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Remembering

Published Date: 10 August 2008

By Staff reporter

The weekend of the 8th August 1981, was bright and sunny, a good day for a wedding. The family and friends of the young couple gathered in St.

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Mary's Church in Creggan, thanked God for the sun shining in through the Church. It had not been a good year. Sorrow at the deaths of eight young men on hunger strike and other deaths resulting from the States response to protests on the streets, lay like a dark cloud over the entire North.

The couple standing on the altar were about to exchange their wedding vows when the silence in the Church was broken by the sound of a loud speaker outside the Church. It was the voice of the late Barney Mc Fadden announcing the death of Tomas McElwee, the ninth prisoner to die on hunger striker in the H Blocks. The sound of the speaker car faded and a quiet weeping filled the Church.

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It was heartbreaking for all there but especially the guests who were active in the Relatives Action Committee. Despite their best efforts, nine prisoners had died the slow agonising death of hunger strike.

Twenty seven years on the memory of that day and that time is a story waiting to be told; the story of how ordinary young people and their families took on a vindictive British Government, and its Six County entity, who attempted to criminalise that generation of Irishmen and women, who took up arms in opposition to the continuing British occupation of the North.

The widespread brutality and inhuman treatment of prisoners in the H Blocks, Long Kesh, many as young as sixteen, and immortalised in the words of the late Cardinal Tomas O Fiach, who described conditions there as akin "to the hell holes of Calcutta", began in 1976 and would end with the deaths of ten men on hunger strike.

It was to break down the wall of silence created around the treatment of the prisoners in the H Blocks, that ordinary women, from a generation literally tied to the kitchen sinks, suddenly found themselves catapulted into the forefront of a campaign to defend the rights of their children and a community that the British Government had labelled criminal and subversive. The Relatives Action Committees set up by the Mothers, wives and sisters of prisoners, would become the vanguard of an intense and painful struggle by prisoners and would subsequently see the British Government indicted by people in countries right across the globe.

The women, who banded together in the RAC, belonged to a generation that lived through the sixties when the Nationalists people were struggling to get off their knees. They encouraged and supported the non violence of the Civil Rights Association for they instinctively knew that the generations to come , the children now growing up in Derry and elsewhere in the North, would not accept the second hand citizenship, foisted on previous generations.

The events of August 1969, the Battle of the Bogside and the attacks on the Catholic community by Unionist militia, forewarned of desperate times ahead, but they held the line and tried to persuade their children and partners that non violence was the way ahead, even when British soldiers were turning their communities into prison camps. Many would join or become supporters of the newly formed SDLP.

When internment and Bloody Sunday threatened the non violence of the Civil Rights Movement they hoped that the use of physical force would not become the only form of resistance to the military might of the British Army on the streets, and prayed that the war declared by the British against the IRA, would not come to their doors.

It did and they watched as their sons and daughters were dragged for their beds in early morning raids. Most would end up in the H Blocks and Armagh Woman's prison. They would find out in the months ahead that their children were being kept naked in solitary confinement, in cells without even a bed and at the mercy of sectarian prison officers, who thought nothing of stubbing out cigarette butts on the backs of the naked men and boys.

Women who had rarely left their homes, abandoned the kitchen sinks and organised themselves into action committees. The megaphone diplomacy of the Relatives Action Committees, who in bare feet and clad only in blankets to symbolise the conditions of the prisoners, began to penetrate the wall of silence around the H Blocks.

They travelled the length and breadth of Ireland standing in the now familiar blankets outside Churches and in town centres.

In 1977, a group of Mothers took the campaign to Europe. As they stood outside the British Airways Offices in the Champs de Elysee, with a mural depicting the conveyor belt system of arrest, ill treatment, Diplock Courts and imprisonment in the H Blocks, traffic came to a standstill.

They stood in bare feet and blankets outside British Embassies in The Hague, Brussels, and Geneva.

Another group travelled to the United States and despite the concerted efforts of both the British and Irish Government officials, the story of the treatment of the H Block prisoners as told simply by relatives, appeared on the front page of The Washington Post.

In New York, a group of Irish American women inspired by the campaign of the Relatives Action Committee mounted a picket on the British Embassy which would last for five years and force staff and even Thatcher, to use helicopters to gain access to the Building.

Stop the H Block torture appeared on neon signs on the famous Times Square.

The women of the Relatives Action Committees became skilled orators, standing on platforms in the now recognisable grey blankets, in major cities around the world.

They visited the European Parliament as the guest of the late Neil Blaney and were welcomed by John

Hume. They addressed the Dutch parliament in The Hague and gave the sermon at a Mass in the underground chapel of the French Metro system.

On the home front they entered a float in the 1978 Mayors Parade, the Irish Country Cottage complete with spinning wheel winning third prize.

It would be consequently dismantled in Ferryquay Street, revealing a naked man in a cage, much to the chagrin of the organisers and the RUC.

The women of no status, whose lives evolved around family and homes became the most disruptive force in Irish society during the turbulent years of the campaign for political status.

In 1978, the then Secretary of State, Roy Mason, stated that he was not worried about the situation in the H Blocks, "as we are getting on top of the military situation and there will be less and less sympathy for prisoners who will be quietly forgotten about."

Next Sunday, on the 27th Anniversary of the hunger strike, the Relatives Action Committees from all over the North, will lead the commemoration to the memory of the ten men who died and the prisoners who endured the tortures of the H Blocks. Who will remember Roy Mason?

The full article contains 1176 words and appears in Journal Sunday newspaper.

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