

## Interview with Dr. Paul KENTOS on June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022 in Brussels, Belgium

1 hour 58 minutes 49 seconds

Dr. Paul KENTOS (originally “KENTOWSKI”) was born in the Etterbeek section of Brussels, Belgium on May 24, 1931, to Sophie (née CHAIMOWICZ) and to \_\_\_\_\_ KENTOWSKI.

Dr. KENTOS gives quite a few details about his mother’s and maternal grandmother’s family, originally from Radom, Poland. His grandmother immigrated to Belgium in 1910 with Sophie (“Zlata”, born in 1905), Rose (“Cypa, born in 1908), Dora (“Chaia-Doba”, born in 1909). Her brother Max was born in 1910. He recounts how his maternal grandfather had opened a store specializing in cutlery, but his stock became useless when stainless steel was invented. He then opened a store selling raincoats where his three daughters served the customers.

Sophie was educated in Belgium and received a diploma of the ‘4<sup>th</sup> degree from the *Institut Pigier*. She spoke excellent French and could write well.

Dr. KENTO’s father was born in a shtetl not far from Łódź, Poland<sup>1</sup>, in a family with 4 daughters and another son. He arrived in Luxembourg in 1928 where one of his older sisters had settled and opened a second-hand clothing store in a small town there.

In 1930, he married Sophie and moved to Brussels, where he became a traveling salesman for hats. His parents spoke French and Yiddish at home. They were “*traditionaliste*” in their practice of Judaism and respected the Jewish holidays.

Paul’s father purchased a house in the Marolles section of Brussels, a working-class neighborhood (“populaire”) where there were already many Jewish businesses specializing in clothing (rainwear, fabric, hats).

Sophie ran a hat store there and he continued to work as a traveling salesman in the Brabant, where he visited local stores and arranged for orders. Although his French was not perfect, he was a good salesman and did well.

In 1937, the family moved to a nicer section of the city, renting an apartment and boutique in the Saint-Gilles neighborhood, rue Blaes (or Blasse?) where Paul started school.

He describes how an atmosphere of worry and profound anxiety reigned in the neighborhood, “*une atmosphere poisseuse*”.

A book came out in French called “*Hitler m’a dit*” and his mother read it out loud to his father, who could not believe what he heard.<sup>2</sup>

Paul attended the local public school and was in second grade in 1938. At that time, German Jewish refugees started immigrating to Belgium and he describes the antisemitic attitude of some of the students and a certain teacher, while other teachers were more sympathetic to their plight.

In 1942, he had to start wearing the Jewish star, but many of the non-Jewish students were kind and called it a “sheriff’s badge”.

---

<sup>1</sup> About 58 miles

<sup>2</sup> By Hermann Rauschning in 1939, a Nazi describes Hitler’s true intentions more clearly than *Mein Kampf*.

Dr. KENTOS remembers a Jewish friend at school who was deported with his family because they were too poor to leave their lodging in a Jewish section of the city and couldn't find a place to hide.

On May 10, 1940, Paul was awakened by the sound of German air raids and Belgian anti-aircraft artillery. He describes how his parents decided to take a train to the coast, as close to the French border as possible. He describes the different types of identification issued in Belgium: green cards were for Belgian citizens, yellow cards for foreigners with a residence permit, and white cards for foreigners with temporary residence permits that had to be renewed every 6 months or so.

The gendarme at the border allowed Paul and his mother through, but retained his father, who had a yellow identification card and was noted as Polish. If he crossed the border into France, he would have been immediately inducted into the Foreign Legion.

The family turned back and walked for miles to a village where they found a room above a bakery. One day, returning from a promenade, they found the house on fire .....Paul's father rushed through the flames to try to rescue their meagre belongings.

Paul recounts other incidents as the family wandered while at the same time, the British soldiers were making their way to Dunkerque (Dunkirk.) At one little hotel, he awoke to find that part of the roof had caved-in on his bed.....

The family returned to Brussels by foot, passing through Ghent and taking a barge to cross a river. Upon their return to Brussels, a neighbor told them that the Germans were very nice.....

He describes returning to school after the summer vacation, the Jewish population obliged to wear the Jewish star, the creation of the *Association des Juifs de Belgique* by the Germans, the convocations of Jewish men for forced labor to construct the Atlantic Wall on the western coast of France. When that was finished, they were being called up to "work in the East"... His Uncle Max, his mother's brother, was summoned and was sent on the first convoy leaving Belgium for Auschwitz....<sup>3</sup> However, her two sisters and their husbands made it to Switzerland by bicycle.

His parents' shop was rented to another Jewish family, the merchandise was sold.

