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ZENON GELDOF – BELGIAN MASTER CHEF

MAIRTIN MAC CON IOMAIRE

ZENON GELDOF was born in Boesinge (Ypres) Belgium in 1882 and served his time in confectionery in Bruges. His early experience in London's top hotels led in 1903 to his appointment as grill cook and pastry cook in The Automobile Proprietary Ltd. in Piccadilly. He met his wife Amelia in London and following his appointment to the Bray Head Hotel in County Wicklow he chose to make Ireland his home. He soon established himself as a chef with a reputation second to none, being awarded numerous prizes. At the Irish Food and Cookery Exhibition in the Rotunda he was awarded Gold Medal and 1st special prize in class 'Y' 'Decorative Socles'.

He worked in the Royal Marine Hotel (1907-10), became chef de cuisine at both the Central Hotel Dublin (1910-13) and Jury's Hotel College Green (1913-1917). During the First World War, as a Belgian citizen he went to Manchester to offer his services in the army but was put in Reserve Group Number Seven since he had a young family. The end of the war had called groups one to six. As head chef in Jury's during the 1916 uprising, he experienced bullets flying through his kitchen and needed a specific permit to allow him home from work at night. He spent a number of years in Cork, first as chef/manager of the Saint Anne's Hill Hydro in Blarney (1917-19) and then also as chef and manager of the Crosshaven Hotel in West Cork (1919-21) before returning to Dublin. During the Irish War of Independence, Crosshaven ignored the 'curfew' laws in force in Cork city and Zenon's son Herbert recalls that the 'Black and Tans' mixed nightly with Irish rebels in the bar rooms there in a truce of mutual drinking.

In 1921 Geldof and his wife opened the Café Belge at 34 Dame Street and later the Patisserie Belge at 1 Leinster Street below the famous Finns private Hotel and Restaurant, where James Joyce in 1904 met Nora Barnacle. In Leinster Street on his son's confirmation day he was held at gunpoint, mistaken as a spy, until his wife, a powerful woman, intervened and sorted out the misunderstanding. On leaving, one pistol-wheeling soldier patted the terrified boy (Sonny) on the head and said 'this must be the happiest day of your life'.

When the Plaza Restaurant was opened in Middle Abbey Street on the 8 November 1928, the role of manager was bestowed on Zenon Geldof. Newspaper reports from the time describe the scale of this fine restaurant: 'Six hundred to a thousand can sit down at tables and every patron can be assured that each morsel has been prepared by one of the eight French chefs who work under the direction of the head chef, lately chef de cuisine on the famous Palais George V., Paris'. (Dublin Evening Mail 8 November 1928). Eight French chefs were employed and in accordance with the wishes of the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the Plaza took six Irish boys in for training under Zenon Geldof's management 'thus providing opportunities for brilliant careers for ambitious Irish youths'. The Plaza proved to be too ambitious for Dublin at the time and having failed to acquire a spirits licence, closed its doors after over a year in business. A fire later severely damaged the building.

Zenon Geldof set up the Belgica-Hibernia Trading Company importing floor coverings, café furniture and food from Belgium and wine from France. He joined the newly formed Irish Tourist Association. In 1929 Albert King of Belgium presented him with the Chevalier de L'Orde de Leopold II in Brussels for his work in restaurants abroad and representing Belgian firms in Ireland.

He had four children, Herbert (Sonny), Robert (Bob), May and Clio. Bob followed his fathers' profession and worked as a chef in London's Carlton Club and later with the Cunard Line, crewing on the Queen Mary's maiden and many subsequent voyages, before returning to Ireland. Zenon was tragically killed in 22nd June 1939, aged 57, in a car crash along with a French wine exporter from Bordeaux, Monsier Pierre Peyrelongue in Waterford. His eldest son, Herbert, took over the running of the Café Belge and the importation business. The Patisserie Belge shut during the war due to shortages of raw ingredients and the Café Belge was sold after the war. Zenon Geldof contributed immensely to improving the standard of Culinary Arts in Ireland by his exacting standards, innovative vision, excellent culinary skills and his contribution to the meticulous training of the next generation of Irish culinarians.

Máirtín Mac Con Iomaire is a lecturer in Culinary Arts at DIT Cathal Brugha Street and is writing his PhD on the History of Dublin Restaurants 1922-2000. He can be contacted at mairtin.macconiomaire@dit.ie.