

Doctors in Belgium during WWII: the connection between anti-Semitism and anti-Masonry versus the resistance.

Belgium is a country of which the complexity is often underestimated with its three national languages: French, Dutch and German, the last being spoken by a minority residing in eastern administrative units, called cantons. The inhabitants of the latter were considered by the Nazi's as *Volksdeutsche* same as for the Luxemburgers and Alsations. A decree issued by Hitler will turn them into *Reichsdeutsche*.

Differences in this country are not only reflected in language, but are also apparent in culture and in thought processes.

Before Nazifying them, the German occupier subjected the invaded territories to intense Germanisation policies.

The first attempt at Germanisation took place before the First World War under the influence of the Pan-Germanic League and the ANV(*Algemeen Nederlands Verbond*) headquartered in Ghent, latter being a stronghold for the maintenance of the Dutch language. At that moment the official language of the University of Ghent(in Flanders) was French.

The Germans imposed the Dutch language with a first *Flamenpolitik* for policies regarding Flemings against the French speaking professors of the University.

The second attempt at "*Flamenpolitik*" was to take place during the Second World War in view of supporting the Flemish collaborationists with their efforts to Nazifying the country.

Anti-Semitism and hatred of Free-Masonry was rampant between the two great Wars and even preceded the First War. The anti- Dreyfusism and the Maurrassisme doctrine in France had exerted significant influence on the Conservative and extreme Right-wing thinking in Belgium. An anti-Semitic and anti-Masonry climate arose well before the German occupation. Prior to the German occupation of the University of Ghent, Professor Hans Handovsky¹ – of Jewish origin – was evicted from this university with the active assistance of Professors Frans Daels and Corneel Heymans, a Nobel Prize winner for Medicine.

Dr. Paul. Ouwerx, member of the Rex party (Léon Degrelle headed this party, as well as the French-speaking Waffen-SS), became the leader and undisputed initiator of the extreme right-wing movement and focused his efforts on the hypothetical Jewish-Masonic conspiracy. Ouwerx was never to become chairman of the Wartime Order of Medicine, the appointment being side lined in favour of the avowed anti-Semite, Dr. Frans Van Hoof from Antwerp, whom the Germans favoured. He recruited Flemish doctors for the *Ärzte Führerschule* in Alt-Rehse in Germany.² The '*Führerschule*' (Leader School of the National Socialist German Federation

¹ File Hans Handovsky. Archives University of Ghent, Faculty of medicine(1940-1944).

² Frans Van Hoof attended a course in Alt-Rehse in 1941,Archives nationales de Paris cote AJ/40 57-70 groupe 11.

of Physicians) was visited by delegations of non-German doctors.³ These included the Belgian delegation consisting exclusively of Flemish doctors, as French-speaking doctors were immediately disqualified. The Flemish doctors were recruited and selected in 1941 by the collaborating organisation of doctors of the AVGV (*Algemeen Vlaamsch Geneesheerenverbond*) linked to the new order party, the VNV (*Vlaams Nationaal Verbond*). This medical association joined the collaboration at the start of the German occupation. The collaborating lecturers in medicine were all members of this association, as well as various doctors linked to the Flemish SS. Paul Ouwerx was associated with anti-communism and anti-socialism. Additionally, he displayed a negative attitude towards psychoanalysis which was considered to be of Jewish origin and allegedly a science responsible for the destruction of the family. Dr. Ouwerx led the Belgian Anti-Masonry League (*L'Épuration - de Bezem*) and in 1939 he published a brochure, '*Les cagouleurs démasqués*', in which he listed names of supposed Masons, which was later used as the basis for a further denunciation under Nazi occupation. In the same year, he published a pamphlet 'Trois impostures Le Scandale Imianitoff, La Franc-Maçonnerie et la bolchévisation de la Médecine'⁴ Frédéric Imianitoff, freemason, socialist and of Jewish origin, held an English university degree in medicine. He was one of the founders of the discipline of preventive medicine in Belgium.⁵ The so-called Imianitoff Affair began in the parliament in 1937, where he was attacked by Rexist politicians, including Paul De Mont of Rex Vlaanderen, and Edmond van Dieren from the VNV.⁶ The Imianitoff Affair reflects all the hatred, contradictions and antagonisms of the period, included hatred of psychoanalysis, the latter deemed a destroyer of the family. Free-masons were murdered by death commando's at the behest of *Devlag*, a *Deutsch-Flämische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* (or literally German-Flemish Workers community) which was linked to the SS. Many free-masons were deported and did not survive. The anti-Masonry publications of '*Burcht-Le Rempart*' were inspired by the Germans. Dr. Roger Soenen, professor of Rassenkunde at the University of Ghent, member of the SS and renowned anti-Semite, published his racist books with the same editor linked to the SS and *Ahnenerbe*. Leonardo Conti, *Reichsgesundheitsführer* SS leader of the Nazi Germany's health organization was to nominate the Belgian physician, Roger Soenen as expert for the mass murder committed by the Bolchevik's in Winnitza, a city in the Ukraine.⁷ This atrocity was to be used by the Nazi propaganda as evidence of the Jewish-bolshevik crimes.

