

When extortion and murder were their stock in trade
By Michael McDowell

A few weeks past, a newspaper story caught my eye. A stamp collection was to be sold this month by Sotheby's in London and it is anticipated that it will realise £4 million sterling.

My immediate reflection, probably that of most people, was that we live in a very strange world where insignificant pieces of paper designed and used for the most mundane purpose, could, by reason of rarity, achieve a colossal value in the highly rarefied philatelic market place. All the more so when we consider that stamps are a relatively modern invention with a history of less than 200 years. While diamonds, gold, and fine art also command great prices in rarefied market places, stamps are unusual because they had such a negligible value when first printed and sold.

I then set to wondering what kind of person could amass a stamp collection of such value and noted that the particular stamp collection being sold at Sotheby's was part of the estate of a life peer, Lord Steinberg of Belfast. His family had decided to donate proceeds from the sale to a number of causes and charities with which he had been associated during his lifetime including a fund that he had started with the aim of helping to rebuild Old Trafford, the celebrated Lancashire County Cricket Club grounds.

The very name, Lord Steinberg of Belfast, surprised me. As somebody with a reasonable grasp of current affairs, I have to confess that I knew little of him.

It turns out that Leonard Steinberg was born in Belfast in August, 1936. His grandfather had fled the anti-Jewish tsarist pogroms in Riga for the safety of Belfast. By doing so he saved his children from the Holocaust. As a member of the small Belfast Jewish community, Leonard was brought up by his father who ran several small businesses including a dairy shop and an opticians. Before his father died in 1954, young Leonard, aged 18, was running a small unlicensed betting business at the back of the dairy shop in Belfast.

By 1977, when this business had grown to 16 licensed betting shops in Belfast, the Provisional IRA shot Steinberg five times on the doorstep of his house on the Antrim Road.

His "*crime*" in the eyes of the IRA was that he was a businessman, he was Jewish, he was a unionist, and, most heinous of all, he would not pay protection money to the IRA, which, in those days and right up until very recently, quietly extorted vast sums from business people under threat of violence.

Having survived the shooting attempt in 1977, Leonard Steinberg understandably left Belfast to live in northern England. But he remained at heart and in accent a Belfastman.

His betting business went on to become one of Britain's largest – Stanley Leisure. Following his move to Manchester, Steinberg bought 100 betting shops from Ladbrokes and he grew a gambling business which came to include 45 casinos and 500 betting shops employing about 7,000 people. His resulting wealth financed his passion for philately.

Predictably, Leonard Steinberg in England gravitated towards the Conservative Party in Britain and eventually became a party deputy treasurer as well as president of Lancashire County Cricket Club. When the Tories duly made him a life peer in 2004, Leonard Steinberg adopted the title "*Lord Steinberg of Belfast*".

Leonard Steinberg was not the only Belfast Jewish businessman targeted by the IRA. Three years after Steinberg's shooting, his good friend, fellow Jew and antiques dealer, Leonard Kaitcer, a married man with two children, was abducted from his Belfast home. The IRA demanded £1 million ransom for his return. An American cousin flew to Ireland to conduct negotiations for his release but the IRA panicked, shot Leonard Kaitcer in the head, and dumped his body in West Belfast.

Of course, neither Leonard Steinberg nor Leonard Kaitcer was targeted simply because they were Jewish. But it probably helped. They were targeted by the IRA for murderous extortion because they were both wealthy and socially vulnerable. Many others were targeted in a similar fashion. Don Tidey, Galen Weston, Tiede Herrema and Ben Dunne are some of the lucky, better remembered southern survivors of the cruel policy of kidnapping and murder of businessmen by the IRA. Gda Gary Sheehan and Pte Patrick Kelly were murdered while trying to rescue Don Tidey in Derrada Woods.

Extortion by the IRA became so common place (and the Loyalist thugs were at it too) that the payment of protection money came to be regarded as a legitimate business expense even for tax purposes in Belfast. Apart from those businessmen, many more modest targets for extortion paid with their lives for refusing to pay money to the Provisional IRA.

