

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Belgium and Antarctica

Grand Hotel  
Brussels, Belgium  
March 29, 1960

Mr. Richard Nolte  
Executive Director  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Dick:

Commandant Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery, a slight, youngish-looking man with a pronounced twitch in his right eye, hardly appears to be the dynamo of energy who, almost single-handed, has been responsible for the remarkable revival of Belgium's interest in Antarctica.

Born in 1920, he was, during his youth, intensely aware of the reputation of his father, Baron Adrien de Gerlache, who had become internationally famous in the early years of the century for his leadership of the 1897-1899 Belgian Antarctic Expedition aboard the Belgica.



This vessel, which drifted in the Antarctic pack ice along the western coast of the Palmer Peninsula for over a year, had been the first in history to remain within the Antarctic region throughout an entire winter season.

In 1940, at the age of 20, de Gerlache entered the Belgian Air Force. He was soon moved to England, where he spent most of his seven years of military service flying with the R.A.F. It was during this period that he first met Francois Bastin, a young Air Force meteorologist, who was destined to lead the second Belgian Antarctic Expedition, which just returned to Belgium this month, after a year in Antarctica.

Following the war, de Gerlache returned to Belgium, worked in Ghent as an engineer, married and began raising a family, which today includes a charming wife and three children, all of whom live at the Chateau de Millem.

During 1955, when the International Geophysical Year meetings were fast crystallizing<sup>ing</sup> an internationally coordinated crash research program in Antarctica, Captain Bastin was working closely with Dr. Edmond Hoge (of the Royal Meteorological Institute), who was proposing that the Belgian I.G.Y. Committee sponsor a Belgian Antarctic expedition.

In early 1956 de Gerlache became interested in the efforts of Hoge and Bastin, which had been largely unsuccessful. Although the proposal had been backed by many military and scientific leaders, the Government had exhibited little interest.

Aware that Belgium appeared to be letting an expedition to Antarctica go by default or inaction, de Gerlache began to approach responsible Belgian officials on his own initiative. He argued cogently that the only way Belgium could possibly have a voice in international discussions regarding Antarctica would be to mount an expedition under the aegis of the I.G.Y.\*

His plan was to hire a ship, gather together a group of scientists, obtain the necessary equipment, and establish a base on the Antarctic continent. However, fighting an almost complete lack of interest by the public, all his attempts failed until he was able to obtain the support of both Kings - largely through an appeal to national pride and honor arising from the accomplishments of his father a half-century earlier.

Finally, the Belgian Council of Ministers gave their approval in October 1956 to de Gerlache's plan for the organization of an eighteen-month Belgian Antarctic expedition, including the establishment and occupation of a winter station - all to be within the framework of the I.G.Y.



CAPT. BASTIN

Some \$800,000 was provided, a sum that was almost matched by subsequent contributions from both private industry and later from the public. The government grant was quite unique in that it was made to de Gerlache personally. His father had indeed left a legacy!

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\* This argument struck a responsive chord with the Foreign Office. In 1948, in response to the ill-fated U.S. proposal to seven nations for the internationalization of Antarctica under United Nations auspices, Belgium (although not one of the recipients of the U.S. note) had expressed great interest in the proposal. In a memorandum to the U.S. Department of State in October 1948, it was stated that the Belgian discovery and investigation of "certain" Antarctic areas during the Belgica expedition entitled Belgium to make its voice heard at any international conference that might be called to consider a convention for the administration of Antarctica.

This attitude was repeated on October 15, 1959, at the opening plenary session of the Antarctic Conference in Washington by Belgian representative Viscount Obert de Thieusies, who stated: "Belgium has the right to be invited to these sessions. It is proud of this. Its contribution to the scientific exploration of the Antarctic is not, as a matter of fact, entirely recent....."

Soon a "Comité d'Honneur" was established with a membership including both Kings, Cardinal van Roey, the Prime Minister, several cabinet ministers, university presidents, and military leaders. With this support, and with the aid of the Belgian I.G.Y. Committee for the preparation of the scientific program, de Gerlache began the actual organization of the expedition - an activity in which the government had given him free rein.

This proved to be a major task. Belgium had no experienced Antarctic veterans, no equipment, very little information and a limited budget. But, with unbounded enthusiasm, the small group began to prepare for a major expedition - which was scheduled to leave in a year's time.

