

Gaza and Thoughts of a Starving Ireland

Exclusive: Former CIA analyst Ray McGovern has joined with other humanitarians in a small flotilla determined to sail from Athens to Gaza in a challenge to Israel's embargo of 1.5 million Palestinians trapped on that narrow strip of land. Awaiting departure, McGovern contemplates the forces of past and present that brought him to his decision.

By Ray McGovern

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Thinking further here in Athens about how it came to be that I joined the passengers on "The Audacity of Hope" and why I feel so strongly about the oppression in Gaza, it struck me that my Irish genes (as well as my theology) may be playing a role.

During the mid-19th Century potato famine, when the starving Irish were being treated in much the same way as Gazans are today, how much my ancestors must have wished for some sign that someone abroad actually cared about them.

Did no one know how the Irish were being deliberately left to starve to death, while the English were making a killing by exporting Irish meat and produce? Did no one care?

How much in need of support, if only moral support, were they? How few had the money to sail from Queenstown (Kobh) or Belfast in the hope of living, and perhaps even coming to live well, in America?

How they must have longed to see sails of a different spelling or flags of a people committed to Justice voyaging to show the emaciated Irish that someone from abroad cared about their plight. Lacking then was any meaningful expression of international solidarity.

A century and a half later, Israeli officials have actually bragged about "putting Gazans on a strict diet" – in other words, condemning them to a subsistence living just barely above the point where they would starve and perhaps subject Israel to charges of ethnic cleansing by starvation. But this attitude must not stand today in Gaza.

Letter Carriers

Thankfully, four of my great-grandfathers survived the Irish famine. And both my grandfathers – as well as my grandmothers – had the audacity of hope, so to speak, to leave Ireland for America. My grandfathers found work in the U.S. Post

Office – both of them.

My mother's father, Lawrence Gough, eventually became a supervisor in one of the branches in the Bronx. My father's father, Philip McGovern, became a proud letter carrier in the central Bronx neighborhood into which my father, my five siblings, and I were eventually born – and where I spent my first 22 years.

Phil McGovern, the letter carrier. It struck me that, in carrying letters of support to Gaza, I am trying to be faithful not only to a faith tradition with the inescapable mandate that we "Do Justice," but also to the Post Office and letter-carrier tradition that I inherited from my grandfathers.

As our Irish cousins like to say: "Yes, I do believe so."

My theology can be summed up in the words of Dean Brackley, S.J., now in El Salvador:

"Everything depends on who you think God is, and how God feels when little people are pushed around."

Ray McGovern works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington. He served as an Army officer and intelligence analyst for 30 years, and is co-founder of Veteran Intelligence Professionals for Sanity (VIPS).
