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JK: Ambassador de Thier, would you please explain where you were and what your position was during the time of the Congo operation?

de Thier: Yes, at that time I was Belgian Ambassador to Canada and so, I was involved in the Congo operation for a very short time. It was in September, 1960. My colleague, Loridan who was Permanent Representative to the United Nations had to go back to Brussels because his wife died in a tragic way. So, I received a telegram from my government asking me to come immediately to New York to take the seat of Belgium during my colleague’s absence. I was not involved in the whole Congo operation. It was only in a very short and temporary way.

JK: In September of 1960 there was a lot going on in the Congo. Were you involved in meetings at the UN?

de Thier: Yes, there was a meeting of the Security Council at that time. The Minister of Foreign Affairs who would usually represent Belgium when there was a meeting of the Council could not come to New York. Loridan wasn’t there. So, I was asked to sit in the Security Council during that session.

JK: Do you recall what was being discussed during that meeting of the Security Council?

de Thier: The main thing was, of course, the very severe, hard criticism of Belgian policy in the Belgian Congo. So, I had to explain the position of my government at that time
and to defend my country against all the criticism going on in the United Nations.

JK: What were the criticisms?

de Thier: The problem and the criticism at that time was first that Belgium had given the Congo independence without any preparation. And the second point was Belgium having been obliged to send troops into the Congo to protect the white population, not only the Belgian population but all the white people who were there at that time and who had been very badly treated by the new Lumumba government. Those were the main issue, these two points, criticism against the Belgian government for the way it had handled the accession to independence of the Belgian Congo.

JK: Why had Belgium given the Congo independence so quickly? What was going on at the time?

de Thier: The idea of the Belgian government was to have a period of transition, not to give the Congo independence immediately. But, Lumumba who had become the head of the Congo government at that time was, and it has been proven, a quite irresponsible man. And he said that they didn’t want to accept any proposal, that they wanted to be granted independence right away. They didn’t want any period of transition. So, the government of the Congolese people were not at all prepared to have great political responsibility. At that time also Lumumba was dealing with Soviet agents and was very much under the
influence of Communist groups.

JK: Was if felt that Lumumba himself was a Communist?

de Thier: Well, he was mainly an opportunist, I suppose. I think that at that time he thought that Communism would be the best policy for the Congo. Also, he was receiving help from Communist agents.

JK: What kind of help had he been receiving?

de Thier: That we don’t know. We don’t have much information about that. But, it’s the way he handled it and what he wanted to get, the immediate independence of the Congo.

JK: Had there been riots or demonstrations in Leopoldville or Stanleyville before that?

de Thier: Before that, yes, there were some troubles. Also, the army had mutinied and had treated the white people badly. That is the reason why the Belgian government decided after independence to send some troops. They were only to protect the white population and not at all the idea of going back to the Congo. That was the main point.

JK: Do you know why the Force Publique mutinied?

de Thier: I suppose it was under the influence of these foreign agents. I don’t have information on that precise point. Any information I have on that period I have put in writing in the book I have published on my career. So, I can give you the book and you can read in the book all the information I had during the period I was involved in this operation.
JK: Let me just read the title of the book here for the record: *A Diplomat in the Twentieth Century*, by Jacques de Thier, published in 1990 by Le Cri in Brussels, Belgium. We will have this on the record so that people can the book. And we can put the book in the UN Library so people can look at it there, also, most likely the Dag Hammarskjold Library.

JK: When I was speaking to Mr. Loridan, he had said that at one point Dag Hammarskjold was asking Belgium to remove all the Belgians from the Congo, not only the Belgian military but also the technicians and other civilians and have all of them leave. Was that something that you were aware of?

de Thier: I know that at that time there was such chaos in the Congo and that many people had been badly treated even wounded. I don’t know exactly how many. The whole white population in the Belgian Congo was trying to get out of the Congo. At that time it’s quite true that many Belgian technicians had gone because of this chaos.

JK: At that time was the UN pressuring Belgium to have the people leave?

de Thier: I don’t think so, not when I was there. The intention of Belgium had been, even after independence, to work with the new Congo government. They had signed a treaty of "amitie" [friendship] and cooperation and the Belgian government agreed to leave all the technicians that the
new government would like to keep. But Lumumba did not want to enforce this treaty. So there was no possible cooperation with Lumumba. He didn’t want to accept and enforce the treaty which had been signed at the beginning.

