

# *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l*

Avenue d'Auderghem 61/16, 1040 Brussels

Phone/Fax: 32 2 3456145

Email: [international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net](mailto:international.secretariat.brussels@hrwf.net) – Website: <http://www.hrwf.org>



## *A History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium*

Willy Fautré

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# **A History of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium**

The relationship between the state and religion in Belgium is rooted in the principle of state-recognition of religions and worldviews. After Belgium gained independence from The Netherlands in 1830, Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism<sup>1</sup> enjoyed de facto state recognition based on the official status granted under French rule (1795-1814). Anglicanism gained formal recognition in 1835. Essentially, this was the state of religion in Belgium to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Flanders (in the north) held about 60% of Belgium's population. Here, the ruling bourgeoisie spoke French, and the working and peasant classes spoke various Flemish dialects. The remainder of Belgians lived in Wallonia (in the south), where educated people spoke French and the rest spoke dialects of Walloon. A 60 000 strong, German-speaking minority lived in eastern Belgium.

The majority of Belgians were Catholic, particularly those living in Flanders. In Wallonia, a process of secularization, fueled by anticlerical sentiments and resentment towards the Catholic Church, was beginning to gain ground among the working classes, the Socialist and Liberal political parties, and in certain sections of the intellectual elite.

Such was the state of affairs when a new religious movement – Jehovah's Witnesses (first called Bible Students) – appeared in Belgium.

This study offers a history of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium: their progressive presence in the early 1900s, their development between WWI and WWII, their resistance to the Nazi regime, and the interactions of political authorities, the Catholic Church and civil society with their movement.

## **Jehovah's Witnesses before WWI**

The first record of activity in Belgium by Jehovah's Witnesses is in 1901. An advertisement for one of their books appeared in a Belgian newspaper. It had been placed there by Adolphe Weber, a Swiss citizen with an Anabaptist background. Weber's was exposed to the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses after emigrating to the United States in the 1880s. He answered a newspaper advertisement to work as gardener for Charles Russell<sup>2</sup>, the founding father of the group now known as Jehovah's Witnesses (at the time known as "Bible Students"). Exposure to the teachings of the Bible Students through Russell led Weber to be baptized as a Bible Student in 1890. He returned to his homeland in the mid-1890s and began to publicize Russell's books and the beliefs of the Bible Students in several countries, including Belgium.

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<sup>1</sup> At that time, there were only about 1000 Jews and 5000 Protestants (3000 were foreigners) in Belgium.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Russell, of Scottish-Irish origin, was originally a Presbyterian.

Weber was followed by Jean-Baptiste Tilmant, who lived in Jumet-Gohissart, a coal-mining village near Charleroi (Wallonia). Tilmant came across the advertisement and ordered two volumes of *The Millennial Dawn*, a series of books written by Russell and printed by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, the publishing arm of the Bible Students. The following year, Tilmant gathered some friends who wanted to study the Holy Scriptures and requested help in this from Weber. By 1903, the first French-language issue of the magazine *Zion's Watch Tower and Herald of Christ's Presence*<sup>3</sup> was published in Belgium, and this early group of followers extended its activities to the north of France, in particular to the city of Denain, where a congregation of Bible Students was established.

Around 1910, François Caré spoke with Edouard Verdière, a Protestant coal-miner and boxing champion in Liège, about what he had learned from the Bible Students. Other coal-miners, disappointed by the Catholic Church for various reasons, joined Bible-study circles, and a new group of Bible Students emerged. Although the encouragement and activities of Tilmant ended with his death in 1911, by 1912, groups of Bible Students met regularly in seven cities in Wallonia and were regularly visited and supported by Weber. On 31 August 1913, Belgian Bible Students took part in an international assembly in Paris, listening to presentations by Charles Russell<sup>4</sup>, the president of the Watch Tower Society at that time. In the same year, Joseph Franklin Rutherford, who succeeded Charles Russell as president of the Society on 6 January 1917, visited Belgium, and the first large assembly of Bible Students on Belgian soil convened in Jumet-Gohissart.

On the eve of WWI, there were about 70, loosely-connected Bible Students in Belgium. In 1914, German troops invaded Belgium and annexed the German-speaking part of the country.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses between WWI and WWII**

When the war came to an end on 11 November 1918, there were only five active members of the Bible Students left in Belgium: two members of Tilmant's family in Jumet, Fontaine<sup>5</sup> in Haine-St-Paul, and Smets and Poelmans in Liège. By 1920, 14 people in Jumet and Charleroi attended the one, annual holiday of Jehovah's Witnesses—the Memorial of the death of Jesus Christ on the anniversary of his death—with another 40 in Liège. Poelmans and Smets, just two of hundreds of thousands of Flemish migrant workers who had found jobs in the industrial areas of Wallonia, started doing missionary work as Bible Students in Flanders. From Liège, they focused on the coal-mining areas of the nearby province of Limburg and on the major port city of Antwerp. Their work in Flanders really started in 1928 with André Wozniak, a coal-miner born in Germany to Polish parents and living in Genk-Winterslag.

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<sup>3</sup> The first name of what is now known simply as *The Watch Tower* magazine.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Russell died on a train in Texas on 31 October 1916 at the age of 64.

<sup>5</sup> Many of the archival materials did not contain a reference to the first names of the individuals involved. When this is the case, only the family name is used.

Organizationally, the activities of the Bible Students in Belgium were under the authority of their offices in Switzerland until 1929, when a branch was officially opened in Brussels. Authority was progressively transferred to Van Eijck, a Dutch Bible Student living in Belgium. With this, the activities of the Bible Students in Belgium were overseen directly by the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society in Brooklyn. 1931 was the year when the Bible Students became known as Jehovah's Witnesses, and on 7 May 1932, the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society* was legally registered as a non-profit association in Belgium.

Although only 27 of the 46 Bible Students were actively engaged in their trademark evangelizing activity<sup>6</sup> in 1930, Brussels was chosen as the location of an international assembly, which was attended by approximately one hundred people, representing a dozen different linguistic communities. It was during this event that André Wozniak decided to become a pioneer<sup>7</sup>. Wozniak's evangelizing work was supported by that of other pioneers from the UK, France and Switzerland, who together distributed tens of thousands of brochures across the country. In 1933, Jehovah's Witnesses distributed 196 000 copies of their brochures. Of the 15 congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses present in Belgium in 1933, three used Polish as the language of their meetings<sup>8</sup> (in Liège, Charleroi and Beringen), and three used German (in Genk, Eisden and Roux). At that time, there were more foreign-born than native Belgians in the movement.

The Catholic Church was hostile to activities of Jehovah's Witnesses and often used its influence on the dominant political party of the time, Christian Social Party, to curb their missionary activity: twenty out of twenty-six foreign-born pioneers were arrested and deported in 1933. A warrant was also issued for the arrest and deportation of André Wozniak, however as a result of a change of government, he was not deported. Emile Schrantz, from the neighbouring Grand-Duchy of Luxemburg, was arrested by the police on a number of occasions, though never deported. Hostility was also evident in the German-speaking part of the country, especially from Nazi groups encouraged by Hitler's ban on their movement in Germany in 1933.

For a short period following 1933, Jehovah's Witnesses enjoyed greater freedom. When arrested by the municipal police, some judges began to make decisions in their favor, refusing to convict. At the International Fair of Brussels organized that year, the Witnesses were granted a booth with a banderole bearing their name and during which they distributed thousands of folders and

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<sup>6</sup> The term used by the Bible Students (Jehovah's Witnesses) for those who actively and regularly engage in their evangelizing work is "publishers."

<sup>7</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses use the term "pioneer" to identify someone who engages in evangelism full-time. It is an unpaid, volunteer position.

<sup>8</sup> Jehovah's Witnesses do not use the term "services" to describe their religious gatherings. They spurn many aspects of ritual and claim instead to concentrate on instruction, calling one of their weekly meetings a "school" and another "Congregation Bible Study," which leads to their use of the term "meeting" to describe their weekly religious gatherings.

brochures in 35 languages. Foreign-born pioneers were again authorized to settle in the country. Fourteen of them soon worked full-time as evangelists.

