

LIVING IN THE RIGHT LANGUAGE By Roy

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Irmgard in An Cheathrú Rua, Connamara, summer of 1959 - with Hanni (Hugo) (left) wearing lederhosen, Maria (right) and Ita in the pram

'I heard someone once say that your childhood runs after you like a little dog.' So reflects the protagonist of Hugo Hamilton's latest novel, *Hand in the Fire* - a Serbian immigrant to Dublin, with a personal and national history which he is determined to forget. Hamilton had published *The Speckled People* a few years earlier, to tremendous acclaim; a fictionalised memoir which similarly explores the terrain of scarred childhood, forever snapping at your heels. 'Hanni' grows up in two languages, German and Irish, but is surrounded by the signs and sounds of a third - English - which is forbidden by his obsessive father. The German past of the narrator's mother Irmgard, from an anti-Nazi family whose only recourse was 'the silent negative', is presented to the child's eye as a flickering black-and-white film, while the present is delineated in a continuous drama of epiphanic scenes. The book's translation into a theatrical format seems utterly natural.

The Hamilton/Ó hUrmoltaigh household in a Dublin seaside suburb fifty years ago might seem spectacularly *sui generis*: Irmgard's German cake-

making rituals, Seán's efforts to create Irish-Irelander home industries, the insults about Nazis hurled casually by boys on the seafront. The children are forbidden to play with anyone who does not speak Irish, effectively condemning them to a kind of internal imprisonment, though relatives visit and drop odd bits of family history into the mix. But Hamilton's enclosed childhood also suggests the memory of something larger: the long connection between Irish national sentiment and an idea of Germany. In cultural terms, it goes back to monastic settlements, musical influences and borrowings, and the contribution of scholars like Kuno Meyer to the study of medieval Irish history and literature,

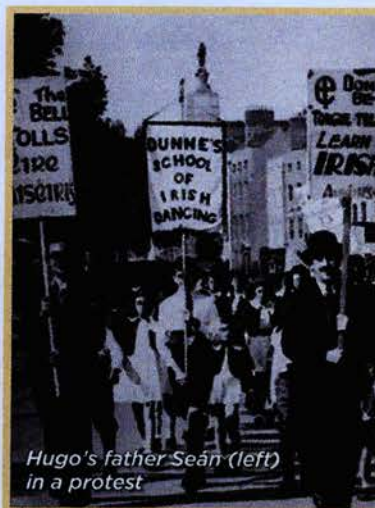
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as well as the idealising identification with Ireland by twentieth-century German intellectuals such as Heinrich Boll. Politically, a sympathetic connection was based on the venerable truism that my enemy's enemy is my friend. It was reflected in the hopes held out by Irish nationalists during World War I for aid from their 'gallant allies in Europe', and the efforts made by Roger Casement and Joseph Plunkett to raise military support for the 1916 Rising in Berlin. Subsequently, Irish republicans in the 1920s evinced fellow-feeling for a Germany defeated and reduced by Britain; Maud Gonne, among others, wrote articles comparing the Sudetenland to the Six Counties, and blaming the ills of both countries on Britain's manipulation of Jewish 'usury'.

From the 1930s, such attitudes mutated easily into organisations like General O'Duffy's 'Irish Friends of Germany', the openly anti-semitic People's National Party (who announced that 'practically all the Fianna Fáil TD's are in the clutches of the Jews'), and generalised pro-Axis sympathies among Irish nationalists after 1939. The pro-Nazi Berlin broadcasts by the novelist Francis Stuart, republished and closely analysed in recent years, supply one vivid reminder of this mind-set; and another is the short-lived fascistic party Ailtirí

na hAiséirghe ('Architects of the Resurrection'), whose 'Ceannaire', or Führer, was Gearóid Ó Cuinnegáin. This is the Gearóid who materialises, with his bullying rhetoric intact, in the Ó hUrmoltaigh household.

By the time of Hanni's (Hugo's) youth, Ó Cuinnegáin was yesterday's man, and Ailtirí a thing of the recent past. But during the war it developed from its origins as an entryist Gaelic League branch in 1940, emerging as a fully-fledged party in 1942, and attracting support from respectables such as the ex-Cumann na nGaedheal ministers Ernest Blythe and J. J. Walsh and the film-maker Liam Ó Laoghaire. (Blythe particularly inveighed against 'foreign ideas of democratic parliamentarianism'.) They won nine seats in the local elections of 1945, gaining 11,000 first-preference votes. In 1943 the Ulster poet John Hewitt watched Ó Cuinnegáin orating in O'Connell Street, 'a pocket Hitler with bulging veins and raucous voice'. His erraticism, abrasiveness and rhetorical incontinence alienated many supporters in the end, and Seán MacBride's new post-war party Clann na Poblachta stole many of Aiséirghe's clothes. But their ideas of Ireland as a 'missionary-ideological state', the notion of a purely Gaelic New Order capital at Tara, the policy of ending emigration by simply forbidding people to leave, the plan to over-run Northern Ireland with a huge conscript army, and above all the blueprint to outlaw the English language, echo down to the Ó hUrmoltaigh parlour in 1950s Dún Laoghaire.



Hugo's father Seán (left) in a protest

The child's cultural universe is skewed into a world where Fruit Gums are untranslatable and therefore immoral, Irish bees show their patriotism by not emigrating, 'listening in English' is a punishable offence, Hamiltons were once an Irish sect called Ó hUrmoltaigh, a grandfather who served in the British navy is a shameful secret, and threats lurk in every walk to the sea wall. But though laughter is dangerous and has to be confined, it throbs subversively below the surface; it is one of Irmgard's secret weapons. Another is love. An 'Irish

yes' is possible as well as a 'German no'; if Seán 'dies in the wrong language' his son will live in several, all of them 'right'. As in *Hand in the Fire*, Hugo Hamilton is powerfully equipped to invoke an Ireland where identity is necessarily 'speckled', mixed, absorbed. But it is also a country where - again, as in the novel - the bourgeois ease

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of Dún Laoghaire conceals undercurrents of violence and threat, where the past is too painful not to be suppressed, and where everything can be successfully built, repaired, bodged, except your memory. 'My mother's sadness and my father's madness' will stay encoded in their son's imagination. No writer, perhaps, could ask for more: the inheritance of a mastery of codes, signs and linguistic double-takes, along with an instinctive knowledge that forbidden books will survive burning, and rules and curfews are made to be broken.

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Franz, Maria (Hugo's brother and sister) with Hugo

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