

Interview with Dr. Elie-Christophe VAMOS on July 11th, 2015,
in Rhodes Saint Genèse, Belgium

Dr. Vamos was born in Mitwaba, in the province of Katanga, in the south of what was then the Belgian Congo, on February 12, 1940. His father Sigmund Vamos, a Hungarian refugee who studied medicine in Italy and France, consciously chose to leave France with his Hungarian wife as antisemitism and fascism spread all over Europe in the 1930s. (See detailed account of their travels from France to Central Russia - and back, jobs in French Equatorial Africa, Sigmund's research on sleeping sickness, Erna's interest in sociology, ethnology, and psychology, and their move to the Congo in the notes on the interview with Dr. Esther Vamos, Elie's sister).

Sigmund Vamos may have had a heart murmur ("un soufflé au coeur") or another congenital heart problem. He may also have caught a viral infection or a bacterial infection causing "strep throat", which can lead to heart problems because witnesses recall that he had a high fever.

Annette (or Hanna), was the eldest, born on the way back from Russia in Saratov in 1931 and Esther was born in Hungary in 1937. Elie was five months old when his father died in the hospital in Elisabethville (now Lubumbashi) in July, 1940.

A young Belgian rabbi, Moïse Lévy, had become head of the Elisabethville synagogue only the year before. At the hospital, Sigmund asked for a Bible and the personnel contacted Moïse Lévy, who came to his bedside. Apparently, they had long discussions and Sigmund made it be known that his son should be circumcised. He asked to be buried in Israel, in only a shroud, not even a casket. (Moïse Lévy's daughter, living in Brussels, made an effort to contact Elie Vamos in the last few years.)

Although he was quite young during the war, Elie Vamos has memories of how the family lived. He also mentions events recounted by his mother. It seems that his father was briefly arrested as a Hungarian citizen, as were those with Italian passports, considered a pro-fascist enemy alien. He was interned at the administrative center of the region in Sampwe, but soon released.

In a text sent to Elie by Annette, who emigrated to Israel with her husband from South Africa in the late 40's, Elie learned of a text Sigmund wrote in the 1930's entitled "A Call to Israel", written around 1936 - 1937.¹

Elie Vamos said that his mother not only instilled her love for art and music in her children, she also made Elie think critically about what he read and heard. He said that already, at the age of 5, he felt that he was part of a "collective destiny". He devoured the local press: "L'Essor du Congo" and "L'Echo de Katanga".

His description of the Jewish community of Elisabethville is not as harsh as that of his sister, Esther. The pension the community allotted Erna when her husband died, without any compensation from the mining company² which has hired him, was a decent amount, he thinks. He speaks of a kind Jewish dentist from Turkey, Dr. Nadjar, and an Ashkenazi family from Antwerp named "Bernstein".

He mentions that the Jewish community was not in favor of the independence of the entire country, but when Moïse Tchombé created a provincial government in Katanga province, they Jews supported this.

¹ « It describes the state of mind of a young Jewish intellectual between the two World Wars, especially from the beginning of Hitler's rise to power ... Where did we go wrong ? Where is our place, if any, in the world, in human society?" Hannah Davis, unpublished memoir on her father." September, 1999.

² SERMIKAT, which mined tin ore.

Apparently, the entire family lived in South Africa for a year while Erna prepared an art exhibition. Elie remembers being part of the Zionist Jewish Scout movement there, the *Habonim*. That is where Annette met her husband and both of them emigrated to Israel.

Born in the Congo, Elie was a Belgian citizen and entitled to a student grant to study in Belgium. The 4 local universities for 25 million inhabitants of the Belgian Congo, lacked resources. He followed Esther to Brussels after passing his baccalaureate exam and wanted to specialize in bio-chemistry, but ended up studying medicine and devoting his professional career to research. His wife is not Jewish and their two daughters were not brought up to practice any religion, but he wants his grandchildren to know about their heritage.