Among the pioneers moving to Belgium in 1936 to work with the Witnesses was Werner Schutz of Switzerland. Schutz had been arrested and deported from France because of his missionary activities there, and he was to play an important role in the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium during and after WWII.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses' resistance under Nazi occupation in WWII**

On 30 March 1940, on the eve of the war, the Belgian Minister of the Interior announced that all publications of the Watch Tower Society were banned. The claim was that the teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, as disseminated in their publications, undermined the morale of the army and the population. However, the move was not implemented by the Belgian government but by the new rulers of the country a month and a half later...

#### **Nazis hunting Jehovah's Witnesses**

On 10 May 1940, when German troops invaded Belgium, there were about 275 active Witnesses in the country. Jehovah's Witnesses had been prepared on how to respond to such an event through their teachings and publications, especially an article on neutrality in the French-language issue of *The Watch Tower* and a brochure entitled "Fascism or Freedom." Two weeks before Nazi occupation began, Albin Glowacz, a Polish coal-miner who had received 20 boxes of these brochures, distributed them in mail boxes throughout his city. Others took steps to secret away the publications of Jehovah's Witnesses for future use. At their administrative office in Belgium, brochures hidden under the floors were not discovered by German soldiers during a search of the premises in October 1940. The literature was subsequently moved to more secure hiding places. Léon and Marie Floryn managed to hide 500 books and 4000 brochures behind the shelves of their grocery shop in Tervuren. These small actions offer a glimpse of what was to come.

The Nazis began to hunt Jehovah's Witnesses in earnest June 1941. The attacks coincided with the appointment of a new commander as head of the Gestapo<sup>9</sup> (He had previously arrested many Jews and Jehovah's Witnesses in Germany). What follows is a record of some of what Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium faced during the Nazi regime and how they stood up under this assault.

The Nazis went after the most active Witnesses first. **Emile Schrantz** was arrested by the Gestapo, interrogated and kept in prison for 40 days. Throughout, he did not betray any of his co-

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<sup>9</sup> The Gestapo commander, Frank Müller, was killed on 20 January 1943 in an air raid targeting the Gestapo headquarters in Brussels. The pilot on board of the British aircraft was a Belgian named Baron Jean-Michel de Selys Longchamps.

religionists. On 6 June 1941, **André Wozniak**<sup>10</sup> was nearly captured by the Gestapo at the home of his Polish friend **François Hankus**<sup>11</sup>, in Couillet near Charleroi. The next day, Wozniak took refuge in La Louvière at the home of another Polish friend, Albin Glowacz. Feeling unsafe, though, Wozniak left. Upon returning to his Antwerp flat, he discovered that seals had been put on his door. The owner had been told to denounce Wozniak on his return, and his wife had been arrested. He fled to the province of Limburg where he visited a number of congregations. Two hours after Wozniak left a house in Waterschei, it too was raided by the Gestapo. In the end, however, during much of Germany's occupation of Belgium, Wozniak masterminded the underground work of Jehovah's Witnesses from his home in Antwerp<sup>12</sup>. Wozniak was never betrayed, and he was never caught by the Nazis.

Though Wozniak managed to escape capture, his initial host did not. Hankus was arrested, beaten and sent to the prison of Saint-Gilles (Brussels) on the same day Wozniak escaped (6 June 1941). Despite being tortured, he did not reveal the names of other Witnesses, their meeting places or the hidden locations of their religious literature: he offered instead only the names of Jehovah's Witnesses who had died. Hankus was next sent to the prison of Leuven from which he was transferred to Aachen, Germany (on 31 October 1942), from there to the concentration camp Natzweiler-Struthof (Alsace, France) on November 1942, and finally, on 9 March 1943, to Buchenwald, Bloc 14-Wing A<sup>13</sup>. By the time Buchenwald was liberated on 3 May 1945, Hankus had spent 1398 days in captivity<sup>14</sup>.

**Albin Glowacz** was arrested on 8 June 1941<sup>15</sup>. The Gestapo was clearly in pursuit of Wozniak and sought the destruction of the network of liaison officers linking the various congregations of Jehovah's Witnesses. Glowacz was successively detained in St Gilles (Brussels), Leuven and Aachen, where he stayed from October to December 1942. He was then transferred to the Natzweiler-Struthof. In March 1943, he too arrived in Buchenwald and was assigned to work in the Kommando of Glüsloverk. Natzweiler-Struthof, as with the other camps, was a work camp, and one day, he and other Jehovah's Witnesses were ordered to make weapons. Jehovah's

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<sup>10</sup> Wozniak was born in Osterfeld (Germany) to Polish parents on 20 November 1899. In 1935, he worked as a traveling minister for Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium (a volunteer, unpaid position), serving both a German and a Polish congregation. In 1940, he became a pioneer.

<sup>11</sup> François Hankus was born on 26 January 1906 in Huta-Laura (Poland).

<sup>12</sup> After the war, Wozniak lived in Molenbeek (Brussels).

<sup>13</sup> In a letter dated 13 March 1953, Marcel Meunier, then a senator, wrote that he had personally known Hankus in Buchenwald: "Hankus was suffering from articulation rheumatism and a bronchitis. I remember quite well that his prison mates had to lay him on a bench to take him to the call."

<sup>14</sup> During his detention, his wife hid a Jewish family that was being hunted by the Gestapo. After the war, he resumed his activities as a pioneer in Mons and in Tournai. François Hankus died on 14 March 1954 from a combination of cancer and the bronchitis contracted during his captivity under the Nazis.

<sup>15</sup> Albin Glowacz was born in Poland on 1 March 1909. He arrived in Belgium in 1933 and was baptized as a Jehovah's Witness on 1 March 1935. In 1938, he left his job in the coal-mines and became a pioneer. He died in Tournai (Belgium) on 25 July 1973 as a consequence of the harsh working conditions in the coal-mines and the German concentration camps.

Witnesses were and are conscientious objectors to war and military service. Although already imprisoned, Glowacz and the other Witnesses refused to make weapons. They said they were willing to perform any other work, but not this. They would not do any work that would harm others. The guards pointed machine guns at them and the beginning of a collective execution was staged, but fortunately, not fulfilled. Seven months later, Glowacz was transferred to Ravensbrück, where he stayed until May 1945.

On 7 June 1941, **Léon Floryn**<sup>16</sup> also went to Hankus' home with 400 brochures and 24 books but left for Brussels immediately when he was told about the Gestapo's crackdown. However, while Floryn was with Hankus, the Nazis were searching his home in Tervuren, from which they confiscated 20 Bibles, 500 books and 4000 brochures, including copies of "Fascism or Freedom." On 8 June 1941 at 5 am, the Gestapo arrested him. Floryn was first sent to the prison of St Gilles (Brussels). There, he was beaten with an iron rod. As he refused to give the Gestapo the names of other Jehovah's Witnesses known to him, they removed his clothes and beat him again. When they saw the appalling state of his back as a result of his beatings, they allowed him to rest for a few days. When his captors returned to resume questioning, he said that he did have a name to give them. Their satisfaction was short-lived, however, as the statement he made was, "My name is Floryn and not Judah." Because the Gestapo failed to extract any names from Floryn, he was sent to Leuven, and on 31 October 1942, to Aachen (Germany). On 18 November 1942, he was transferred to Natzweiler-Struthof, where he was detained together with Hankus, Glowacz and **Alphonse Michiels**<sup>17</sup>. On 19-20 March 1943, he was moved to Dachau, where he worked in an SS carpentry school. Floryn was sent to the Kommando of Unterfalheim in April 1943 and back to Dachau in February 1944. Later, he was transferred to the Kommando of Sudelfeld (Bayerischzell), where he stayed until the Allied Powers liberated the camp. During his detention, he was occasionally able to communicate by mail with his parents in Belgium and his wife in Ravensbrück. In all, he spent 1439 days in captivity.