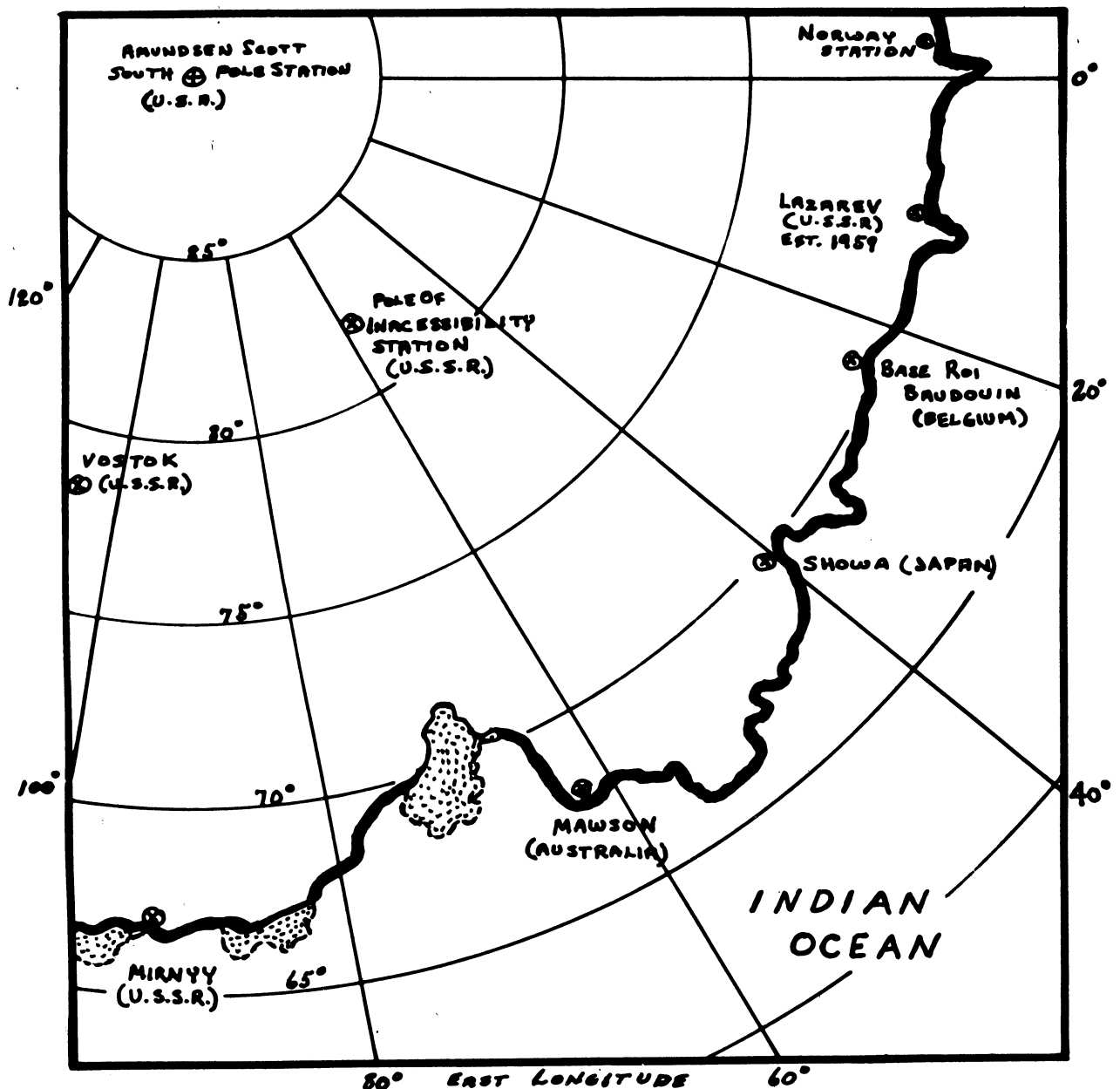
Captain Xavier de Maere d'Artrycke, second in command, was despatched to the U.S. to gather as much information as possible. de Gerlache accompanied the French Antarctic Expedition to Terre Adelie during the austral summer of 1956-1957. Taking copious notes on everything from food to the performance of vehicles, he even participated in the overland tractor trip to Charcot, the French inland station.

Other expeditionary members were sent to Greenland to purchase and train huskies for anticipated sledging operations; "Sno-Cats" were ordered from Oregon for mechanized over-snow transportation. During the spring and summer of 1957, preparations went ahead feverishly. In June the entire expedition's complement travelled to Switzerland for snow and ice training. The pilots practised landing ski-equipped aircraft.

