

The Children from Operation Shamrock
Historical Context, Testimonies
and Fictionalized Memory Fragments

Monica Brandis

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DEUTSCH-IRISCHE STUDIEN
LÉANN NA GEARMÁINE AGUS NA HÉIREANN

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Preface

My first contact with Operation Shamrock was in 2013 when the German Embassy invited journalists to the Gathering of the participants of Operation Shamrock. Living in Cork at the time and hosting a weekly radio show, I was interested in people who were connected to both Ireland and Germany to interview for my broadcast. The participants of Operation Shamrock seemed like ideal guests, and the humanitarian initiative itself was invitingly unknown to me. Operation Shamrock placed around 400 German children, now in their 70s and 80s, in the care of Irish families in the aftermath of World War II. The children came predominantly from North Rhine-Westphalia. Most children returned to Germany after a period of three years; fifty stayed in Ireland permanently.

The children were brought to Ireland in several transports. The first children arrived on July 27, 1946. By June 1947, 421 young Germans had found a new home in Ireland. The reunion took place at the Glencree Centre for Peace and Reconciliation. It was a festive day with many speeches, a mass, even a play, but what really stuck with me was looking into the faces of and listening to the testimonials of the participants. They seemed extremely present and very conscious of the fact that Operation Shamrock had had an important impact on their lives.

In 1997, the German Embassy worked with the Irish Red Cross to organize a reunion of the former children in Dublin and Glencree. Participant Elisabeth O’Gorman played an instrumental role as she initiated contact between the former children. The reunion was attended by 160 participants (and 180 members of the foster families). Irish President Mary Robinson and German President Roman Herzog gave speeches that illustrated the importance of Operation Shamrock not only for the official relationship between the two countries, but for its far-reaching influence on the lives of the children and their foster parents. The second reunion in 2013 took place as part of the “Gathering Ireland”. Only 21 former participants attended, as some had passed on and others were no longer fit to travel.

I realized that time was of essence if the memories of *The Children from Operation Shamrock* were to be gathered and preserved for posterity, not only as individual testimonials, but also to provide a more informed and detailed interpretation of circumstances by adding these micro-historical perspectives to official history. With logistical support from the Centre of Peace and Reconciliation in Glencree and financial support from the German Embassy in Dublin and the Irish Embassy in Berlin, I started the endeavour, which resulted in the exhibition of interviews and finally in this book. Photographer Sidarta Corral and graphic designer Frank Lietz contributed largely to the visual realization of the interviews, each in their own right and talent.

Initially I collected the testimonials of fourteen former children, then another four appeared, and in 2019 yet another two participants volunteered to be interviewed.¹

1 The information provided by my last two interview partners, Erika Postir and Hans Brömme, has been informally added to this book. They are not included in the inter-

The participants of Operation Shamrock are eager to talk about their lives to make sure that this episode of German-Irish history and the generosity of the Irish people is remembered.² In order to bear witness to the events of Operation Shamrock and the situation in post-war Europe, many former children have travelled to the two reunions and to the ten openings of *The Children from Operation Shamrock*, sometimes together with their families, sometimes individually. In addition, several of them have spoken about their participation in Operation Shamrock in schools or churches.

What had been planned as a single showing in Glencree in May 2015 (and possibly at the Irish Embassy in Berlin), developed into a travelling exhibition. *The Children from Operation Shamrock* has so far been shown in ten places. More institutions have signaled their willingness to host the exhibition. The public is riveted by the life stories of the participants, and academic circles are becoming more and more interested in this under-researched episode in the relations between Ireland and Germany. Several participants and I have stayed in close contact. Two of them have sent me their collections of pictures, documents and belongings relating to Operation Shamrock, so I can make sure these remain preserved for posterity.