On 23 May 1942, **Marie Floryn-Hernalsteen**, Floryn's wife, was also arrested. Floryn-Hernalsteen's torture while at the St Gilles prison included flogging with a whip: she refused to reveal the names of other Witnesses. Floryn-Hernalsteen was put into solitary confinement with a sheet of paper and a pencil and ordered to provide names, but when she came out, the tip of the pencil was broken and the paper was blank. She was tortured again and given a new pencil, which she broke in two pieces in front of her torturers. On 31 October 1942, Floryn-Hernalsteen

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<sup>16</sup> Léon Floryn was born in Seneffe (Belgium) on 17 March 1901. He was bilingual, French-Flemish. Floryn was baptized as one of Jehovah's Witness on 15 July 1939. During the first year of the war, he sometimes covered 200 km in a day by bicycle to distribute books and brochures to underground congregations. In 1943, after being in Natzweiler-Struthof, he was sent to Hamburg (Neuengamme). He was freed on 12 July 1945. He died in Mons on 1 May 1986 at the age of 85, three months after losing his wife.

<sup>17</sup> Michiels was born on 12 July 1912. He was arrested on 10 June 1942 in Brussels. After being interned in Natzweiler-Struthof, he was sent to Hamburg (Neuengamme) in 1943. In all, he spent 1102 days in captivity. He died in Brussels in 1992 at the age of 80.

was transferred to Aachen, and on 11 November 1942, to the concentration camp of Ravensbrück<sup>18</sup>, where she shared block number 12 with other Jehovah's Witnesses from Germany, Poland and The Netherlands. While in detention, she and the other Jehovah's Witnesses refused to sew gun holsters for the German soldiers, risking execution for disobeying an order. In September 1944, Floryn-Hernalsteen was transferred to St Lambrecht camp (Austria), which was part of the Mauthausen camp. There, she worked as a servant for a SS overseer until the liberation of the camp on 9 May 1945. In all, Floryn-Hernalsteen spent 1082 days in detention.

The Floryn children, Celestin and Elza (aged 5 and 9 years respectively), were looked after by their grand-parents (aged 65) during their parents' imprisonment. The separation from their parents was traumatic and a terrible shock for both children. Life was also difficult at school for Celestin. He refused to salute the flag, to sing the national anthem or to participate in compulsory Catholic religious classes. He was ostracized and victimized by his schoolmates and teachers and beaten and stripped of his clothes by other boys before being thrown in nettles. Celestin reports, "On many occasions, the teacher forced me to kneel before the whole class holding a heavy book on my arms stretched out while everybody was insulting me and laughing at me." The treatment he received reflected the existing social hostility of the mainly Catholic population of Belgium towards Jehovah's Witnesses at the time.

In all during the war, 14 Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium were arrested and interrogated with torture by the Gestapo. Some Witnesses were released after a few weeks or months. Nine were sent to German prisons and concentration camps<sup>19</sup>. **Dominica Mich**<sup>20</sup>, Alphonse Michiels' wife, spent 1077 days in captivity. Arrested on 10 June 1942, she arrived in Ravensbrück after taking the same route as Marie Floryn-Hernalsteen. **Karel Colpaert** died in Buchenwald in 1945<sup>21</sup>. **Alphonse Midi** died from nephritis and gangrene in Hagen prison on 4 September 1943<sup>22</sup>. **Lodewijk Schokaert**<sup>23</sup>, a former Communist who had become a Jehovah's Witness, was

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<sup>18</sup> In Ravensbrück, in August 1939, 427 of the 1554 female detainees were Jehovah's Witnesses. In Buchenwald, they numbered 270 in the autumn of 1937, and 450 in the autumn of 1938. In Lichtenburg in April 1939, 427 out of 1415 female detainees were Bible Students. In Sachsenburg concentration camp, 400 Jehovah's Witnesses were in detention in 1935.

<sup>19</sup> Karel Colpaert, Léon Floryn, Marie Floryn-Hernalsteen, Albin Glowacs, François Hankus, Alphonse Michiels, Dominique Mich, Alphonse Midi and Lodewijk Schokaert.

<sup>20</sup> Dominica Mich was born in Solo-Slatina (Czechoslovakia) on 30 July 1907. She was baptized as a Jehovah's Witness in 1939 in Belgium and became a pioneer on 24 May 1946. She was released from captivity on 21 May 1945.

<sup>21</sup> Karel Colpaert was born in Oudenaarde (Belgium) on 5 October 1889. He was baptized as a Jehovah's Witness in 1937. He was arrested and first imprisoned in Maastricht in September 1941. In January 1942, he was transferred to Buchenwald, where he died on 8 January 1945. Source: his daughter Anna Colpaert.

<sup>22</sup> Alphonse Midi was born on 19 March 1882. He was arrested in Mons on 30 October 1940. He was then 58 years old.

<sup>23</sup> Schokaert was born in Antwerp around 1912. He was arrested on 6 December 1940. During a transfer, three prisoners revolted because they were hungry, and the SS shot indiscriminately in the crowd. Schokaert was

arrested on the basis of his previous political activity. When he arrived at the camp in Sachsenhausen, he told the SS commander he was no longer a Communist, but a Jehovah's Witness and was given a purple triangle. He was shot down by the SS in 1943 while being transferred to another camp.

### **Underground activities**

As a result of the arrests of key people and the intense surveillance carried out by the Gestapo, the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses dropped dramatically. By July 1941, there remained only 86 publishers<sup>24</sup>; fourteen congregations had become inactive. Fritz Hartstang was sent from The Netherlands branch office to revive the activities of the movement in Belgium. He and his liaison officers were nearly arrested during their very first meeting in Antwerp. The Gestapo soon became aware of Hartstang's activities, but despite numerous attempts, they never succeeded in catching him. During this time, the Dutch-language version of *The Watch Tower* was introduced clandestinely into Belgium, hidden in the pipes of a bicycle or on board boats. It was then translated into Polish, French, German, Italian and Slovak. The printing work was done at the homes of two Czechoslovakian families, Golik and Pajk, in the north-eastern province of Limburg. No one in the neighbourhood denounced them to the Germans.

An underground branch office, or "Bethel" (as the Witnesses call their branch offices), was established in Ougrée, near Liège, in the house of the Doyen family. The Doyens were not Jehovah's Witnesses but their home was also the home of the Hartstang family. Two typing machines and a duplicating machine were used to print the publications. German-born Fritz Schneider printed copies of the leaflet *L'Informateur* (The Informer) and the book *Enfants* (Children) in Polish. Werner Schutz translated German and Dutch texts into French. Despite all this activity and their numerous, visible comings and goings, their neighbours did not betray them.

This was not the only activity of Jehovah's Witnesses during this period. In Charleroi (Wallonia), a printer agreed to print the publications in Dutch. In 1942, 10 000 copies of the brochure *Choisir* (Choose) and 7455 copies of *The Watch Tower* magazine were produced by his printing works. As post-offices and train stations were under the control of the occupiers and petrol was scarce, the books and brochures were transported within the country by bicycle and distributed to the various congregations. In 1943, the publishers of the 19 congregations distributed 7868 books, 17 106 brochures and 2243 magazines. By the end of the war, the printing house Erasme (in Brussels) was producing *The Watch Tower* magazine clandestinely

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one of those killed. Source: G.N. Van der Bijl, a Dutch prisoner of the camps, living at the time of the interview in Oostende (Belgium).

<sup>24</sup> Again, "publisher" is the term Jehovah's Witnesses use for those who regularly engage in their evangelizing work.

and had printed 6000 copies of the book *Enfants*. From 1942 to 1944, more than 64 000 copies of books, brochures and magazines of Jehovah's Witnesses were printed in Belgium.

Hartstang re-organized the missionary activities to incorporate door-to-door preaching and increased distribution of New Testaments. Baptisms were secretly performed in private houses<sup>25</sup>. The number of Jehovah's Witnesses started to increase again: to 253 in 1942, 396 in 1943, 545 in 1944, and 747 in 1945. By the end of 1944, meetings were again being organized in the main cities of Belgium, so much so that early in 1945, a V1 rocket fell and exploded near an assembly hall in Liège where 500 Jehovah's Witnesses had gathered for a religious meeting. No one was killed or injured.

