

My name is Léon Braconnier, and I was born in 1952. I have lived in many different places. As a child, I first lived in Beho in Belgium, where my mother is from. We then moved to Bonnevoie and from there to Wiltz. Following that, we moved to Merl, and after finishing my studies, I lived in Kirchberg. I have been living in Clervaux with my family since 1981.

Can you tell us a bit about your parents? Their names and what they did for a living?

My mother was called Léonie Pint and, as I mentioned, she came from Beho in Belgium. She was born in 1926. Her parents owned a convenience store. My father was from Marnach and was born in 1929. He had a difficult childhood because his father died when he was still young. He had two sisters, and two older brothers who had to go to war. Both of them deserted, and the family was relocated to Silesia, where their mother became ill and died. They say she wasn't cared for properly. As a result, the children were orphaned and my father and his two sisters were sent back to Luxembourg, where they stayed with relatives, his two brothers were still in hiding. The children were therefore 'pupilles de la Nation', meaning war orphans who the State was supposed to take care of.

Can you tell us a bit about your siblings?

I had two younger brothers, but I always regretted not having a sister. I did get on well with my brothers, though.

Who played an important role in your childhood?

My parents and siblings, of course, but my teachers at school were also very important to me. That was partly in Wiltz and partly in Merl. Those people had a big influence on me. Back then, the student-teacher relationship was different compared to today. I have some particularly fond memories of a teacher in Wiltz, Roger Spautz, who taught me in the first grade. He had a new method that had been approved by the Ministry of Education. I think it's a shame that this method wasn't more widely adopted. On the first day of school, he wrote on the board 'We are all in school', and by the time we went home that day, we could already read those six words. We knew each word. We didn't write single letters. This man had a profound impact on me because after only a short time, I could read Grimm's Fairy Tales and Andersen's stories. I was able to read straight away. He really did have a big influence on me.

In the first question, you mentioned that you moved around a lot, including from the capital to the Oesling. Why was that?

For the first two years of my life, I lived in Beho, my mother's hometown. My father worked for an architect in Gouvy at the time. But he didn't see any career prospects there, so we moved to Bonnevoie, where he started working for a well-known architect, Mr Frieden. We stayed in the capital a few years, but I don't remember why he then switched to the National Roads Administration. Maybe he felt limited working for this architect, since he was a qualified construction technician and draughtsman. He didn't have a degree in architecture. Because of the war, he'd never had a proper opportunity to study. So he switched to the National Roads Administration, where he worked in the Waterways and Dams department, or something like that. In 1956, we moved to Wiltz because of the dam in Esch-sur-Sûre, as my father was part of that department. It was a pioneer in this field, since there weren't yet any dams in Luxembourg at that time. During the construction of the dam, we lived in Wiltz for five years.

What are your childhood memories of the reservoir and dam being built?

As mentioned, we moved to Wiltz, where we lived in three different places over the course of five years. My father drove to Esch-sur-Sûre every day to work on the construction of the dam. At home, it was the main topic of conversation, so we knew everything about it. The National Roads Administration gave him a Jeep with a telephone in it, complete with a handset and a large aerial. The dam was almost like a part of the family. My father talked about it a lot and drove there every day, initially in the Jeep and later in our VW Beetle. Sometimes, we went with him as a family. At first, it was just me and my mum, as my brothers weren't born until we lived in Wiltz. He would occasionally take us to the construction site with him on weekends. Our lives revolved around the project.

So, as the child of someone involved in the construction, it had a big impact on you?

Yes, it did. We experienced the entire construction from start to finish. I remember how a wooden barrack was set up for the engineers and architects. Today, it would probably be a container. It was an impressive building, and I still remember it well. I drank my first Coca-Cola there. Once, we were sitting there when he suddenly opened the fridge and said he had something new from America that I should try. I loved it, but my mum wasn't so keen. She thought it tasted awful. All in all, we were there quite often, and Esch-sur-Sûre is firmly etched in my memory.

You mentioned the barrack, which would probably be a container today. Can you describe your father's working conditions?

I don't know exactly what his daily routine was like. The offices had large drawing tables, and there were no phones or computers back then. My father was always on the move. He didn't spend the whole day sitting in the office. He talked to people a lot and supervised the work. Those involved in the construction all got on well. He called most of them by their first names. It was like a family. There is a photo that always reminds me of the famous picture of the men in New York sitting on the girder. In this photo, my father is seen with two workers and two engineers. One of them was his boss, Mr René Heinerscheid. Some of the workers came to our home from time to time. I still remember Giovanni from Italy. He had been through a lot on a personal level and was grateful to be able to work there. It was one big family.

To what extent did the reservoir project change your father's life?

A lot. He was associated with this project all his life. It was the biggest project of his career. Even after we moved to Merl, he continued to drive to Esch-sur-Sûre two or three times a week until he retired. He was also involved in the construction of the SEBES building. Right up until his very last day of work, the phone never stopped ringing. He was the only one left who had been involved from the beginning, so he knew everything. When problems arose, people called him, because he had devoted his life to the project.