American pre-fabricated Clements panels were ordered for the construction of the base. Scientific equipment was begged, borrowed or purchased, clothing and food obtained. A host of Belgian institutions assisted: le Centre de Physique du Globe, l'Institut Royal Météorologique, several universities and various services of the Ministry of National Defense.

The Princess Ragnhild Coast was selected as the location for the base, at which some 17 men were expected to winter during 1958. Halfway between the projected Norwegian and Japanese I.G.Y. stations, the Belgian station would provide important data for the I.G.Y. network in Antarctica (which eventually totalled some 60 stations.)

Finally everything was ready, and the expedition left Antwerp in mid-November 1957 aboard two Norwegian sealers, the Polarhav and the Polarsirkel, which had been chartered for the voyage. With de Gerlache as "chef d'expedition" and pilot were 16 others including four meteorologists, four other scientists, a surgeon, four radio-men and mechanics, a man to take care of the huskies, a photographer, and an all-round helper. In addition were a party of three to operate the helicopter during the summer season. Food and fuel for two years were taken along with 24 huskies, a small single-engine aircraft, a helicopter and two new four-pontoon-drive "Sno-Cats."



### POSITION OF BASE ROI BAUDOUIN IN ANTARCTICA

By late December the ships had easily penetrated the ice-pack and reached their destination at Breid Bay. A site (70° 26' S., 23° 19' E.) for the station was chosen about 10 miles "inland", but still on floating shelf ice. Established in just eleven days, the station was officially named "Base Roi Baudouin." Thus, after an absence of 60 years, Belgium had again returned to Antarctica.

While de Gerlache and his companions were settling in at their winter base in Antarctica, an administrative struggle was raging many thousands of miles to the north - whether or not to continue an internationally coordinated Antarctic research program after the termination of the I.G.Y. In February 1958 the first meeting of the newly formed international Special Committee on Antarctic Research (S.C.A.R.) was convened at The Hague. The Belgian delegates stated that no decision had yet been made in Belgium for the continuation of the program, but that every effort would be made to obtain government support.

The struggle was successful - In June 1958 the Belgian parliament agreed to provide 35 million francs (\$700,000) for a second year's operations. Captain Bastin was chosen to head the expedition.. In true Antarctic fashion he found that he had only five months in which to get ready.

Again feverish operations took place. During the ensuing months personnel and supplies were obtained. Administratively, the organization changed to the "Centre National pour la Campagne Antarctique 1958-1959-1960." The name was again changed in December 1958 to its present form: "Centre National de Recherches Polaires (C.N.R.P.)." A small staff was left behind as Bastin and his 22 men departed to relieve de Gerlache.

Meanwhile, an exciting drama was being unfolded in the Antarctic. During November and December the field party was busy making limited oversnow traverses and photographic reconnaissance flights along the coast. Early in December de Gerlache and a small party set off on a flight - but this time did not return.

An immediate radio appeal was made by the Belgians at the base through the international I.G.Y. Antarctic communications network. The first to respond were the Russians, who quickly prepared an emergency rescue flight. The Soviet aircraft, piloted by veteran polar flier V. Perov, made an unprecedented 1900 mile flight across uncharted territory via the Australian and Japanese bases to reach the Belgian station in mid-December.\*

After a repeated search pattern was carried out, the grounded aircraft was finally sighted on the polar icecap. A note was found stating that the party had set out on foot for a depot station some 80 miles away. Again the Russians flew in concentric circles - finally locating the group and bringing them back to Base Roi Baudouin.

De Gerlache and the first wintering party returned to Belgium in early 1959 as heroes warmly praised by their country - de Gerlache being given a life baronetcy for his work.

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\* Although the Soviet press made much of this exploit of their Antarctic expedition, the Soviet Union has proven on many occasions its willingness to respond to calls of distress in the Antarctic.

In the past year the Belgian Government has made the decision to continue the operation of their Antarctic station for at least ten years. Funds are to be made available annually through the Ministry of Public Instruction to C.N.R.P., which has been charged with the responsibility for administering the continuing program.

The scientific program is arranged through the assistance of the "Comité Spécial Belge pour les Recherches dans l'Antarctique," appointed by the Belgian Royal Academy of Sciences. International scientific liaison is maintained with S.C.A.R. through the representative of this committee, Professor Van Meighem, a world-famous meteorologist. In addition the Foreign Ministry maintains representation in the interim consultative body created by the Final Act of the Antarctic Treaty, signed in December 1959 in Washington. Finally, considerable logistic support is regularly provided through the cooperation of several agencies within the National Defense Ministry.