### **Back to Freedom**

The end of the war and the emptying of concentration camps saw the release of imprisoned Witnesses. Léon Floryn, for example, was released on 18 May 1945. (His son Celestin cannot remember his homecoming). Marie Floryn was released on 9 May 1945 but suffered from such poor health that she had to remain under the medical care of the Red Cross before being able to travel. To return home, she travelled through Austria (Klagenfurt), Italy (Udine, Verona, Bolzano), Switzerland (Dornbirn), France (Mulhouse, Paris, Lille), and back to Belgium (through Tournai, Brussels and finally Tervuren): 1700 km in all. She arrived in Belgium on 29 June 1945. Celestin, then aged 10, did not recognize the "stranger" in the striped uniform. He cried and struggled against her because he did not want to be touched or kissed by her. This incident was surely a terrible ordeal for a woman coming back from Ravensbrück, known as "women's hell." Fortunately, a close relationship between mother and son was quickly restored.

While the end of Nazi rule brought some relief from harsh treatment to Jehovah's Witnesses and greater freedom to practice their religion in Belgium, all was far from easy. Even under the Belgian rule, the Witnesses faced social hostility and mistreatment. Their young men faced imprisonment. The next section is to create a record of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Belgium who conscientiously refused to participate in war or to have any connection to the military.

### **Jehovah's Witnesses' refusal to perform military service: 1945 - 1995**

A tradition of pacifism and antimilitarism existed in Belgium before WWI, especially in the Socialist and other left-wing movements including Flemish nationalist and Catholic organizations. In 1933, the then Minister of National Defence proposed a draft law forbidding any pacifist propaganda. By way of protest, Léo Campion, a freemason and anarchist, and Hem

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<sup>25</sup> A baptism of 40 persons was once performed in Sclessin, near Liège, and another one of 27 converts at the house of a Polish-speaking Witness in Waterschei (Limburg).

Day (alias Marcel Dieu), an anarchist and libertarian, sent back their military books to the authorities. They were immediately summoned, arrested and sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Nevertheless, conscientious objection to military service was an unpopular stand in society, in the Catholic Church and across the whole spectrum of political parties in the aftermath of WWII, whatever the motivation of the objectors. At first, little attention was paid to the issue or those taking that stand. As interest in the issue grew, the media, politicians, and sometimes, some institutions of the Catholic Church focused on the few cases of non-religious objectors. This is true even though most of the young people rejecting military service were Jehovah's Witnesses, with dozens of them spending an average of two years in detention with delinquents--generally harsher conditions and more prison time than non-religious objectors received for their stand. No academic or political researcher<sup>26</sup>, no deputy or senator proposing draft laws on the issue, no media ever made - explicitly or implicitly - mention of this religious group at the time of the public debate<sup>27</sup>. (This additional ostracism of Jehovah's Witnesses is worthy of investigating.) As well as laying out the history of conscientious objection in Belgium since WWII, this section begins to chronicle the actions of Jehovah's Witnesses in connection with their refusal to perform military service for reasons of conscience.

### **Conscientious objection to military service: Statistics and legislative framework**

An exception to ignoring religiously-motivated conscientious objectors was the case of the religious objector, Jean Van Lierde<sup>28</sup>, a Catholic pacifist whose conscientious objection to military service and to war was motivated by his faith and his pacifist ideals. He served several prison terms between 1949 and 1952. Media attention to Van Lierde's imprisonment forced Belgium's political, military and religious authorities to take notice of the issue.

The following lays out key events of his history:

1949: On 10 October, Van Lierde was imprisoned on the grounds of "disobedience" on the occasion of his call-up. On 25 November, he was suddenly and unexpectedly released by the military authorities. They had 'discovered' that the conditions of his arrest violated the legal

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<sup>26</sup> A few examples from the well-known Socio-political Research and Information Center in Political Science (CRISP): *Courrier Hebdomadaire* Nr 5 (1959). *Le statut des objecteurs de conscience (1949-1959)* *Courrier Hebdomadaire* Nr 170 (19 October 1962). *Le statut des objecteurs de conscience (II)* *Courrier Hebdomadaire* Nr 1044 (29 June 1984), *L'évolution législative du statut des objecteurs de conscience en Belgique (1964-1984)* by P.Arcq

<sup>27</sup> Seventh-Day Adventists who were refusing armed military service and some other Protestants were also totally ignored.

<sup>28</sup> Jean Van Lierde was a Catholic pacifist and leader of several Catholic institutions. His repeated sentences and the publication of his 8-page statement at the military court on 3 October 1951 "Why I refuse to be a soldier" led to widespread protests and debates in civil society and in the media.

framework existing at that time: he could not be arrested during the enrollment process at the “Petit Château” in Brussels.

1950: On 28 November, Van Lierde was again imprisoned in Liège after a new call up to serve in the military. Also in 1950, the publishers *Editions du Seuil* released Rev. Pierre Lorson’s book “Un chrétien peut-il être objecteur de conscience?” (Can a Christian be a conscientious objector?), which was used by MP Gaston Baccus to propose a draft law on conscientious objection.

1951: On 27 February, one month after the death of MP Baccus, Van Lierde was sentenced to nine months in prison by a military court. On 13 June, Royal Decree Nr 860 pardoned him. On the same day, he was again called up for military service. On 29 June, he was arrested once more. On 3 October, he received another sentence of six months in prison.

1952: On 26 January, Van Lierde was released. In an exception to standard practice and outside any legal framework, he was sent to work in a coal-mine to carry out a sort of civilian service for three years. He worked for six months as a mine worker but was then banned from all coal mines as a potential trouble-maker. The government then put him “on the dole.”

1953: Finally, the Minister of Defence got rid of the Van Lierde case by putting him on “unlimited leave”. While this ended the debate in the media and government over Van Lierde, military courts went on sentencing to prison all the other young people rejecting military service, including Jehovah’s Witnesses.

### *Fragmented statistics*

Information about conscientious objectors was not publicly accessible in the aftermath of WWII<sup>29</sup>. In most of the statistics<sup>30</sup> and cases listed below, the media and other sources did not identify the nature of the conscientious objection, whether religious or secular<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> In a letter dated 18 January 1950 and addressed to MP Gaston Baccus, then Minister of Defence M. Albert Deveze refused to publish the list of objectors who were in prison at that time.

<sup>30</sup> Although statistics about the number of Jehovah’s Witnesses who refused to perform military service are non-existent, anecdotal accounts uniformly substantiate that most of those claiming or imprisoned for conscientious objection were Jehovah’s Witnesses. The following are the statistics for all for the period 1965-1983. The first number is the year; the second is the number of individuals:

Objectors exempted from any form of military service from 1965 to 1983: 1965 (38); 1966 (14); 1967 (11); 1968 (18); 1969 (57); 1970 (63); 1971 (87); 1972 (225); 1973 (686); 1974 (542) 1975 (670); 1976 (833); 1977 (991); 1978 (1093); 1979 (1318); 1980 (1220); 1981 (1062); 1982 (1856); 1983 (1898).

Objectors exempted from armed military service: 1965 (14); 1966 (15); 1967 (8); 1968 (15); 1969 (26); 1970 (26); 1971 (25); 1972 (47); 1973 (106); 1974 (65) 1975 (96); 1976 (80); 1977 (94); 1978 (97); 1979 (130); 1980 (119); 1981 (109); 1982 (155); 1983 (127).

A 1958 common report of three parliamentary commissions (National Defence, Justice and Interior) stated that 120 objectors were sentenced from 1953 to 1957: 31 were sentenced once; 39 twice; 29 three times; and 5 four times<sup>32</sup>. It is during this period that Jehovah's Witness Celestin Floryn and a dozen of his co-religionists were then employed in penitentiary agricultural institutions (See his testimony below). Between 1956 and 1960, about 100 objectors were in prison: 74 were sentenced twice, around 12 three times and 1 four times.

What follows is a year-by-year breakdown of the available data.

1954: In January, 18 conscientious objectors were imprisoned at Forest (Brussels) while awaiting trial. One of them was a Catholic, N. Platteuw. In September, an unidentified student of Leuven was also imprisoned as an objector.

1955: In February, a conscientious objector was convicted by a military court. On 25 April, he was sentenced to six months in prison.

1956: The secretary-general of the Minister of Justice, M. Cornil, released that 44 objectors were in prison in April.