JK: When Lumumba had been dismissed by Kasavubu and was later arrested, do you think that there was any involvement by the West in his death, the US, the British, etc.?

de Thier: I have no information on that point. I think it is still a mystery who was responsible for Lumumba’s death.

JK: Was Belgium accused of being responsible?

de Thier: I think so, but I can’t answer that because it was so long ago. My memory is very bad. As I told you, I am very old. I am over 90. So, it is not easy for me to remember all that.

JK: Yes, it was over 30 years ago. Did the UN, Dag Hammarskjold, Ralph Bunche, etc., understand what Belgium was trying to do? Was there a misunderstanding when Belgium sent the troops back in? Did they think that Belgium wanted to take control again?

de Thier: There was disagreement, of course, between the United Nations and Belgium. But I was not involved in that discussion. I didn’t have any contact when I was there with Hammarskjold at the United Nations. I was only there for 8 days. As soon as the Congo discussion in the Security Council had ended and Loridan came back, I
returned to Ottawa. There was also a lot of criticism in Canada over the policy of the Belgians. The Occidental powers at that time criticized the Belgians by saying, "you gave independence to the Congolese people without having prepared them." But, as I explained in my book, the fact that they had not been prepared was because independence had been given so quickly. The idea was to educate the masses first, to have a solid education in the population before forming an elite. They had already created two universities, but they had just started. So, there were no Congolese people who already had a university degree from a Congolese university. It can be explained because independence came so quickly. At that time a professor had made a plan according to which he said that education would be give little by little, but it would take probably over 30 years before the Congo would be ready for independence. Many people thought that was much too early because they thought that independence would take a very long time in a country that was so backwards. Belgium took over the Congo government in 1908 after the Congo had been the private territory of King Leopold II. So, Belgium had very little time to educate the Congolese people. It is a fact that on the primary level of instruction the Congo was one of the countries where the greatest part of the people were receiving a primary education. In the view
of the Belgian government, they thought that it would be possible to govern a country like the Congo only when the masses had at least a minimum of instruction before starting to educate university people.

JK: Independence came quickly then because . . .

de Thier: Because of the wind of change and because the French under General deGaulle . . . . the French colonies were in a much different situation. They were much better educated and were much more in contact with Western civilization and had been in contact for several centuries. Belgium had only 40 years. The situation was completely different. But the criticism from the Western world was that we had not prepared the Congo for independence. They didn't take into account that the situation in the Congo was completely different. The Congo was a territory which had been completely out of contact with the civilized world.

JK: Do you think it would have been different if the Congolese army had not mutinied and it had been safe for the Belgians to stay and to continue working with the government?

de Thier: That was the intention of the Belgian government. They said, "we don't want to leave the Congo and withdraw all our technicians. We want to continue to work with an independent government, but in a friendly spirit." And it worked in part of the Congo, in Katatanga where there
was a reasonable man at the head of the government. His name was Tshombe. It worked there. It was our intention to work in the whole of the Congo that way. If only there had been in Leopoldville at that time a sensible man it would have worked. It is only because there was this Lumumba who was a completely irresponsible man as the facts have revealed.

JK: What was the Belgian policy toward the secession of Katanga?

de Thier: Tshombe would have liked to form a new country, a secession. He wanted Katanga to become an independent country and only in a federation with the Congo. But the Belgian government was more under the feeling that it would be better to maintain the Congo as a whole united country.

JK: So, the official policy was to have a united Congo.

de Thier: That is it.

JK: Were there factions in Belgium who were involved with the company the Union Miniere and who were supporting Tshombe and the secession?

de Thier: Yes. According to what I read in the papers at that time there were some private companies that would have accepted and preferred to have Katanga independent because Katanga was a sensible, well governed country. It would have been a sensible country.

JK: How did Belgium feel about the UN troops coming into
Elizabethville?

de Thier: The Belgian government agreed to that. Belgium’s main purpose was to protect the white population and if it were not possible to maintain Belgian troops then the United Nations forces would take the place of the Belgian troops. The main purpose of the Belgian government at that time was to ensure the security of the white population, not only the Belgians but the whole white population.

JK: Was there a problem in controlling what was going on in Elizabethville? There were Belgian military advisors that had stayed to advise Tshombe. Tshombe had hired mercenaries. The UN was having trouble getting them to leave. Was the Belgian government having some trouble controlling what was going on there?

de Thier: Some of the United Nations troops were not always well disciplined. Some of them even shot a few people. I had a stepson of mine who is American and is a newspaper man, Ted Morgan. He wrote this book. He was wounded at that time by United Nations troops with two other American newspaper men.