I developed questions and listened to my interviewees with the academic interest of a historian, the curiosity of a journalist and the empathy of a Gestalt therapist. The more I found out about Operation Shamrock, the more I needed to know. I contacted archives and libraries to continue my historical and literary research around the project. This book is only a first milestone. Important aspects of Operation Shamrock remain largely unexplored: the composition of membership in the Save the Germany Children Society, the background and lives of the participants who have passed away as well as those of the French, Polish and Austrian children who took part in Operation Shamrock, the supervision of the German children by authorities during their stay in Ireland and also an examination of the perspective of the Irish families, to mention just a few.³

While the interviews themselves provide rich details, the children's emotional responses (the taste of the first orange, the loss of a shoe during an air raid, the tears provoked by literally being taken out of a brother's arms) could only be touched on. During a Heinrich Böll Residency on Achill Island in the summer of 2019, I wrote eighteen short stories about specific episodes in all the participants' early lives, from a child's point of view, based on true incidents yet creatively transformed. The names of the children are not mentioned in the short stories for two reasons. By filtering the children's experiences through my artistic lenses, the happenings are no longer

view section (nor have their experiences inspired a short story) because due to COVID-19 their pictures have not been taken yet.

- 2 In fact, I usually get to select two participants to talk about their experience at the opening night of the exhibition on *The Children from Operation Shamrock*. There is a certain interest on the participants' part, expressed with an intensity depending on their individual temperaments, that everybody gets their fair share of opening nights.
- 3 In late 2020 I plan to start a more thorough academic project on the subject.

uniquely theirs, but have been turned into fictionalized history. Secondly, I feel that these moments in time convey a universal experience, those of the most vulnerable in the hardest of times. Therefore, this book is a somewhat unusual compilation of historical analysis, oral history interviews and creative writing.

The book touches upon the complex friendship between the Irish and the German nation that led to the foundation of the Save the German Children Society in Dublin in 1945 and subsequently to Operation Shamrock. It focuses on the children's war time experience, their stay in Ireland and either their return to Germany or the early years of adult life in Ireland. The book takes a critical look at the organization of Operation Shamrock and its consequences on the children's everyday life and well-being, based on literature review and the children's perceptions. Through linking patterns in the children's trajectories to their retrospective evaluation of their participation in Operation Shamrock, the book distills positive and negative aspects of cross-cultural fostering. Through a tentative analysis of the influence of Operation Shamrock on the children's life paths (and the yet scholarly unexamined life paths of their host families), the book evaluates the benefits, tensions and failures of this humanitarian initiative.

As worldwide military conflicts, wars and pandemics continue to separate children from their families, more research is needed to guarantee the best treatment possible for unaccompanied under-age refugees or children adopted in transcultural contexts. By critically examining the experiences of *The Children from Operation Shamrock*, this book hopes to provide some insight into best practice for creating a sense of well-being and a stable identity in children forced to leave their homes and their families.

I thank the Goethe-Institut in Dublin for supporting the publication of this book. All translations, if not otherwise indicated, were done by me.

1. Context: The circumstances of Operation Shamrock and the perceptions of the German participants

1.1. The start of Operation Shamrock

On October 16, 1945, not even six months after WW II had ended, pediatrician Dr. Kathleen Farrell (née Murphy)⁴ organized a meeting in Shelbourne Hall in Dublin. Unanimously, the 350 attendees agreed to found the Save the German Children Society. Dr. Farrell, who came from a family of staunch IRA supporters, was captain of the branch of Cumann na mBan (the Irish Republican women's paramilitary organization) at the University College Dublin. Dr. Farrell began to collect funds for German orphans during the war. To commemorate her efforts, she was later awarded with the Cross of Merit by the German Government.⁵ Dr. Farrell's daughter Isolde Halpin became the first secretary of the Society and was very active in the fight to obtain permission to bring the children to Ireland. Another noteworthy member of the Save the German Children Society is Dr. Kathleen Lynn. The medical doctor and political activist, who was partly educated in Düsseldorf, Germany, was vice-chairman of the Society.⁶

Dr. Farrell's allegiance to the illegal Irish Republican Army was indeed strong enough to grant refuge to a man on the run. Dr. Farrell and other members of her family hid IRA Chief of Staff Charles Kerins (as well as manuscripts and weapons) in their homes in 1944⁷. The IRA's ties to Nazi intelligence were considered a threat to the Irish neutrality during World War II, and consequently a Special Branch Division of the Gardai went in hard after the IRA. In 1942 Special Branch Detective Sergeant Denis O'Brien was killed. After being arrested, Charles Kerins was tried, convicted and executed for the murder of O'Brien.