1958: Eleven conscientious objectors were in prison.<sup>33</sup>

1959: Military sources described 1751 as draft evaders and 692 as objectors on "moral grounds"<sup>34</sup>. On 26 January, two unidentified objectors were sentenced by a military court<sup>35</sup>: J.D., an atheist was sentenced to six months and M.G., already sentenced to six months, was sent again to prison.

1960: About 20 objectors were in prison.

1961: There were 24 objectors in prison at the beginning of the year.

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Objectors released from all military obligations (after military service): 1969 (84); 1970 (105); 1971 (16); 1972 (52); 1973 (86); 1974 (64) 1975 (114); 1976 (140); 1977 (120); 1978 (193); 1979 (207); 1980 (258); 1981 (226); 1982 (444); 1983 (488). The author of this report who is and was not a Jehovah's Witness was one of them.

Rejected applications: 1965 (14); 1966 (6); 1967 (6); 1968 (12); 1969 (7); 1970 (9); 1971 (7); 1972 (17); 1973 (31); 1974 (15) 1975 (15); 1976 (5); 1977 (12); 1978 (12); 1979 (16); 1980 (20); 1981 (26); 1982 (60); 1983 (26). Source : Courrier Hebdomadaire Nr 1044 (29 June 1984), quoting the CSCJ and the Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>31</sup> The general source was the CRISP (See footnote nr 26)

<sup>32</sup> Sénat de Belgique, Session 1957/1958, Doc Nr 201, 5 March 1958.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. Names and the grounds for conscientious objection are not mentioned.

<sup>34</sup> Socialist newspaper « Le Peuple », 17 January 1959.

<sup>35</sup> "Le Peuple", 26 January 1959.

1962: On 10 July, two unidentified objectors were sentenced to six months in prison by a military court in Brussels. On 27 July, an objector previously sentenced to six months was again sentenced to nine months.

1963: A Catholic youth named Ch. Vassart was recalled to military service but rather than reporting for duty, he sent his military book back to officials in February. He was arrested for failure to report on 18 March and imprisoned in Ghent. On 14 May, he was sentenced to three months in prison—a much shorter term than usual because the judges were expecting the executive power to adopt a law that included respect for conscientious objection to military service and made accommodations for those making this claim.

On 4 May, as an act of protest and to demonstrate solidarity with dozens of objectors serving a prison terms, two Catholic vicars<sup>36</sup> of Quaregnon refused a recall to military duty. Their service would have lasted only several weeks. Their bishop, Mgr Himmer, disavowed their choice, and without their knowledge, asked the military authorities to postpone their call-up. Another Catholic priest in Liège made the same move but was not prosecuted.

On 5 October 1963, the Minister of National Defence announced that he was granting an “exceptional leave” to all conscripts who had been sentenced on the grounds of insubordination as objectors on the occasion of a recall. Finally, conscientious objection was formally recognized with a 1964 law (See the subheading “Legislative initiatives on conscientious objection, a brief overview” below). However, the accommodations made for alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors did not help more absolute objectors, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses. Alternative service was still under the authority of the military, and as is evidence by the refusal of the Witnesses in concentration camps, they object to any form of service or activity connected to war, killing and the military. Therefore, even with the institution of alternatives to military service for conscientious objectors after 1964, Jehovah’s Witnesses continued to be convicted and sentenced to prison terms by military courts on the grounds of “insubordination.”

#### *Legislative initiatives on conscientious objection, a brief overview*

The first law on conscientious objection in Belgium was drafted by Ward Hermans, Thomas Debacker, Gérard Romsee et Jeroom Leuridan and submitted to the House of Representatives in June 1931. The draft was taken up by Edmond Van Dieren in the Senate on 2 June 1932. In

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<sup>36</sup> Catholic priests used to be to subject military conscription and most would perform military service.

1933, the issue became polarized, and then died in Parliament, when Paul-Henri Spaak<sup>37</sup> took up the defence of conscientious objectors with a Socialist background.

It was not until 21 November 1950 that draft legislation on conscientious objection was again presented to Belgium's Parliament, this time by MP Gaston Baccus, a Socialist. It included a proposal to permit civilian service as an alternative to the military. Although Baccus had the support of his political party, the proposal did not even reach the debate stage, much less become law. Ironically, even while conscientious objectors were imprisoned for refusing to participate in war, at Christmas of that year, the Minister of Justice released WWII war criminals from prison. Those who were convicted of brutal, unlawful killings were released, while those who refused to kill were imprisoned.

The 1951 imprisonment of Van Lierde and the reaction of his supporters pushed the debate on conscientious objection into the media. The outcome was a special commission in the House of Representatives to examine the legislation of other countries on conscientious objection. With this act, political response waned. So much so that in 1954, the Ministry of National Defence asked for study on the status on conscientious objection to be resumed.

Finally, on 30 December 1955, action was taken that had an impact on all conscientious objectors. Minister of the Interior Pierre Vermeulen adopted a "humane" administrative measure: he threw "conscientious objectors out of the army" after 18 months of imprisonment, limiting repeat sentencing and the average length of time spent in prison. Nevertheless, conscientious objectors retained the stigma of a criminal conviction after release from prison and were deprived of many civil rights, including the right to vote.

The next legislative activity on conscientious objection came when Ministers Antoine Spinoy, Pierre Vermeulen and Albert Lilar submitted draft law Nr 379 to the Senate on 4 July 1957. One year later, a common report of three parliamentary commissions (National Defence, Justice and Interior) stressed that conscientious objection was a new concept in Belgian law and recognized the high moral value of those who had served prison terms on the ground of their idealism. Draft law Nr 379 was however not adopted. It died when the House of Representatives and the Senate were dismissed on 30 April 1958.

The military conscription law was at last amended in 1961 to allow young people with specific diplomas (teachers, engineers, physicians, pharmacists, biologists, dentists, social assistants, radio-technicians, holders of a master in political and administrative science) to undertake a sort of civilian service for three years in a Third World country without being convicted and

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<sup>37</sup> Spaak was prominent in Belgian politics at the time, serving in various cabinet posts and as Prime Minister, but after WWII he became best known for his outspoken support for creating a European Union.

sentenced by a court for failure to serve in the military. About 700 applied for this service; about 600 of them were accepted. And on 3 July 1962, senators Henri Rolin (Socialist), Albert Housiaux (Socialist) and Charles Moureaux (Liberal) presented a “new” draft law on conscientious objection, which was in reality the text of draft law Nr 379 proposed in 1957-1958. Finally, on 5 May 1964, the House of Representatives voted 144 to 1 abstention to adopt this law granting recognition to the status of conscientious objection and making a provision for alternate service.

However, there were many flaws to the law. It permitted someone to declare his conscientious objection only before being inducted into military service but not during service or after having served. Civilian service, required for objectors as an alternative to military, was to be equivalent to the length of military service, plus one year. Civilian service remained highly connected to the military in fact and in nature. It was placed under the authority of the Civil Protection Department. Recruits were accommodated in barracks, experienced discipline following the military model and wore uniforms. This association with the military meant that most Jehovah’s Witnesses refused to apply for the status of conscientious objector. Military courts continued to deal with their cases, sentencing them to heavy prison terms on the grounds of insubordination for refusal to join the military. The media kept silent about how these objectors were treated. It took two years to put the civilian service into place, and few objectors applied for it: 38 in 1965, 14 in 1966, 11 in 1967 and 18 in 1968.

On 16 January 1969<sup>38</sup>, the House of Representatives unanimously adopted amendments to the 1964 law. It was now possible to be granted the status of objector after performing military service, but only before the first recall to duty. The amendments also provided for a fully civilian alternative service, with assignment to “tasks of public utility” under the Ministry of the Interior instead of working for the Civilian Protection Department. It also prohibited civilian service from including any activity related to the use, wearing, production or the sale of weapons. The number of applications for the status of conscientious objector rose significantly: 57 in 1969, 63 in 1970, 81 in 1971 and 225 in 1972<sup>39</sup>.

This does not mean that all future steps were progress. In 1974, the Minister of the Interior issued a circular restricting the freedom of expression of objectors: without authorization from the Ministry, interviews and public statements about their status were prohibited. The edict was not rescinded until 1977. From 1975 to 1984, associations promoting conscientious objection found it necessary to campaign for the improvement in the conditions of alternative civilian service. On the positive side and in contrast to the claims that allowing civilian service as an alternate to the military would reduce public spirit, during this period, public organizations,

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<sup>38</sup> Published in the Official Gazette on 1 February 1969.