He speaks of various round-ups in early September, 1942. One occurred in the Marolles neighborhood where his maternal grandparents lived. The German soldiers spared his grandmother, but his 63-year old grandfather was taken away.

Every afternoon, Paul's parents left their apartment and told him not to open the door. He later found out that they were on a mission to find safe hiding places. They made arrangements with the local grocer with whom they had good relations.

Right after the round-up of his grandfather, Paul was sent to live with the grocer's son and his wife for a short time. The son's wife had a cousin with 4 boys in a small town near Verviers in the French-speaking Walloon province of Belgium. One day, her husband came to take Paul there by train.

The Debast family were fervent Catholics.

Not only was he safe and comfortable for 2 years - Dr. KENTOS describes his time with the family as an enormous stroke of good luck. He attended the local School of the Christian Brothers for his

---

<sup>3</sup> After the war, the family received a document stating that he was "presumed dead". It seems that the members of this first convoy were all sent directly to the gas chamber and did not receive a number to be tattooed on their arms.

last year of elementary school (*Première 6ème*) and then a Jesuit College where he was first in his catechism class and took 10 hours of Latin a week. He also took extra classes on the Catholic religion because he could not take communion and could not go to confession, as other pupils were obliged to do.

Mr. Debast was a bank employee with an excellent general education, something Paul's parents lacked. He realizes that they could not have helped him in his studies because secondary education and university courses demand a familiarity with a certain type of education and knowledge of Western European history and culture.

Every week, Paul wrote a card to his parents, addressing it to the grocer's son's apartment in Brussels. His mother even took the great risk of coming to see him by train from time to time.

He describes how his parents found a place where they could hide for two years....through a woman who had given Paul violin lessons for several months in 1941 – 1942, who knew a lawyer willing to rent them a room in the Schaerbeek neighborhood. His father did not leave their room for the entire time.

Brussels was liberated on September 4<sup>th</sup> and Vervier liberated on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 1944. Mr. Debast brought Paul back to his parents soon after that.

Dr. KENTOS recounts how his parents and grandmother finally were able to return to their pre-war home and shop....however, other non-Jewish Belgians were paying rent and running the store and did not want to leave.... a long judicial procedure ensued.

His parents were now living in the Saint-Gilles section of Brussels and looked for a high school for Paul closer to their apartment. Dr. KENTOS describes the different types of high schools in Belgium at the time: *Athénées Royaux* and schools run by the City of Brussels, divided into 3 categories: A, B, and C.

Since there was a waiting list for the *Athénée de Bruxelles*, Paul attended an A School for 2 years and then was accepted at the "*Athénée Catho*", a very upscale and snobbish place.

Dr KENTOS reflects on the fact that his 2 years with the Debast Family near Vervier were relatively peaceful and "almost indecent", considering what was going on at that time, but, "Coming back to Brussels from Vervier, I felt antisemitism in the most intense way."

One of the students next to him on the classroom bench asked him right away, "What should I call you? "Dirty Hebratico" or "Dirty Jew"?"

Then, there was the question of Israel in 1948 and 1949. There were terrorist attacks, Count Bernadotte was assassinated, and students confronted him: "What – you dare to come to school?" One of his teachers was able to calm the students down, but a math teacher did not know how to confront a student, the son of the Governor of the Brabant region, when this boy made antisemitic remarks. Paul was too timid to protest himself.

Paul celebrated his *bar mitzvah* in 1945 or 1946. He took Hebrew lessons, but spending a year on two lines from the Torah was not inspiring.

Now, Dr. KENTOS thinks that his education in Vervier gave him an understanding of what religion is. The things that his father and grandfather told him about Judaism were confusing and did not make sense to him.

After graduating from the *Athénée*, Paul wanted to become a doctor and though it was a great financial sacrifice on their part, his parents were proud and encouraged him to do so. He tutored and found jobs to supplement the family's resources.

Paul opted to become a Belgian citizen and after his medical studies, he had to do his 21 months of military service. As a doctor, he was an officer. After working in Germany for a while, he returned to Belgium and started volunteering at hospitals to gain experience.

It was at this point that he decided to change his name and simplify it to KENTOS.

Dr. KENTOS gives several examples of prejudices and misconceptions about Jews, such as Jewish preoccupation with money. He speaks about an incident with a fellow student who sees him reading Zola's novel, "L'Argent" and the stupid comments the man makes.

Another incident involves a francophone professor at the University of Ghent, when he hoped to become a professor at the university.

"People are not well-educated and harbor prejudices about Jews."

He admits that he deliberately asks modest compensation from his patients so as not to be accused of being greedy.

"This is one of the consequences of the war and the way people see Jews....."