other day, did he catch sight of an unmarked grave? And if so, did anyone tell him the story of the woman whose last resting place this is? Indeed, how many people in Limerick remember anything at all about Elsa Reininger?

Born in 1882 in Bohemia, now the Czech Republic, she married Berish Hofler, a Polish Jew, and lived in Vienna until 1938. She fled to Ireland, having been forced to abandon her money, after Hitler annexed Austria. That was when she came to Limerick.

First she lived with her daughter, Margaret Kaitcher, at Wolfe Tone Street, and then with the Tobin family at Newenham Street.

She suffered from depression. On Thursday October 27th 1938 she booked a room at the Hotel Crescent at 87 O'Connell Street. There, that night, she shot herself in the head.

Limerick, sadly, is notorious for the pogrom of 1904. And that was arguably the most shameful incident in the city's long and otherwise mainly glorious history. Yet, even though there is no evidence of her having been overtly persecuted here, somehow Elsa's death sym-



bolises the suffering of Jews even more than the horrors of 1904.

Perhaps it is because she lost her life, or because the tragedy occurred within living memory, or because she is someone with whom we can more easily identify today. Whatever the reason, she should surely haunt the folk memory of what was briefly her adopted city.

The restored Castletroy cemetery stands as a monument not just to the former Jewish community but to Limerick's sorrow for its sins against them. Now that Ambassador Sofer is taking such a direct interest in Limerick, however, it is appropriate to take further steps on the road to atonement for anti-semitism in all places and in all ages.

ONE way would be to establish a Jewish heritage centre on Shannonside where peoples of all faiths and of none could share the Jewish experience.

Limerick's Jewish community is now almost extinct yet there remain among us distinguished families of partly-Jewish extraction. Society should treasure their Jewishness. It ennobles us all.

Moreover, the heritage project deserves to be given a title of honour. What better than that of the woman in the unmarked grave, Elsa Reininger?



Diplomatic credentials: Ambassador Sofer in Limerick

(L)

The man for the job

HE has all the diplomatic credentials: presence, persuasiveness, style, intelligence, charm and wit. And he has more: integrity. He is a man of principle.

And it is that integrity, fused with mental flexibility, which is his primary strength. Mark Sofer, as evidenced during his first visit to Limerick, makes a wonderful Ambassador for Israel. It is just as well: Israel's case has historically tended to go by default.

This is mystifying considering Ireland and Israel have so much in common: exile, persecution nation-building in a hostile atmosphere, faith in God. Ireland has nothing, thank God, to compare with the Holocaust but the fact remains that in several respects the historical experience of the Irish most closely resembles that of Jews in general

and Israelis in particular.

Moreover Ireland and Israel share fundamental political values. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, not an oligarchy which as a matter of routine publicly maims suspected thieves, beheads alleged killers and stones women accused of adultery. Yet official Ireland has on occasion seemed less sympathetic to Tel Aviv than to terrorists.

HOWEVER, the presentation of Israel's position has improved with the appointment of her first resident Ambassador here, Zvi Gabay, and will certainly continue to do so with the advent of Ambassador Sofer. He is upbeat but history has taught the Israelis that survival comes only with a long struggle. Ireland, of all countries, should be the first to embrace the Zionist cause.