<sup>39</sup> See footnote 30 for full statistics between 1965 and 1983.

ministries, healthcare institutions, schools, and foundations began competing to hire conscientious objectors: they constituted a free labor force. On 3 July 1975, new amendments to the 1964 law brought more positive changes. Any conscript was now allowed to opt for the status of conscientious objector, regardless of the motives, and four types of civilian service were made available:

- Non armed military service (duration: the same as the military service)
- Civilian service in Civil Protection (duration: one time and a half the military service)
- Civilian service in the healthcare sector or in homes for the elderly or disabled (duration: one time and a half the military service)
- Civilian service in socio-cultural institutions (duration: twice the military service)

In response, the number applying for status as conscientious objectors grew. From June 1964 to December 1993, 31 010 Belgians were recognized as objectors. In 1984, 70% of these performed their service in the socio-cultural sector, 25% in healthcare, and 5% in civil protection.

In 1994, Belgium abolished military conscription and opted for a professional army.

### **Testimonies of Jehovah's Witnesses**

Before the 1964 law creating a civilian service for conscientious objectors, Jehovah's Witnesses were usually sentenced to repeated prison terms amounting to about 24 months. Their situation remained unchanged after the adoption of the law and its subsequent amendments in the next three decades. Because they considered the civilian service not totally independent from the Ministry of Defence, they did not apply for an alternative service, and their cases were still dealt with by military courts, with all its consequences.

There exist no statistics and no research work concerning this category of prisoners of conscience who put their conscience above the law and silently paid the price of their choice without asking the Belgian authorities to accommodate their religious beliefs. As those former prisoners of conscience never created a specific association and never published their experience, it is only through interviews that partial data on their number at specific times and specific places can now be collected<sup>40</sup>. The ones that selected below reflect the evolution of their situation and detention conditions decade after decade, from the 1950s to the 1990s.

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<sup>40</sup> The Bethel branch office of Jehovah's Witnesses in Brussels does not have any archived records of Jehovah's Witnesses imprisoned on the grounds of their neutrality. None of those sent to prison ever created a specific organization and no published testimony can be found. Politically or ideologically motivated conscientious objectors created organizations to defend their rights and developed lobby groups, while totally ignoring Jehovah's Witnesses, even though they more than likely represented more than 90% of all those sentenced to prison terms for refusing military service.

*1950s: Testimony of Célestin Floryn*

Célestin Floryn from Mons, whose parents had been arrested during the war and sent to German concentration camps, was one of those sentenced. His case was never published in the printed press.

In February 1954, Célestin was summoned for the three-day medical and intellectual examination for prospective conscripts. He presented himself at the military barracks in Brussels and stated that as a Jehovah's Witness he could not perform military service. As the prospective conscripts were gathered together in the yard of the barracks, an officer read aloud the laws regarding military service and required each one to sign a statement to the effect that they would obey these laws. Celestin refused to sign and was sent to a civilian detention center as a military prisoner. Over a period of two and a half months, he was summoned several times by the military auditor and asked whether he had changed his mind and was ready to perform military service. Strangely, he was also repeatedly questioned about the internal functioning of the Bethel. Foreign-born missionaries were banned from Belgium at the time, and the auditor apparently wanted to gather information about possibly illegal activities of Jehovah's Witnesses.

In April 1954, Célestin appeared at the military court (Palace of Justice) in Brussels. Floryn describes the impact of his trial on his parents,<sup>41</sup> who were present in court:

“My parents got a terrible shock when they saw their son coming in handcuffed between two gendarmes. They were not allowed to take me in their arms. Mum cried! I was treated like a criminal while others were not although they had committed serious offences: theft, blows and injuries, acts of rebellion and removal of a star from the uniform of an officer, etc. These soldiers came to the military court without handcuffs. Their son, the ‘conscientious objector’, was the only one to be handcuffed. During the court's deliberation, my father said to the military auditor: I was also a conscientious objector to Hitler and Nazism. Like him, I refused to bear arms and to participate in Hitler's war. For this I got the Cross of the Political Prisoner in 1949, a ribbon with eight stars, while my son is being sentenced to a prison term by the same country which gave me that award. Conscience has no border. The members of the court were smart people but they could only apply the law.”<sup>42</sup>

Célestin Floryn was sentenced to six months in prison for refusing to obey a military order. He was given the opportunity to serve his term in an agricultural penitentiary center and was sent to work alongside 40 delinquents at a state farm in Ruiselede (Flanders). They were put to work in

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<sup>41</sup> Célestin's parents are Léon Floryn and Marie Floryn-Hernalsteen, whose arrest and imprisonment in Nazi camps for their religious beliefs are described earlier in this account.

<sup>42</sup> Interview of Célestin Floryn in April 2010 in Mons.

fields and orchards, but their food was bad. Floryn was so hungry that he resorted to eating beets for cattle and caught birds to fry them. In the half year he spent at the centre, he was never given any meat to eat.

In August 1954, Floryn was released from prison. He went back home, and after one week had to present himself again at the military barracks. From there, he was sent back to prison to await trial. In November 1954, he was again sentenced to prison; this time one year. Floryn asked to go to another state farm in the Ardennes (Wallonia). He was allowed to serve his sentence in Saint-Hubert, where 15 other Jehovah's Witnesses were also interned for conscientious objection, along with other delinquents. The Witnesses were granted a certain degree of freedom in that they could hold religious meetings every week. The work was quite varied. They worked in the fields, stables, cowsheds, pigsty, mill, repair workshop, kitchens and the vegetable garden of the detainees and director. Every day a Witness distributed milk to the villagers, another took care of swans outside the compound.

Again, Célestin never got any meat and could eat only potatoes, carrots and leeks. One day, the guards went hunting wild boars in the forests and took some Jehovah's Witnesses for logistical purposes. For the next few days, the prisoners were able to enjoy meat for the first time.

Célestin was released in August 1955 after serving one and a half years in prison (Most objectors were sentenced to two years in all, either four times six months or twice six months and one year). For five years, the conviction was included on his criminal record. The consequence for objectors was that they were not only barred from employment in the public sector (ministries, municipalities, schools, etc.) but from the private sector as well if a character reference was requested. Upon applying for a job in a private company, Célestin was asked to provide that character reference. When he failed to do so, his potential employer tore his contract into pieces...

#### *1960s: Testimony of Pol Laurent*

On 16 December 1968, four years after the voting of the law on conscientious objection, Pol Laurent went through the gate of St Gilles prison (Brussels). Because civilian service was not completely independent from the military machinery and from military law, Laurent decided not to make use of this option. He spent a total of 2 years in detention as a result: repeatedly sentenced to prison terms of six, nine and twelve months, the last of which was reduced by three months. Laurent was finally released on 19 December 1970. His case was never published in the printed press.

During Laurent's detention, he worked as a mason 5 days a week from 8 am to 6 pm. Freedom of religion was quite restricted in his penitentiary. Bible studies and prayer meetings were forbidden, but whenever there was an opportunity to escape the ban, they seized it. The Watch Tower publications were not allowed either, but they were introduced clandestinely through

various channels. Laurent and others made several copies by hand of the main articles and shared these among themselves. On 12 April 1969, Jehovah's Witnesses were ordered to stop copying religious articles. A few days later, there was a search of the cells: all their notes, their brochures and their carbon paper were confiscated. Some time later, they were returned their Bibles back because the confiscation was considered illegal. Afterwards, they managed to anticipate search operations and to hide their religious material in safe places. In July 1969, the Witnesses were allowed to pray in groups, and some guards even joined them. In November 1969, Jehovah's Witnesses of the St Gilles prison heard that 3 of their co-religionists in the Flanders had been sentenced to 15 months. On 6 July 1970, they were allowed to receive the publications of the Watch Tower.

