

Northern Ireland: Living a Normal Life



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Peace Counts *project*



Joe Doherty and Peter McGuire



The gym is filled with shouts from boys playing soccer. In the foyer, where the girls hang out, disco beats pound the walls. In the middle is 48 year-old Joe Doherty, calm but also a little bit out of place. Cell phones constantly ring, and the kids eat green chips out of a bag for dinner. Over the years when Joe was in jail, things changed in the streets of New Lodge in Northern Ireland.



Joe was 15 when he experienced how British soldiers threw tear gas on his street, forced their way into his house in the middle of the night, and beat up his parents. Before that, Joe had already spied for the Irish Republican Army. He told the IRA the movement of the soldiers, the hated occupational troops. Joe was proud that attacks on enemies were prepared based on his information.



At age 17, he became a soldier, as he called it. The British called them terrorists. When police found explosives in his car, the young IRA soldier was sentenced to twelve years in prison. After serving two-thirds of the sentence, he was set free: then in his mid-twenties, full of feelings of revenge, a living time bomb. Joe began to plan the first fatal attack.



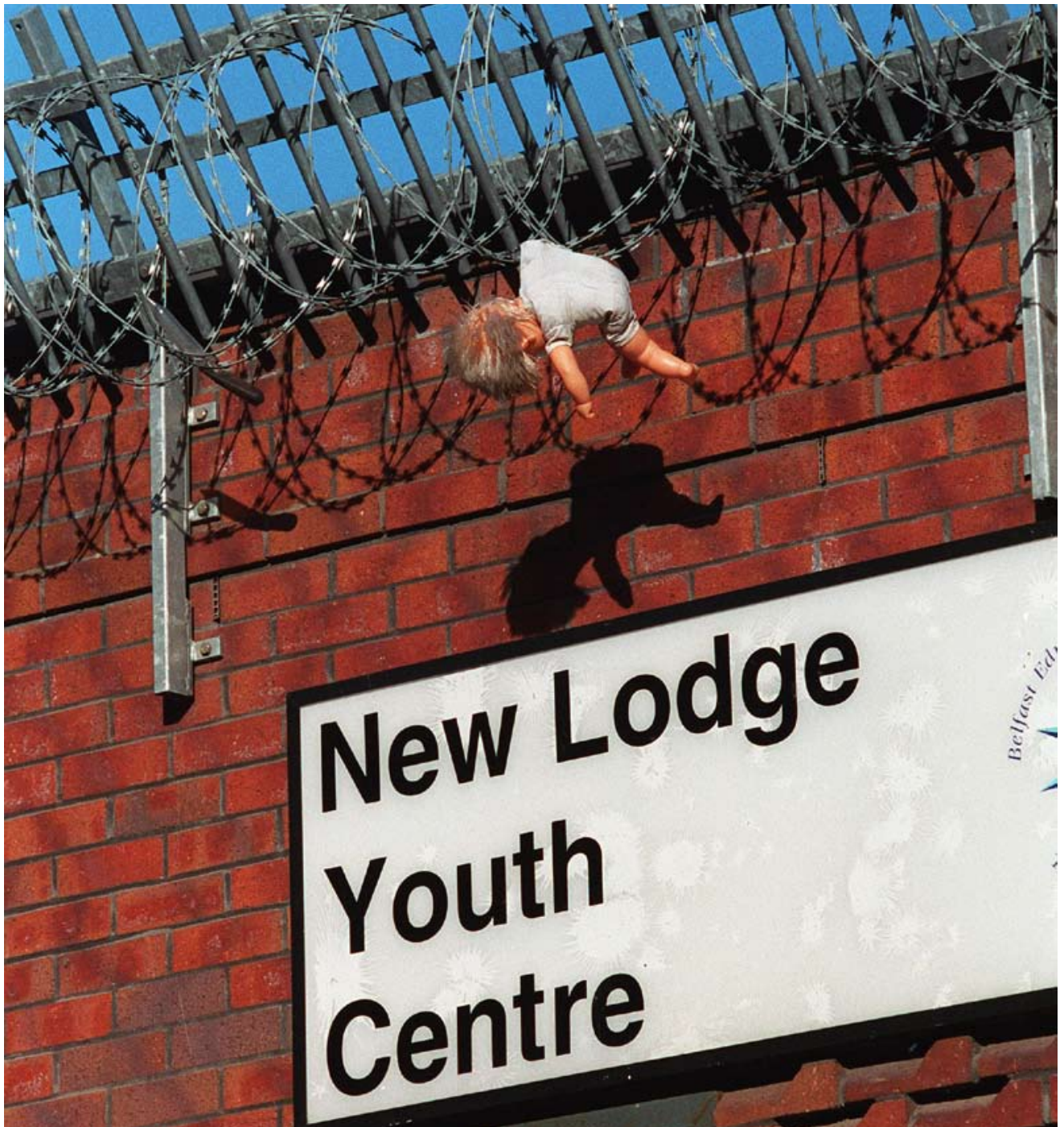
Today his thoughts always wander back to a certain dead man who had changed Joe's life. His name was Richard Westmacott, and he was a British elite soldier stationed in Belfast and was responsible for fighting the IRA. On May 5, 1980 the captain was shot, after turning just 28 years old. The assassination took place on the street near, what is today, the youth club. One of the three snipers was Joe Doherty. "We were all responsible, and I am sorry for each person who had to die."