Although de Gerlache is continuing his interest in the capacity of Vice-President of the seven-man governing Bureau of C.N.R.P. (the President is Professor van Meighem,) his major work has been completed. He has been entirely successful in organizing government and public support for an important and complex Antarctic expedition. He led the first wintering party, and has since organized the establishment of a permanent Belgian polar research organization. Currently acting as an attorney in private industry, de Gerlache is still active in policy planning for C.N.R.P.

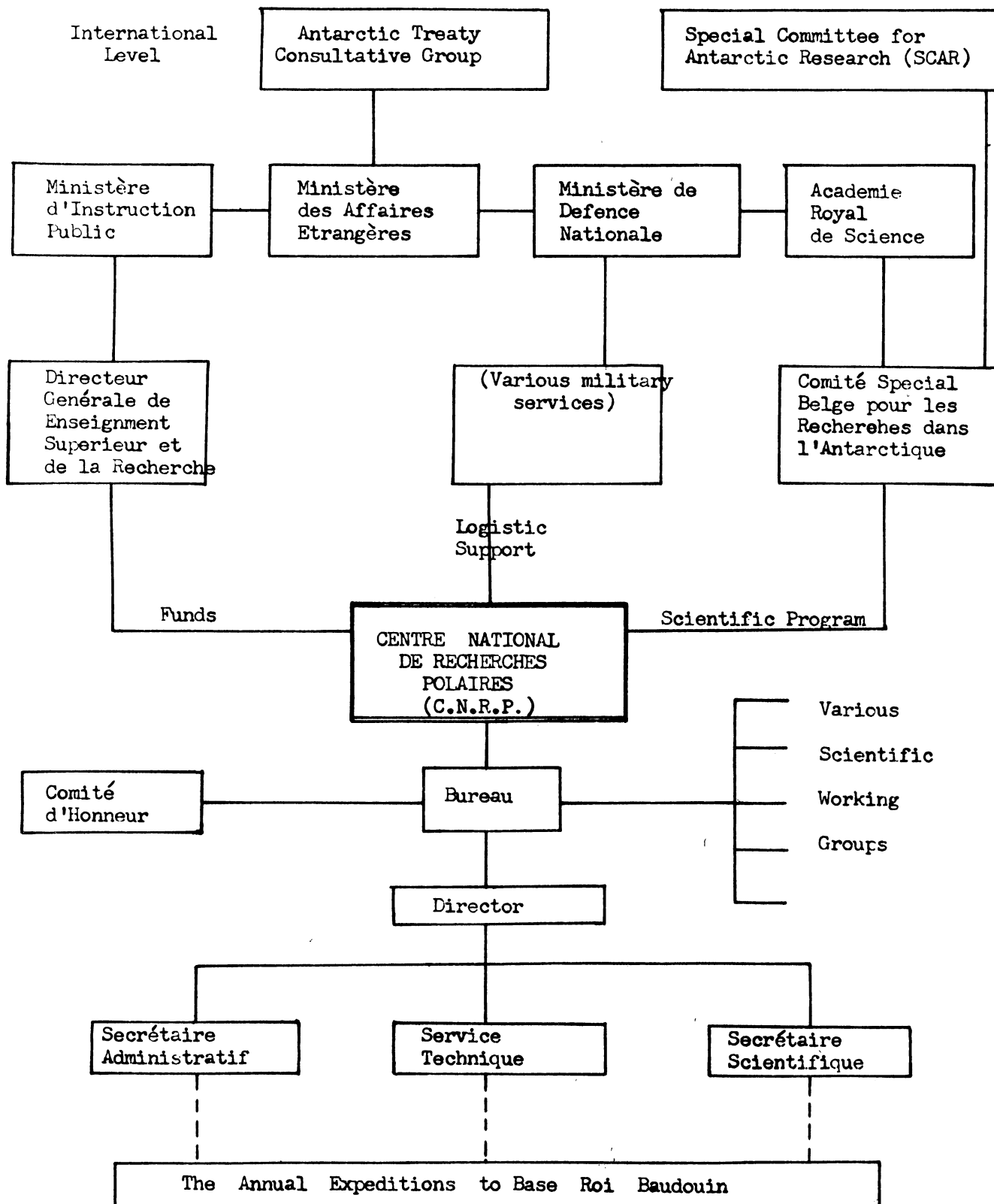
In a quiet corner of Brussels a small but utilitarian building has been provided by the government for use by C.N.R.P. (29 rue Vautier.) Located here are the administrative offices, a small library, conference room, and space for logistics planning.