Laurent summarized his time in prison this way: "Life was not easy for us in prison. We were in contact with criminals, thieves, sexual abusers, rapists but we survived and kept our faith because we remained united."<sup>43</sup>

#### *1970s: Testimony of Celestin Loockx*

On 24 January 1973, Celestin Loockx, a Flemish Jehovah's Witness from Tervuren, was sent from the military recruitment center in Brussels to the prison of St Gilles to await trial as a conscientious objector. There were then two Flemish-speaking and ten French-speaking Jehovah's Witnesses already in detention. On 20 February, Loockx was sentenced for "insubordination" to two years imprisonment by the military court of Brussels. One week later, the Public Prosecutor's Department lodged an appeal against his conviction. A pro bono attorney was attached to his defence by the military court. Nevertheless, on 21 June, his conviction was upheld. Loockx described his experience as follows:

"On the first day of my detention, it was strange to be alone between four walls. I will never forget the noise of the door of my cell banging behind my back. I was in wing E, cell 531. The guards could not understand why I had chosen to be in prison instead of having a nice time in the army, and they mocked and harassed me during the first days. After a week, I was transferred to wing A where I could meet with other Jehovah's Witnesses. The prison staff was kind there, and they sometimes gave us some coffee and pastries. We could receive letters and religious brochures without any impediment. We were not allowed to sing hymns, but we occasionally did and it sometimes created some problems. Three months later, I was working at the censorship department of the incoming and outgoing mail. After one year of detention, we were put on a semi-detention regime. We

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<sup>43</sup> Interview of Pol Laurent on 9 April 2010.

were working outside, but in the evening and during the weekend, we were back in prison.”<sup>44</sup>

On 24 January 1975, Looockx was expelled from the army with “Dishonor.”

*1980s: Testimony of Frank De Gendt*

Frank De Gendt was sentenced to two years in prison on 25 October 1989 for refusing to perform military service, officially for “insubordination.” The military judge told De Gendt that he understood his position on neutrality, but his duty was to apply the law, even if it was unjust.

From September 1989 until early January 1990, De Gendt was detained at the prison of St Gilles. When he arrived, there were a dozen Jehovah’s Witnesses, and when he left, there were forty. They were working five days a week, four hours in the morning and four hours in the afternoon. Since they were all kept in the same room, it was easy for them to organize religious meetings, to pray and to sing hymns. They also had a library with the publications of their religion. The sole limitation to their freedom of religion was that they were not authorized to share their faith with others, but they did it anyway. By this time, conditions of imprisonment had somewhat improved. They had some pieces of furniture, a ping pong table, a TV set and a dozen wash-basins. However, the food was of poor quality, and sexual abuse by the guards was a major risk.

After serving 100 days in St Gilles, Frank De Gendt was transferred to Mons where he spent nine more months in half detention. From Monday to Friday, he worked in the prison from 8 am to 4 pm: collecting garbage, giving remedial classes to the son of the prison director, etc.

De Gendt final observation is that prison is a crime school, and “unless you are a Jehovah’s Witness, you will easily become a criminal in prison.”<sup>45</sup>

*1990s: Testimony of Frédéric Lefèvre*

Frédéric Lefèvre is now an architect. This is his testimony about his time in prison for refusing military service:

“The young Jehovah's Witnesses who were called up for military service, being conscientious objectors, refused the alternative civilian service that was offered to them because it was paid by the Ministry for Defence, which for them constituted a form of compromise. Additionally, only a conviction against us issued by a military court would allow us to avoid being called up for service in case of war and other entanglements with obligations to the military.

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<sup>44</sup> Interview of Celestin Looockx on 16 April 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Interview of Frank de Gendt on 20 April 2010.

In my case, around the start of October 1990, just after my studies in architecture, I was summoned to the recruitment centre. While at the centre, according to established procedure, the staff began to ask whether there were Jehovah's Witnesses present. They did this in order to avoid carrying out all of the tests and examinations that other recruits are subject to. An officer warned us of what we were to expect, and asked us to confirm our choice on paper. We were then put in handcuffs and driven by van with two armed military officers to the Palace of Justice in Brussels. I remember being in pain as a result of the handcuffs. No one offered to help with my bags even though my hands were cuffed.

Upon arrival at the Palace of Justice, we had to wait in a dungeon until we were to appear again before an officer, whom I remember as quite impressive, even threatening, in his attempts to dissuade us from taking our decision. The same day, after a brief return to the dungeon, we were then transferred to St Gilles. It was an oppressive feeling to be stuck between four walls in a strange environment that was perceptively hostile.

After some weeks, I appeared again before the military tribunal. In the presence of my family and a certain number of friends who had come to support me and after having explained my position and defended my principles, I was convicted and sentenced to 2 years imprisonment. In reality, we knew at the time that this sentence would not be fully served. However, we also knew that the decision to apply the sentence in its entirety could be made at any time and for any reason whatsoever.

I spent four months in St Gilles, from the start of October 1990 until the end of January 1991, in the company of fifteen other young Jehovah's Witnesses, most of them less than 20 years of age, while I was 25. The number of other Witnesses in St Gilles with me varied – those who were present at the time of my arrival were not the same as those I left when I was released. The names of some are still clear in my memory: Olivier Daemers (recently died of cancer), Philippe De Milde (left to live in the US), Olivier Lotz, Vincent Mahy, and Sébastien Piotrowski. I remember only the first names of others: Alain, Robby, Emmanuel, Rudy, Alain, Fabrice...

In general, since we were not considered dangerous detainees, we enjoyed much better conditions of detention and were relatively well treated by most of the guards. For example, we were permitted to take part in outdoor activities, such as cultivating a patch of land to produce vegetables for the guard's meals, or to clean the chemical toilets of the detainees (a persistent and enduring memory!!!) We were also responsible, and this shows the extent of the trust that they had in us, for cleaning the different areas of the prison after the evening meal, which allowed us to walk freely around the prison, even the visiting rooms and the administrative offices!

As for relations with other prisoners, because of our convictions and principles and our young age, we were well thought of, and were treated with a certain degree of respect. As for the practice of our religion, the authorities gave us permission to meet in a group three times per week to read and study the bible, in a visiting room adapted for the circumstances each time.

During the last weeks of detention, certain people among us were delegated to work at the “Official Gazette.” We were transferred there and back every day in a van, accompanied by the guards. All security measures could well appear superfluous because one evening, when the van didn't arrive, we received the order to come back by ourselves (that's to say by foot, since we had no papers and no money)!!!

After these four months spent in St Gilles, I received authorization to complete the rest of my first year's detention in semi-detention. I was assigned to the Ministry of Justice, and my duties there consisted of photocopying the files of detainees whose conditional freedom had been proposed. After every working day, once certain tasks had been carried out in the prison, we were permitted to go back home for the night.

After this first year, I was permitted to register as an intern with the Order of Architects. Although one of the main conditions to be able to pursue that profession was to not have a criminal record, mine did not pose any specific problem. The only disadvantage was that I was deprived of my civil rights for 5 years – the time it took for my criminal record to be made clean again.”<sup>46</sup>

### **Social hostility: 1945 - 2010**

Before WWII, there were 200-300 members and sympathizers of the Bible Students/Jehovah's Witnesses movement. By and large, only the local Protestant or Catholic churches, from which new members of the movement came, noticed the Witnesses. However, these perceived them as a threat.

After the war, membership of the movement increased<sup>47</sup>. In response, the dominant religion, the Catholic Church, intensified its fight against this new competitor. During the early, post-war years, opposition orchestrated by the Catholic clergy made it difficult for Jehovah's Witnesses to rent premises for their larger gatherings (“assemblies”) or to evangelize from door to door. Beatings sometimes occurred. Policemen are known to have attended Jehovah's Witness' public conferences to monitor their teachings, including their position on military service. However, more was done to oppose their activity than this. Since most Belgians at that time were still

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<sup>46</sup> Interview of Frédéric Lefèvre on 10 May 2010.

