

OLD TIMERS

with **RICHARD BARBER**

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The best of the fighting Irish

An America-based exhibition has come to Ireland and there is plenty to see, including a mummified right arm!

AN exhibition, previously seen only in America, has been bought to Ireland. *Fighting Irishmen* has achieved extraordinary success since opening at the Irish Arts Centre in the heart of Manhattan's historic 'Hell's Kitchen', New York in Autumn 2006 but now can be viewed, until November 29, at the Ulster American Folk Park in Castletown, County Tyrone, Omagh, Northern Ireland.

Officially launched by boxing legend Barry McGuigan, the exhibition features an array of photographs and memorabilia charting the unique stories of Celtic prizefighters from 1820 to the present day. Objects on display include items from boxing greats such as John L Sullivan, Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, James J Corbett, McGuigan and many others.

There is even material on Muhammad Ali, who, it is claimed, has Irish ancestry.

Perhaps the most unique item in the Omagh exhibition is the late Irish fighter Dan Donnelly's mummified right arm. The body of Donnelly, who died suddenly in 1820, was stolen by grave robbers and taken to a local hospital where a surgeon realised who it was and, amazingly, kept his right arm as a keepsake.

It was 'owned' over the years by several people and was on display at the Hideout pub in Kilcullen, Ireland, for 43 years before finding its way into the exhibition.

Speaking at the exhibition's launch, McGuigan said, "Love of boxing runs deep in Ireland's veins. That passion for the sport travelled unabated to America with emigration. The exhibition is fantastic and clearly highlights boxing's rich history from 1820 onwards."

The story of Irish American boxing is also the story of Irish America itself. Back in earlier decades, as the Irish sought to find their feet, boxing was often a quick passport to a better life for those who had a talent for it.

Think you've got it tough?

WE often hear the tales of how boxers from years ago fought to survive. There were no state benefits to rely upon – you had to work, or fight, to put food on the table.

One fighter who has recently passed away, gave a whole new meaning to the phrase, "fighting to survive." Salamo Arouch was born in Greece in 1923 of Jewish descent. His stevedore father taught him to box and at 14



WHAT A LINE-UP: (l-r) Paul McCloskey, Hugh Russell, Charlie Nash, Barry McGuigan, John McNally, Davy Larmour and Jim McCourt at the opening of the exhibition

He turned professional early on in life and by 1939 had an unbeaten record with 24 knockouts to his credit. Due to his fancy footwork he acquired the nickname "The Ballet Dancer". He progressed to become the light-middleweight champion of the Balkans.

Upon conscription into the Greek Army he fought in the Army team. However, when the Germans overran Greece he was arrested, being Jewish, along with his family and deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp where the female members of his family were gassed on the first day of their incarceration.

He became inmate number 136954 and it was found he was a boxer and forced to fight other inmates in matches held at the camp on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. The reward was that he was not required to carry out physical labour, was put on light duties as a clerk and received extra rations that he could share with his remaining family – but the result of losing a contest would be death.

For the next two years, Salamo would fight two or three times a week in a smoke-filled warehouse for the amusement of his Nazi captors. Thanks to his speed and nimble footwork, he could beat opponents outweighing him by more than 100 pounds.

His recalled his toughest opponent as a German-Jewish boxer called Klaus Silber, who had an undefeated pre-war amateur record of 44-0 and had never lost at the camp. After a fierce fight in which Arouch knocked Silber out, the German was never seen alive again.

Arouch managed to survive at Auschwitz for nearly two years, amassing a record of 20 knockouts. Asked how he approached his life or death battles, he admitted he felt terrible.

"I trembled," he said. "But a boxer had to be without compassion. If I didn't win, I didn't survive."

While searching for members of his family at Bergen-Belsen immediately after the war, he met and married 17-year-old Marta Yechiel, like himself a survivor of the camps.

They immigrated to the fledgling state of Israel, where Salamo served in the Army. After leaving the Army, he established a successful shipping and moving business in Tel Aviv.

In 1989 a feature film was made about his experiences in Auschwitz entitled *Triumph of The Spirit*, which starred Willem Dafoe and Edward James Elmos. It was the first major feature film shot on location at Auschwitz.

Salamo died in Israel and is survived by his wife and four children.

Memorabilia Fayre

LONSDALE International Sporting Club have announced this year's Boxing Memorabilia Fayre, featuring the launch of Barry Hugman's *Boxing Board of Control Yearbook 2010*, will be held at St Aloysious Hall, Eversholt Street, London NW1 on Saturday October 24 between 1.30 and 5.50pm.

There will be many stalls selling a selection of memorabilia, so make a note of the date