JK: Where did this happen in the Congo?

de Thier: It happened in '60 or '61. I don’t remember exactly where he was in the Congo at that time, but he was evacuated with two other newspaper men. There were three American newspaper men and one of them was killed, one of
them was wounded, and my stepson was lightly wounded. He was in the hospital in London for sometime.

JK: So, some journalists had been shot by the UN troops. Were there other incidents where the UN troops seemed to be undisciplined or unable to be controlled?

de Thier: Well, the fact that these three newspaper men were shot seems to indicate that they were not always well disciplined or their instructions were not clear. I don't know.

JK: Were the Belgians not confident that the UN troops could maintain law and order?

de Thier: That is a question that my colleague, Mr. Loridan, would be better equipped to answer.

JK: When Dag Hammarskjold made his last mission to the Congo and his plane crashed, were the Belgians convinced that it was an accident? Was it felt that there was sabotage involved?

de Thier: We were wondering, of course, but we didn't have any proof of any possible intervention of foreign agents or Congolese. We don't know. I read quite recently that this question might be cleared and that there might be more information now than there was some years ago. I think that there is a recent book that is supposed to clear up the mystery. It will be published in a few days. The author is Belgian.

JK: Going back to that period for a moment, what was the
relationship between Belgium and and some of the other Western countries at the time? Were relations with the US, for example, going well, or were there problems?

de Thier: They were going well, but the general idea at that time was that Belgium had not prepared the Congo for independence. I remember when I was in Canada I had been asked by my government to inform the Canadian government that Belgium was going to give them independence. The preoccupation of the Canadian government was who would be responsible for maintaining order. That is why the occidental powers at that time were criticizing the government for lack of preparation. Then when Belgium sent back some troops into the Congo the whole third world, the underdeveloped countries, all criticized Belgium for sending troops. They said they gave independence to be able to come back with troops to take the Congo territory again under their control. The whole world was against us. I remember when I was in the Security Council I got very little help from other countries because they were all criticizing us.

JK: Even France and Great Britain?

de Thier: France didn’t say a word. There was only the British representative who supported me after I had spoken to try to explain the policy of my government. All the other countries were either saying nothing or criticizing us.
JK: At that time Belgium was not on the Security Council.
de Thier: No, we were not a member of the Security Council. We were in the Security Council because it was a matter for which the Belgian government was responsible.

JK: So, you had been asked to speak on Belgium's behalf.
de Thier: Yes, I was really feeling like a lawyer defending a criminal.

JK: France did not come to your defense at all.
de Thier: No, France at that time and all the colonial powers at that time were concerned about their own problems. I remember very well only the British representative and the Italian representative said a few kind words for Belgium. But all the others didn't say anything at all.

JK: Informally did anyone support Belgium?
de Thier: Individual people, but officially, no. They either criticized us or didn't say a word. I must say that I remember that week I stayed in New York, it was not a pleasant job. I was really feeling like a lawyer defending a criminal.

JK: There had not been universities in the Congo because you had not had time to build the universities there, but why were the Congolese not brought to Belgium to study?
de Thier: Some of them had come, but the idea of the Belgium government was that it would be better for the young Congolese people to study in universities in their own
country. They were not in favor -- there were exceptions, of course -- but as a rule it was felt that it was better for young people in any country to study in universities in their own country.

JK: Why did they have that policy?

de Thier: Because between countries with very different states of civilization it would be better to be educated in their own country. It would be better to be in their own intellectual and social climate.

JK: Was it felt that if they studied in Belgium that they wouldn’t want to go back? That they would just want to stay?

de Thier: Yes, that’s it. That is probably the point. If they sent young people to the university in Europe these young students would prefer to remain and to continue to live in Europe. They don’t go back. It’s no use.

JK: The policy then was to develop a broad education. Who was doing the educating? Were there missionaries? Had the Belgian government set up schools?

de Thier: The first university had been developed in association with the University of Louvin, a Catholic university here in Belgium. Now Louvin has two universities, one French and one Flemish. The Flemish one is in Louvin because it is in the Flemish region of Belgium and the other one is near Brussels in the French speaking part of the country.
JK: So, it was this university that helped to develop the university in Leopoldville.

dé Thier: At that time there was only the one University of Louvin. In the Congo they built a second university in Elizabethville which was more like the Brussels University, a state university. But the first university, the one in Leopoldville, was thought of as a creation of the University of Louvin.