Ouwerx's works mentions in great detail the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The idea of conspiracy constituted the basis for incriminations and ensuing denunciations. The list of

³ HANSSON (N.), MAIBAUM (T.), NILSSON (P.M.), *The 'Führerschule' in Alt Rehse: a Character School for the Physicians of National Socialist Germany*, *Vesalius: Official Journal of the International Society for the History of Medicine*, Vesalius XVII, 2, 4-15, 2011.

⁴ P.Ouwerx, *trois impostures: le scandale Imianitoff, la Franc-Maçonnerie, La Bolchévisation de la Médecine*, éditions Sobeli, 1939, Brussels.

⁵ Jean-Louis Schreiber: Frédéric Imianitoff, *Dictionnaire Biographique des Juifs de Belgique* p 175-177 concerning Frederic Imianitoff, éditions De Boeck, 2002, Brussels.

⁶ Victor Meulenijzer: *Le docteur Imianitoff*. Les éditions Ignis, Brussels, 1942.

⁷ File Roger Soenen, Protocol from Winnitza, Archives de l'Auditorat Militaire of Ghent. Nr1680 14/05/1947.

Freemasons published by Ouwerx in his writings the *Libre Belgique* and in *Le Pays Réel* (by Rex), was later to be used by the Nazis. The Germans and their collaborators considered the University of Brussels to be a bastion of Freemasonry and Jewry. The German order of 28 October 1940, prohibiting Jews access to certain offices hastened the suspension of Jewish professors at the University of Brussels and their practice in the capital's public hospitals. In 1933, the book "The Third Reich and the Jews" was published in Antwerp.⁸ It gave full voice to the protests that were breaking out in various European countries and from a variety of quarters, against the Nazis' attitude towards German Jews. In 1934, students at the University of Brussels as well as their professors established committees which were referred to as: '*comités de vigilance anti-fasciste*'. In 1939, 154 professors, 90 of whom were connected with the Université Libre de Bruxelles (ULB), signed a manifesto. Since its very beginning in 1834, the University of Brussels had always been an outspoken liberal socialist institution in contrast with Ghent. The anti-Jewish measures had their impact on the medical faculty, from which many Jewish doctors had been dismissed.

In Brussels, the decree issued against the Jews, led quickly to arrests and dismissals of Jewish professors in the civil service and hospitals.⁹ These decrees were to be reinforced with regard to the establishment of the Wartime medical Association. Even before they were issued in August 1940, professor Weil, of Brussels University, had been caught and put in jail.(St- Gilles prison).