You told us that you were often on the construction site with your father. And you also went there a lot afterwards. What is it like as a child to see this huge structure?

It's impressive, of course. First and foremost, you admire your father. But you also marvel at the structure, which seems even bigger when you're a kid. When the dam was finished, my father took us to see the turbines that generate electricity. Seeing the sheer force of the water rushing in and flowing through the turbines to produce electricity is a sight to behold, but also a bit frightening. Especially the noise. But after my father explained everything to me, it wasn't so bad anymore. I was always very impressed by it all. Including the SEBES building later on. It's amazing to have the opportunity to see these huge facilities. Not everyone gets the chance because not everyone has

access to the building. Those turbines have stayed in my memory. When I look at the drawings, I can almost hear and feel the force of them.

You mentioned that your father often went to the Oesling even after the project was completed. How was it for you as a family, that he continued to invest so much time into it?

Although he had his office at the National Roads Administration in the capital, he still drove to Esch-sur-Sûre two or three times a week. It was around 50 kilometres from Merl. It was a bit stressful for the family. My mother was an anxious person, and in the winter, she always worried when he was away too long. She would always think something bad had happened. And she had to go through this two or three times a week. He would finish work late and then set off home. Around 6 PM, she knew he'd be on his way. If he wasn't back by 7 PM, she would think he'd had an accident. We three boys would sit by the window, waiting for him to pull up outside. Sometimes, he wouldn't get home until 8 PM or even later. That's when my mum would start to cry. There were no mobile phones back then. Today, you would simply call the other person and ask where they are. But back then, you just had to wait and worry. It was hard for us, this worry when he was late getting home. I also have a little anecdote: On his way back once, he was driving behind Nicolas Koob, a Luxembourgish rally driver at the time. My father loved driving and sometimes drove a bit faster. Of course, he only had a normal car. But when he saw that Nicolas Koob was driving in front of him, he wanted to keep up. But he didn't manage it for very long!

Can you use your father's drawing to explain how the dam was actually built?

It's very interesting because, as we know, there are several ways to build a dam. One is to construct a very thick, straight wall, like they do in a lot of places. But here, we have an elegant and intricate structure. My father always explained it to us with sketches and by showing us around the site in person. The wall is about 4 metres thick at the bottom. As it rises, it gets gradually thinner, and at the top, it is only 1.5 metres thick. We always wondered how such a thin wall could hold the entire reservoir, which contains 60 million cubic metres of water. If you consider that one cubic metre of water weighs one tonne, that's 60 million tonnes! We always wondered how this was even possible and why the wall was so thin. He explained that it was due to the design. The wall is convex, and the entire force of the reservoir is channelled to the sides by the curvature. The wall distributes the full weight. He loved the elegance of this design. Even today, when I talk about it, I'm still impressed. Without this solution, it would have needed to stack up a vast amount of concrete to distribute the force. It was a very clever solution.

Did the reservoir also play a role in your father's life in terms of tourism?

No, absolutely not. Although the tourism aspect is very important today, I don't remember it at all back then. He never talked about it. He was only interested in the technical side and the subsequent production of drinking water. I know that his boss's son once went there with a sailboat – just like many others did later – and that many people went there to swim. I'm amazed by the scale of this aspect today. Back then, this wasn't even discussed. There was only the beauty of the reservoir. And the tranquillity. It completely changed the landscape there. It was a huge encroachment on nature, something that would probably spark a lot of debate today. The people living in the valley were forced to leave, and my father had many photos of the houses that were flooded. Back then, the State had more power than it does now. The reservoir was always very beautiful from the start. The tourism aspect was not a subject at the time. It only became one later.

So you never went walking or swimming at the reservoir as a family?

We did go there sometimes and stood on top of the dam, admiring the reservoir. Even today, it still has a calming effect on you. But we never really went there for walks. I only remember how after finishing the first cycle of secondary school, I went on a bike ride through Luxembourg with some friends and we spent the first night at the new youth hostel in Lultzhausen. But I never felt the urge to swim in the reservoir or take a boat out on it. I love the reservoir, but I don't see it as a tourist attraction.

Can you remember when the reservoir was drained in 1991? Did you watch it?

Yes, I watched it. I didn't find it particularly nice, though. To me, it looked like a lunar landscape – wild, muddy and ugly. But I'm still glad I saw it. It was interesting to see the dam as a whole and not just the top part. And the spot where water is drawn for the drinking water facility. I don't regret seeing it, but it certainly wasn't pretty. It's much nicer when there's water inside. It was moving, though, not least because of the sheer size. It was impressive, but not beautiful.

What role does the reservoir still play in your life today?

The reservoir plays an important role in my subconscious. Especially if you consider that the water from the reservoir accounts for 80 per cent of Luxembourg's drinking water. Eighty per cent – let that sink in! It means that eight out of ten Luxembourgers drink water from the reservoir or use it for washing every day. I find that really impressive, and I feel quite proud that my father and my family contributed to it. I sometimes think the Esch-sur-Sûre dam is the most important wall in the country. No other wall in Luxembourg plays such an important role. That makes me kind of proud.