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Zenon Geldof

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire

Technological University Dublin, mairtin.Macconiomaire@tudublin.ie

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Year 2009

Zenon Geldof

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire
Dublin Institute of Technology, Mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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Dublin Institute of Technology

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Zenon Geldof

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire Ph.D.
Dublin Institute of Technology, Mairtin.Macconiomaire@dit.ie

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GELDOF, Zenon (1882-1939) chef, restaurateur, entrepreneur, born Boesinge (Ypres) Belgium, 28 February 1882, to Zenon (schoolteacher) and Mini Geldof. He served his apprenticeship in confectionery in Bruges. His experience working in London's top hotels led in 1903 to his appointment as Grill Cook and Pastry Cook in The Automobile Proprietary Ltd. in Piccadilly. He met his wife Amelia in London and following his appointment in 1907 to the Bray Head Hotel in Ireland's County Wicklow, he chose to make Ireland his home. He soon established himself as a chef with a reputation second to none, being awarded numerous prizes. At the Irish Food and Cookery Exhibition (14-26 October 1912) held in the Rotunda he was awarded Gold Medal and 1st special prize in class 'Y' 'Decorative Socles'.

He worked in the Royal Marine Hotel (1907-10), became chef de cuisine at both the Central Hotel Dublin (1910-13) and Jury's Hotel College Green (1913-1917). During the First World War, as a Belgian citizen he went to Manchester to offer his services in the Army but was put in reserve group number seven since he had a young family. The end of the war had called groups one to six. As head chef in Jury's during the 1916 uprising, he experienced bullets flying through his kitchen and needed a specific permit to allow him home to Strand Road, Sandymount at night. He spent a number of years in Cork, first as chef / manager of the Saint Anne's Hill Hydro in Blarney (1917-19), and then also as chef / manager of the Crosshaven Hotel in West Cork (1919-21) before returning to Dublin.

In 1921 Geldof and his wife opened the Café Belge at 34 Dame Street and later the Patisserie Belge at 1 Leinster Street below the famous Finns Private Hotel and Restaurant, where James Joyce in 1904 met Nora Barnacle. In Leinster Street on his son's confirmation day he was held at gunpoint, mistaken as a spy, until his wife, a powerful woman, intervened and sorted out the misunderstanding. On leaving, one pistol-wielding soldier patted the terrified boy (Sonny) on the head and said 'this must be the happiest day of your life'.

Zenon set up the Belgica-Hibernia Trading Company importing floor coverings, café furniture and food from Belgium, and wine from France. He joined the newly formed Irish Tourist Association. In 1929 Albert King of Belgium presented Zenon with the Chevalier de L'Orde de Leopold II in Brussels for his work in restaurants abroad and representing Belgian firms in Ireland.

When the Plaza Restaurant was opened in Middle Abbey Street on the 8th November 1928, Zenon Geldof was appointed manager. Newspaper reports from the time

describe this fine restaurant '600 to 1,000 can sit down at tables and every patron can be assured that each morsel has been prepared by one of the eight French Chefs who work under the direction of the head chef, lately Chef de Cuisine on the famous Palais George V., Paris'. Eight French chefs were employed and in accordance with the wishes of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Plaza took six Irish boys in for training under Zenon Geldof's management 'thus providing opportunities for brilliant careers for ambitious Irish youths'. The Plaza offered billiards, dancing, restaurant and a parking garage, and in the early years of the Sweepstakes, the thrice yearly draws were held there. The Plaza was gutted by fire about 1936 and the site was redeveloped as the Adelphi Cinema which opened in 1939.

Zenon Geldof had four children, Herbert (Sonny), Robert (Bob), May and Clio. Bob followed his fathers' profession and worked as a chef in London's Carlton Club and later with the Cunard Line, crewing on the Queen Mary's maiden and many subsequent voyages, before returning to Ireland. Zenon was tragically killed in 22nd June 1939, aged 57, in a car crash along with a French wine exporter from Bordeaux, Monsier Pierre Peyrelongue in Waterford. His eldest son, Herbert, took over the running of the Café Belge and the importation business. Clio worked in catering, running the restaurant in Switzers, Grafton Street. May worked as a dress designer. The Patisserie Belge shut during the war due to shortages of raw ingredients and the Café Belge was sold after the war. Zenon Geldof contributed to improving the standard of Culinary Arts in Ireland by his exacting standards, innovative vision, excellent culinary skills and training of the next generation of Irish culinarians. Herbert (Sonny) Geldof died in December 2005 aged 93. Zenon's grandson is (Sir) Bob Geldof.

Dublin Evening Mail 8/11/28; Evening Herald 6/11/28; Nat. Arch. Irish Tourist Assoc. S 5819; O' Dwyer, Lost Dublin (1981); Interviews with his sons, Herbert and Robert; Zenon Geldof's personal documents, references, and menus

MÁIRTÍN MAC CON IOMAIRÉ