Dr.J.Decoux, of St Peters hospital in Brussels had charged freemasons and the Jewish professors in one of the most hateful documents of the period. In a long letter sent to the *Oberarzt* dr Dietrich in Belgium's Nazi headquarters, Decoux accuses Brussels University- especially the medical faculty- of favoring the Jews to the point of "*Dass die Juden eine Gefahr für Belgische Aerzte darstellen, und das die Freimaurer Solidarität jede Aktion noch schwieriger gestaltet*" (wich translated, reads "That the Jews constitute a danger for Belgian physicians, and that solidarity between freemasons renders the problem of taking action more difficult"). Decoux refers to the following professors by name : Murdoch, Cohen, Weill, Wibauw, Dustin and Millet, and apologizes for not furnishing a complete list. At the same time he accuses various physicians of providing shelter for Jews inside the hospital. Similar letters were written by Frans Van Hoof, from Antwerp, who betrayed colleagues providing help to Jewish families.

Some Jewish doctors went underground, others joined the resistance, amongst others, Nusyn Appelboom(1910-1999) who was a liaison officer, and Henri Pohl, of St. Peters hospital in Brussels, who was executed in 1943.

The medical student Georges (Youra) Livchitz, of Brussels university, formerly betrayed by Roger Soenen, professor of racial science, stopped together with two accomplices, the train of the XX° (twentieth) transport linking the Belgian town of Mechelen with Auschwitz.¹⁰ This is one of the great feats of arms in the history of Belgian resistance.

⁸ Comité tot verdediging van de rechten der jooden, *Het III° Rijk en de Joden* "The Third Reich and the Jews" Delplace Koch Antwerp 1932.

⁹ Médecins juifs, Archives nationales de Paris AJ 40 /69 groupe 11.

¹⁰ Marion Schreiber, *L'attaque du 20° convoi pour Auschwitz*, Berlin , Aufbau Verlag 2000- Editions Racine.

Armed with only one pistol and a red signal lamp, the three of them managed to halt the train which carried 1600 deportees. This happened on April 19, 1943, in the middle of the night. Thus 17 deportees could make it to Boortmeerbeek, and some two hundred could escape all along the way to Auschwitz. Youra Livchitz was executed in 1944.

6 women in this XX^o (twentieth) transport which brought them to Auschwitz, were later on murdered in the gas chamber of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp located in Alsace. These 6 women of whom, Elsa Klein and Else Passmann, were all residing in Belgium at the time of their deportation. At the request of Dr. August Hirt, anatomo-anthropologist and confidant of Himmler on the staff of the “*Reichsuniversität Strassburg*”, 86 Jews, of whom these women, were transferred 2 months later, from Auschwitz to Natzweiler, to be subjected to his murderous experiments.¹¹

This episode probably represents one of the most heinous Nazi crimes with regard to utter cruelty and the total denial of human essence.

Many Jewish doctors were deported and did not survive the concentration camps. This is, amongst others, the case of Simon Helman (1902-1943) -transport Mechelen-Auschwitz, David Mohrer (1902-1943) -transport Drancy-Auschwitz, and Isidore Gunzburg (1875-1943/45) of Brussels university, who was equally murdered in Auschwitz.

Owing to the German decree of October 28, 1940, in Ghent, Jews were among other things, not allowed to remain in the civil service, or to be a member of the teaching staff in any school whatever. Many Jewish assistants and students were dismissed from the university.

A certain number have not survived the war, of whom Falks-Fedor Epstein, Marcus Fink, David Lustig, and Dr. Rifca Tirlea Schor who together with her children, were dispatched to Auschwitz.

The *Rijksuniversiteit Gent* was meant to become a “*Zentrum Volksverbundener flämischer Wissenschaft*” (Center for people-related Flemish Science), a Germanic example for Western Europe, same as the *Reichsuniversität Strassburg* where like in Ghent Germanisation preceded Nazifying, the French-speaking professors were ousted while the medical faculty played a leading role in collaboration with the Nazis in Strasbourg

The University of Ghent was the political centre of collaboration. The University had already been transformed previously into a Flemish-oriented institution during World War I. At the start of World War II *Kriegsverwaltungsrat* Franz Petri wanted to appoint German visiting professors as swiftly as possible. In 1942 the most important professors and leaders in Eugenetic Eugen Fischer, Freiherr Othmar von Verschuer, Walter Gross, Fritz Lenz, Hans Reiter and Friedrich Burgdörfer were invited at the Ghent University for the Faculty of medicine.¹²

On 23 June 1941, *Reichsgesundheitsführer* SS Leonardo Conti was welcomed with open arms at the Faculty.