<sup>47</sup> In 1946, those attending the Memorial were 1099; in 1947, it was 1525. In 1950, there were 2462 Jehovah's Witnesses in the country. In 1951, they had 3000 publishers and 80 congregations.

committed Catholics and the Christian Social Party dominated politics, the various political institutions (national government, parliament and municipal councils) could be easily instrumentalized to thwart evangelism activities of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Initially, the main targets were foreign missionaries and foreign-born Jehovah's Witnesses, even though these had lived in Belgium for years. They were deported, no longer authorized to stay in the country. Hartstang, who had come from The Netherlands to reorganize the movement underground during the Nazi regime, was thrown out of Belgium in 1947. Three German-born pioneers (Fritz Schneider, Erwin Klose and Willy Klopper) were accused of espionage and arrested. This accusation was made even though these same men had been hunted by the Gestapo during the war. Regardless of the regime, actively participating in the religion of Jehovah's Witnesses could land you in prison. Klose was incarcerated for 11 months with Nazis who had earlier hunted him! In 1953, Calvin Holmes was deported from the country, even though married to a Belgian woman. André Wozniak, who had been threatened with deportation in 1934 and hunted by the Gestapo during the whole war, escaped a new deportation order thanks to a change of government.

Efforts to block the activities of Jehovah's Witnesses alternately gained and lost ground through the years. For example, on 28 July 1954, the Minister of the Interior Pierre Vermeyleen determined the public distribution of Jehovah's Witnesses' publications to be a non-profit activity rather than a commercial one, which meant that their activities were no longer subject to prior authorization at national and local levels. On the other hand, on 6 June 1956, the Transport Minister Edouard Anseele banned the transportation of Watch Tower publications by train or by post. Jehovah's Witnesses had to organize delivery of their magazines and books by truck from France and within Belgium. This ban stayed in place for more than 25 years, finally rescinded on 30 October 1981.

Increasingly, though, Jehovah's Witnesses right to practice their religion gained ground. Although on 8 June 1957, the mayor of Anvaing (Wallonia) banned Jehovah's Witnesses meetings in the public sphere, his ban was determined to be illegal and was lifted by royal decree of 8 January 1958. On 20 June 1960, the appellate court of Liège ruled that Jehovah's Witnesses were entitled to tax exemption on places of worship. Before this, the state had not recognized their status as a religion. On 5 August 1976, the Minister of Justice allowed Jehovah's Witnesses being detained for refusing military service to receive spiritual assistance while in prison.

In the meantime, the movement continued to expand, particularly among migrant workers in the coal-mining and industrial areas of the country. From 1950 to 1960, the number of active members (publishers) in Belgium more than tripled (from 2150 to 7065). In 1960, more 10 000 people attended their annual religious holiday, the Memorial of Christ's death. In 1962, the group realized that 40% of their members were of foreign origin and did not speak French or

Dutch. A language school was established to overcome this problem. In 1968, a new building in Kraainem (just outside Brussels) was used to accommodate the branch office of the steadily growing movement<sup>48</sup>. By 1970, active members reached 13 271<sup>49</sup>.

With the transfer of NATO from Paris to Brussels, the development of numerous activities of the European Parliament in Brussels (Belgium) instead of Strasbourg (France) and the installation of the European Commission and the European Council in the Belgian capital, the movement started to expand into a new community of expatriates. A branch of the European Association of Christian Jehovah's Witnesses was then started in Brussels with the goal of promoting religious freedom of Jehovah's Witnesses around the world (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Eritrea, Greece, Romania, Russia, etc.), using the institutions of the European Union.

Still, social hostility directed at Jehovah's Witnesses persisted, though under new forms.

During the first half of the 1990s, the world was shaken by a series of suicides, homicides and attacks perpetrated in America, Asia and Europe at the urging of leaders of religious movements or movements claiming to be religious. These events changed the perception of new religious movements in Europe by the media, political authorities at all levels, society, a perception that was also fostered and exploited by anti-religious stakeholders and anti-sect associations. A few EU member states – especially in German-speaking and French-speaking regions – adopted new laws and put into place specific mechanisms to restrict the activities of all communities of faith and belief outside of traditional religions such as Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism or Islam: lumping together movements small and large, public and secretive, and labeling them all as dangerous or harmful. On 28 April 1997 in Belgium, a special parliamentary commission issued a biased and controversial 670-page report<sup>50</sup> on the dangers allegedly posed by “sects,” to which a list of 189 of suspicious groups was attached<sup>51</sup>.

Much of this story, though, lies beneath the surface. The main actors behind this campaign were anticlerical and antireligious advocates, secularists, and anti-sect groups composed of former members of new religious movements. Of note is that sociologists and historians of religion were

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<sup>48</sup> In 1965, an international conference organized in Charleroi was attended by 11 710 people. In 1973, 53 365 people took part in another one held in Brussels.

<sup>49</sup> Their number almost doubled between 1960 and 1970. In 1980, there were 17 664 publishers and 37 105 people attended the Memorial. In 1990, there were 24 188 publishers and 48 131 people attended the Memorial. Since then, membership has remained stable.

<sup>50</sup> One of the “witnesses” interviewed for the report went so far as to say, “Jehovah's Witnesses were in favor of Hitler. Even those who were incarcerated in a concentration camp were enjoying a more favorable regime,” and the parliamentary commission published this statement in its report!

<sup>51</sup> For more details on Belgian state policy, see *The Sect Issue in France and in Belgium* (Willy Fautré), pp 323-328, in *Law and Religion/ National, International and Comparative Perspectives* by W. Cole Durham and Brett G. Scharffs (Wolters Kluwer), Aspen Publishers, 618 p. (2010)

deliberately not consulted during preparation of the commission report. Academics who study religion and religious movements were, and continue to be, excluded from the discussion in Belgium. The media ran wild with the contents of report, spreading panic about the groups listed and also deliberately ignoring the expertise of learned scholars – listening exclusively to “apostates” from the various groups.

Along with other religious groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses were victims of these campaigns, and individuals associated with the group suffered various forms of intolerance and discrimination: libel; slander; victimization in the neighbourhood, at the workplace and at school; damage to individuals’ reputation; loss of jobs or promotions; dismissals from employment; loss of child custody in divorce cases; inability to rent public or private facilities for meetings and conferences, and so on. Despite agreements effected between Jehovah’s Witnesses and hospitals concerning blood transfusion of minors, detractors continued to accuse them of letting their children die rather than allow them to receive transfusions. No Jehovah’s Witness in Belgium has ever been sentenced by a court for failing to provide assistance to a person in danger, including minors – though this was completely ignored by the media and in the public debate.

In 1998, a law was promulgated in Belgium to create an “Information and Advisory Center on Harmful Sectarian Organizations” (CIAOSN), commonly known as the Sect Observatory. The mandate and the activities of this controversial state agency have been successfully challenged by several religious groups in various courts in the past ten years. Despite issuing biased and unreliable information, and despite the outcome of a number of unfavorable court decisions, the Sect Observatory and private anti-sect organizations continue to enjoy the moral and logistical support of the State and its various agencies.

A few years ago, the Sect Observatory published a leaflet on Jehovah’s Witnesses. The contents were thoroughly negative, even though their branch office in Belgium had provided the Observatory with all the necessary documentation. The Sect Observatory also publicizes a book written by a former Belgian Jehovah’s Witness criticizing the movement, but continues to remain silent about the courage and resistance of Jehovah’s Witnesses under the Nazi regime in Belgium and in Germany<sup>52</sup>.

## **Conclusions**

The appearance of the Bible Students (Jehovah’s Witnesses) on the Belgian scene more than a hundred years ago confronted the political authorities, the dominant Catholic Church and civil

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<sup>52</sup> Between 1933 and 1945, around 6000 German Jehovah’s Witnesses (out of about 20 – 25,000) were imprisoned: about 2000 of them were sent to concentration camps; 1500 died in detention and 250 were executed (decapitated, guillotined, hung or shot down).

society with the issue of religious diversity. Their response has been intolerance and discrimination. Under the Nazi occupation, Jehovah's Witnesses were treated in the same way as Jews (with the exception of the gas chambers) and Roma. Since the end of WWII, Jews have been protected in law and in practice against anti-Semitism. Since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the situation of the Roma has increasingly been the focus of attention of human rights NGOs, national governments and international institutions, and there has been some progress, although the path to social acceptance is still arduous and long. The situation of Jehovah's Witnesses has not aroused the same attention or the same interest. May this study contribute to the waning of prejudices and misrepresentations concerning them.