All this reminds us that in the cracked mirror of their crazy, warped ideology, the Provisional IRA had convinced themselves that the IRA Army Council somehow was itself the legitimate government of Ireland and the sole repository of the powers of the Republic established in 1916!

That madcap theory, as set out in the Provos' volunteers handbook, depends in turn on a meeting on 8th December, 1938, between some former members of the Dáil and some members of the IRA. The IRA claims that at this meeting an obscure minority of the many surviving former backbench members of the long defunct Second Dail elected in 1921, who in 1938 now claimed to be the "*Government of the Republic*", in some manner "*delegated*" their "*sacred trust*" to the Army Council of the IRA until a 32-county Republic was finally established, "*confident ...that in their every action towards its consummation they will be inspired by the high ideals and chivalry of our martyred comrades*".

Perhaps there is still, unbeknownst to us, another rival Government composed of people who have in total secrecy inherited directly the sacred trust of Robert Emmet's republic of 1803 or the Fenian republic of 1867. Who knows?

On top of that nonsense, one has to add a layer of savage, revolutionary marxism espoused by the core IRA leadership from the 1970s onwards. A marxist world-view convinced those grim-faced, beret-wearing coffin-carriers that murdering businessmen who would not hand over their money to the IRA was not merely legitimate in terms of this so-called "republican" theory of governmental succession but also justified in terms of marxist revolutionary theory. A potent cocktail of madness and evil very far removed from "*high ideals and chivalry*".

Anyhow, on such ludicrous, demented ideology rested the justification some forty years later for killing Leonard Kaitcer and shooting Leonard Steinberg. The Irish Republic was "*entitled*", the Provos believed, to exact taxes and revenues from the well to do – by extortion under threat of murder and arson. Needs must! Or, as Lenin would have put it, it was all part of "*what is to be done*".

These actions, of course, could not be "*crimes*" – because they were economic actions authorised by the Army Council who, of course, as custodians of the "*sacred trust*" embodied the legitimacy and exercised the authority and powers of the Irish Republic.

We are led to hope that the Mahon Tribunal will report in the coming months. There will be justified breast-beating and angry, if ritual, condemnation when that tribunal enunciates that which we now know to be true, namely, that a small but sizeable minority of Irish public representatives behaved corruptly in relation to the planning process over many decades.

To the fore among the breast-beaters will be household names, now elected to the Dáil and to the Assembly in Northern Ireland (and some of them to Parliament at Westminster). They will claim that they themselves weren't ever into bribes. They hope that we will forget that their politics were financed by murder-based extortion of fellow Belfastmen like Steinberg and Kaitcer.

It would be a salutary thing if, while listening to post-Mahon "*politics of condemnation*" (something to which Gerry Adams, for instance, was at one time notoriously averse), we listen carefully for the voices of those who were personally actively engaged in directing the campaign of murder and extortion-base fundraising that killed Leonard Kaitcer and nearly killed Leonard Steinberg.

Those paragons of virtue, remarkably, now have the neck to pontificate on corruption and misconduct in public life, confident that amnesiac media sheep will have long since forgotten that they, personally, directed a movement financed by the murder of innocent businessmen, threatening of their families, stealing or destruction of their property, and

extortion of vast sums of money from a great number of people, all to further their political ends, to feather their own nests and to provide themselves with “*walking around money*”.

Above all, perhaps we should remember that some of those who wish to be respectable household names in our new political order still have the blood of Leonard Kaitcer on their hands and have never apologised for taking *his* life – while demanding and extracting apologies from all around them.

Perhaps some in the media will bring home to the public on both sides of the border the immense moral gulf which separates the marxist thugs in the Provos who directed the murder for his money of Leonard Kaitcer from the patriotic founders of our State. Perhaps some brave, enterprising broadcaster or journalist will now make a “*lift the lid*” documentary on the Provos’ fundraising campaign of extortion and murder. Don’t hold your breath.