He visited Ghent university, the “Ijzertoren” in Diksmuide (close to the Belgian coast). The Ijzertoren stands for a catholic symbol of Flemish nationalism with regard to the Flemings (*Flamenpolitik*).

¹¹ Hans Joachim Lang: *Les noms derrière les chiffres: Biographie de victimes de la recherche biomédicales à Strasbourg entre 1941 et 1945*. Nazisme, science et Médecine, éditions Glyphe, Paris 2006 p 205-206.

¹² Voyages, séjours, cours et conférences de professeurs et médecins allemands en Belgique. (nov. 1940-février 1944). Archives de Paris AJ/40 69 4).

He visited the German cemetery of Langemarck of the First World War and followed up the visit of Hitler one year before as a part of the German propaganda.

Victimisation justifies aggression and violence thus the famous so-called murder of the innocents (*Kindermord*) in Ypres Langemarck by the English and the French soldiers, was used as propaganda by the students organisations 'the intellectuals in the SS'.

The Langemarck symbol is very important, it permits the analysis of Nazi ideology which presents Germans as victims and so justifies extreme violence.

The Germans present themselves as victims of the Versailles treaty but the brutality of the Germans in Belgium and South West Africa was well known in Europe.

The Germans treated civil populations most savagely in Löwen, Dinant and Liège and various villages in Belgium during the First World War.

In 1940 the Germans will nominate Professor Raymond Speleers, one of the leaders of the VNV new order party as head of the ophthalmological center, running counter the proposal of the Ghent medical faculty.¹³

The proposed nomination of my grand-father Professor Julien Van Canneyt, to the same post had thus been prevented.

In 1918 Raymond Speleers had already been appointed as Rector or President of Ghent University by the German authorities. This takes us back to the first World War and the first *Flamenpolitik*.

Later on, in 1943, pro-Nazi doctor Raymond Speleers was to be designated by Leonardo Conti as expert for the Katyn mass murder of the Polish officers by the Bolchevik's. This was German propaganda to incite hatred towards 'Jewish bolshevism'.¹⁴

Leonardo Conti will equally designate Roger Soenen member of the SS and professor of 'racial science' in charge of the examination of the Winniza mass murder committed by the Bolsheviks in the Ukraine, as already mentioned, for the same reasons.

On reflection, the doctors in the Belgian resistance can be divided into 3 broad categories. The vast majority were involved in **espionage**, whilst most doctors maintained close contact with the resistance and performed **clandestine surgical operations**. Finally, there were those who were involved in the **clandestine press**. On account of the nature of their espionage activities, a number of these doctors were eventually deported to Germany for sentencing, and in some cases, after a year of captivity, were beheaded. Some Belgian doctors were shot or did not

¹³ File Professor Raymond Speleers, Archives of University of Ghent Faculty of Medicine (1940-1944).

¹⁴ Rapport sur le charnier de Katyn (octobre 1940-février 1944). Archives nationales de Paris. cote AJ/40/69.

<http://www.ugentmemorie.be/dossiers/de-faculteit-geneeskunde-tijdens-wereldoorlog-i>

- LOUIS(Y.) en Verschooris(M.), *The faculty of Medicine of the Rijksuniversiteit Gent during the Second World War*

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survive the concentration camps. Other doctors who were victims of the anti-Jewish measures were murdered in Auschwitz.

Anti-Semitism and hostility towards Freemasonry reared its ugly head long before the Second World War. The ULB, Université Libre de Bruxelles was regarded as a bastion of Jews and Freemasons. It is in this context that one must view the persecutions which were to take place. While the medical faculty of the ULB suffered a loss as a result of the dismissal of all Jewish professors, the medical faculty at the University of Ghent had definitely never been a model of resistance; rather the opposite, that of collaboration with the Germans.