JK: Was the primary education in the Congo conducted primarily through the missionaries?

dé Thier: Mainly through the missionaries because they were the only ones. Yes, most of them were under the missions.

JK: Were there Congolese, though, that were trained as medical assistants that worked in the hospitals?

dé Thier: I think so. But, I was not in the Congo at that time.

JK: Was it felt that Kasavubu was a good leader even though Lumumba was not?

dé Thier: Kasavubu was a more sensible man, but he was not as gifted as Lumumba as a politician or as a speaker. I heard Lumumba in Canada because after I had been in New York at the Security Council he came to the US and to Canada. I heard him on the TV and I could see that he was a good speaker and a clever politician. But completely irresponsible.

JK: So, Kasavubu was more sensible but not a very strong leader.
de Thier: Yes, he was a good man, but not a very brilliant man.

JK: And Tshombe?

de Thier: Tshombe was a man of the old tribe in the Congo. He had an educated background. Later, when I was ambassador to London, he came there and I met him. He was much more sensible and had more authority. If Tshombe had been in Leopoldville instead of Elizabethville this chaos would probably never have happened. It would have been possible to work with a man like Tshombe and to maintain a regime of cooperation between the Congolese and the Belgian government. I think that that is what was responsible for this whole problem, the personality of Lumumba.

JK: So, Tshombe was well respected by the Belgians.

de Thier: Yes, and he was well respected by the companies who were in this part of the Congo at that time. The Belgian companies were very powerful, of course. That was the part of the Congo where the mineral wealth was.

JK: Was it felt by the companies that they could control Tshombe?

de Thier: It was a matter of the relationship between the leaders of the big companies. I think they were working well together. They prefered to go on working with Tshombe and not with Lumumba.

JK: Were there any indications that Mobutu would end up being such a strong leader?
de Thier: Not yet. Mobutu was an officer in the Force Publique. He was not yet prominent. His name was not yet known. Most of the information I have about that period is in my book and I have made a note of the pages for you: they are pages 152, 153, 154, and 172 – 189. If you read that you will have the essentials of the contribution I can give you on that period. Also, the text of my statement to the Security Council is in the back of the book.

JK: In your opinion and on the part of Belgians did the UN do a good job in the Congo or was it felt that the UN had made a lot of mistakes?

de Thier: I think that Loridan could really give you a reply to that question. My contribution is what I have written in my book. I was not the responsible representative at that time. I was only there by accident. I think there were some members of the Congo staff that were more under the influence of Lumumba and of the left. Some of the UN staff were more of the left. It depended on the person who was representing the UN in the Congo. Some of them were good, some of them were not as good as the others, and some of them were more leftist people, even some communists. It depended on the personality of the individual, even the UN military leaders. We had more confidence in the Belgian troops than in the United Nations forces. I think it was the Swedish troops that shot these Americans.
JK: Were the Swedish supportive of Belgium at all?

de Thier: No, the Swedish were critical. At that time when I was there I felt completely alone. Our usual friends like the French or the British, only the British said a few words after I spoke and the French said nothing.

JK: Thank you so much for taking the time to help us with this topic. That is all I have to ask you.

de Thier: It was a pleasure.
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UNITED NATIONS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY AGREEMENT

I, Jacques de Thier (Interviewee) hereby agree to participate in the United Nations Oral History Project, sponsored by the Yale University Institution for Social and Policy Studies, and consent to the recording by magnetic audio tape of (an) interview(s) with Jean Brau (Interviewer) on Mar. 6, 1991 (Date) at Brussels (City), Belgium (State).

It is my understanding that a typed transcript will be made of such tape(s) and returned to me for any necessary corrections. I hereby agree that if for any reason I have not returned the transcript with my corrections to the Institution for Social and Policy Studies within three months of the time it was sent to me, the Project Staff may edit the transcript and make it available for research and other use as provided here below.

In the understanding that the tape(s) and transcript(s) will be preserved at the United Nations and made available for historical, scholarly and (as deemed appropriate by the United Nations) public information purposes, and that copies will be placed on deposit at Yale University for research and study, I hereby grant, assign, and transfer legal titles and all literary rights in the tape(s) and transcript(s) to the United Nations. However, it is agreed that neither the United Nations nor Yale University will publish or authorize publication of the transcript(s) or any part thereof during my lifetime without my written permission.

Jacques de Thier  6 Mar. 1991
(Interviewee) (Date)

Jean Brau  March 6, 1991
(Interviewer) (Date)

(For the Institution of Social and Policy Studies)