He went to prison and broke out. He then fled to the USA, but was then taken into custody again. They painted a huge portrait of him on a wall on New Lodge Road. He was a hero...When he was released from jail one year after the Good Friday agreement, he demanded that his picture on the wall be painted over. He then started working on youth social problems.



“When I was in prison, my parents wrote and said that many kids were hanging around on the street corners, taking drugs and getting into trouble. Then I knew what I wanted to do when I came out,” said Joe. The young people, who grow up today in the poor Catholic neighborhoods of Belfast, have little to hope for in the future. Most of them drop out of school, traineeship positions are scarce, and unemployment is high.



When the schools are closed for summer break, and there is nothing else to do, the kids from New Lodge start wars again. This one is against the protestants in the next neighborhood. The teenagers gather for the fight at Interface, the middle point between the two neighborhoods. They throw rocks and sometimes Molotov cocktails. Joe Doherty called it a rebellion out of boredom against the boredom. The underground offers everything that seems out of reach the legal way: a lot of money, free time, willing girls and the power that a weapon bears. Compared to being unemployed, this lifestyle sounds incredible attractive.



“Young people on both sides are in danger of drifting towards the influence of the paramilitaries.” Joe wants to help prevent this, and he works overtime to attain his goal. As a social worker, Joe Doherty wants to protect his kids from the downward spiral of violence. He doesn’t want to preach to them but will rather give them practical help, which includes taking computer courses, going swimming somewhere outside of the neighborhood, learning how to apply to jobs, and playing soccer with the boys. He takes them in from the streets and out from the influence of the underground groups. He provides social counseling and oversees a youth club.



“Fighting leads to a dead end,” said Joe, and he knows dead ends very well! It was a dead end to hope to drive out the British army with terrorism. Each grave of a soldier was a dead end. Even his jail cell was a dead end. Joe has gained great respect for his work with young people, which has helped lead him and the kids away from dead ends.



Joe does not preach non-violence. He still has some contact to the IRA. It is a cold period of peace. He teaches the kids not to provoke the others, the Protestants, but: "if you are attacked, you must defend yourselves." He said that he never wants to see Catholics being harassed again, but at the same time, he is afraid that the "troubles" could blaze up again.



Peter McGuire, Joe's counterpart in the Protestant camp, shares his concerns. Peter has a rosy face with a full, soft mouth and nickel-rimmed glasses. In some ways, he resembles a Protestant pastor more than a terrorist.



When the 36 year-old reflects, he presses his hands together. And he reflects quite often. Sometimes he thinks about the children who were burned because they were baptized in the wrong denomination. Sometimes it is about the kidnappings and the attacks which he was involved in. Sometimes he recollects his career as a terrorist. It is hard to imagine that he attacked, threatened, handcuffed, and abducted people. Nevertheless, it is true.



When his fellow terrorists threw firebombs at a Catholic house, three children died in the blaze. "That shocked me. The little children could have also grown up in our family. What did they have to do with the "troubles?" he said.



A little later the leader of the Ulster Volunteer Force imposed the highest punishment possible on a comrade. Peter was instructed to lure the man into the woods and to shoot him. "The guy went with me, although he knew what it was all about. As an outcast, he could not go anywhere in Northern Ireland anymore. He was completely distraught." Peter could not pull the trigger. He told him to go into hiding abroad. He asked himself: "What has this war done to me?"



As an adopted child, who was frequently pushed around by his parents and siblings, he always wanted only one thing: control over his own life. Nevertheless in the underground, others made the decisions for him and even demanded the death of his friend. That was in 1997. Since then, Peter McGuire has gradually withdrawn from the Ulster Volunteer Force.



Today he proposes political answers for the conflict. The Good Friday agreement from 1998 is by no means, a defeat, as many loyalists claim. "Our strategic goal has been to be able to live completely normally in Northern Ireland. We have achieved this normal life and with it, we have won the fight." He confronts the young people who visit his seminars with ideas like these, which are unusual for Northern Ireland.



Neither the police nor the garbage collection operates in some of the narrow alleys between the enemy neighborhoods in Belfast. Social worker Peter McGuire returns here to look for contacts to his former enemies.



For over three years, Peter has been organizing a “critical dialogue.” The target groups include young people involved in the paramilitaries, but also those who are still open-minded. “This is not about changing ‘bad’ people into ‘good people.’ We just want to make it clear to them that they have alternatives,” Peter said. Some participants withdraw from their paramilitary involvement after the seminars. Peter counts every one of these young people as an achievement.



Peter McGuire and Joe Doherty never met in Northern Ireland although their goals are so similar. Peter has begun to study social work. Joe wants to start a family, at an age, where most other people already have grown children. Both are starting over again in what will perhaps be their most difficult fight. They want to achieve what others take for granted: a completely normal life.