The relationship between Ireland and Germany cannot be considered without casting an eye at both nations' histories with the United Kingdom. Ireland and Germany had both political and strategic reasons to forge an alliance, mainly in regard to their respective relationships with Britain. Ireland saw Germany as a possible ally on its quest for autonomy; Germany was interested in Ireland for geo-political reasons. The concept that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend" began to influence German-Irish relations during the World War I. In 1914, Sir Roger Casement, a former British diplomat, reached an agreement with the German Empire to approach Irish soldiers fighting in the British Army who had become prisoners of war in Germany. The aim

4 Some sources refer to Kathleen Farrell by her maiden name Kathleen Murphy.

5 Papers of Dr Kathleen Farrell (née Murphy), UCD Archives, 1945.

6 Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, "Celebrating Irish women: Kathleen Lynn". *Royal Irish Academy*, 5 February, 2020.

7 Dervla Murphy, *A Place Apart*. London: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 26-34.

was to form a military unit (outfitted with German uniforms, decorated with shamrock and harp⁸) which would be sent to Ireland to fight for the nation's independence. Only 56 men from over 2000 Irish soldiers volunteered. The German Empire agreed to also provide weapons and ammunition for the Irish Easter Rising, unsuccessfully as it turned out. The ship carrying the weapons, the *Aud*, was scuttled by the German Captain and her crew after having been sought and caught by the British Navy. Roger Casement was arrested and executed for high treason in 1916, and by the time of the Easter rising, the Irish Brigade was defunct.⁹

The complex relationship, however, between Ireland, Germany and the United Kingdom continued into the 1940s. Prime minister Éamon de Valera managed a veritable tightrope act during World War II. He succeeded in keeping Ireland neutral during the war. At the same time, he cooperated with the British, without the Germans catching on. All the while a substantial number of Irish people supported German politics – and sometimes its spies.¹⁰ In 1940, in an attempt to deepen ties with Nazi Germany, Acting Irish Republican Army (IRA) Chief of Staff Stephen Hayes sanctioned and forwarded “Plan Kathleen” to the Germans. Plan Kathleen outlined the somewhat amateur invasion of Northern Ireland by the Germans and “was so ludicrous that it had been rejected out of hand by the *Abwehr*”.¹¹ According to historian Enno Stephan, the infamous German spy Dr. Hermann Görtz expressed doubts about the strength and the capability of the IRA in general and held no faith in Plan Kathleen.¹²

The German spies sent to Ireland were neither the brightest nor the most ingenious of men. Military historian Mark Hull mentions bad English and inexperienced cover identities, for example arthritic Ernst Weber-Drohl, a former professional wrestler and circus strongman, who supposedly was searching for two of his five illegitimate children who were the result of his liaison with an Irish girl. Hull lists a number of blunders, such as Hermann Görtz asking the Garda for directions to an IRA contact

8 Lar Joye, “Casement’s Irish Brigade Uniform”. *History Ireland*, January/February, 2012.

9 Justin Dolan Stover, “The Afterlife of Roger Casement’s Irish Brigade, 1916-1922”. *BREAC A Digital Journal of Irish Studies*, 1 April, 2016.

10 Eunan O’Halpin (ed. and introduction), *MI5 and Ireland 1939-1945: The Official History*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003.

11 Joseph T. Carroll, *Ireland in the War Years, 1939-1945*. Newton Abbot: David and Charles/New York: Crane, Russak, 1975, p. 61.

12 In Ireland, Görtz discovered that the IRA had neither enough weapons nor any functioning leadership. He described Stephen Hayes as a man with no dignity due to fear and alcohol, somebody who is at the most “a retired soccer player” (p. 122). Görtz referred to Plan Kathleen as “childish” (p. 108). In: Enno Stephan, *Geheimauftrag Irland: Deutsche Agenten im irischen Untergrundkampf 1939-1945*. Oldenburg, Hamburg: Gerhard Stalling Verlag, 1961.