The permanent staff is composed of about ten men and women, who are augmented for perhaps six months each year by the personnel of the forthcoming expedition. At present there is no actual director, although the leader of each expedition functions as such while he is preparing for the departure of his group. He is given considerable freedom in dealing with personnel and equipment. Each expedition makes use of the central facilities and services provided by the permanent personnel at C.N.R.P.

There are three groupings in the office: (i) Service administratif, (ii) Service technique, and (iii) Service scientifique (headed by Mlle. Paulette Doyen.)

# ORGANIZATION OF THE BELGIAN ANTARCTIC PROGRAM



During my recent visit to C.N.R.P. I was pleasantly surprised to find Mlle. Doyen. I had met and worked with her at several international I.G.Y. conferences, during the period when she worked as scientific assistant to Professor Marcel Nicolet (also a Belgian,) the secretary-general of C.S.A.G.I. (the international central governing committee for the I.G.Y.)

In her affable manner she busily dug up documents, dragged me around to meet people, cleared others out of an office so that I would have some room to work, and generally was extremely helpful. When I ventured the remark that polar people outside Belgium were somewhat confused about the workings of her organization, she roared with laughter, saying "so are we!"

A graduate geographer, Mlle. Doyen is extremely well versed in the administrative techniques necessary in running a complex scientific research program. In the absence of a formal director, most of the operating responsibility at C.N.R.P. rests on her capable shoulders - although being a woman in a traditionally male field of operations provides many difficulties. Nevertheless, she is unique in her trade.

Among other accomplishments, such as managing the preparation of all publications, she maintains a smoothly running office - if a bit informal by normal American standards. One morning, while I was reviewing some documentary material, the quiet of the office was punctuated by a phone call from one of the secretaries in another office. She had just finished a lengthy filing operation and would I like to come up and join the rest of the staff in a small celebration? I would and did.



At 11 AM I found myself in the conference room clinking glasses and drinking wine in front of a huge stuffed penguin.

The occasion provided the group with an opportunity to pepper me with questions regarding various aspects of American life. Those that knew some English tried it - the others simply spoke French; fortunately none attempted Flemish, or I would still be there.

A few hours later I was called upstairs again - this time to say hello to "someone" over the telephone. As I tentatively started with a "bon jour," the voice at the other end informed me that it belonged to Major Guy Derom, who was speaking to me in perfect English over a 10,000 mile radio-telephone hookup from Base Roi Baudouin in Antarctica.



After my initial surprise ended, Major Derom, the current leader of the station, launched out in an extremely sophisticated conversation lasting some 45 minutes. He asked many questions regarding United States efforts, especially the plans for Little America Station (which has been abandoned due to lack of funds.) In reply to my questions, he conversed freely about his men, their program, hopes and problems.



Place Brouckere, Brussels: Exhibition, Belgian Antarctic Program



One of the most interesting accomplishments of de Gerlache and his Antarctic group has been the astonishing change in the attitude of the public toward Belgian participation in the international Antarctic program. Easily noticeable now is genuine pride in the achievements that such a small nation has made alongside the expeditionary giants.

Practically the first thing I noticed upon arrival in Brussels was a colorful exhibition of the Belgian Antarctic expeditionary effort located right in the middle of Place Brouckere, the busiest and most fashionable square in the city. Financed by the Belgian branch of British Petroleum, the display included maps, posters with descriptive text in both of Belgium's official languages, tents, Sno-Cats, and various other paraphernalia of an expedition. The exhibition consistently drew large crowds - even in the rain.

At lunch, as we swapped stories, de Gerlache explained his work of the past four years. Impeccably dressed, driving a Lancia sports car, with a solid reputation for achievement, de Gerlache was the picture of a successful man. Nevertheless, he did not appear over-confident as he sketched out Belgium's future polar plans. Still scarred from his battles with parliamentary and other government functionaries, he prefers to move carefully through the maze of Belgian officialdom, who are involved in the prosecution of the Antarctic program.

De Gerlache feels that Belgium would agree to an international administration for Antarctica - especially, as she, not having made any claims, has little to lose. However, he agrees with Britain that the governing body for such an organization should be limited to representatives from the 12 nations that participated in the I.G.Y. Antarctic program, and who were the original signatories to the Antarctic Treaty of December 1959 in Washington. De Gerlache shares the feeling with his countrymen that Belgium has now proved her right to participate in such an organization - and must continue to maintain her operations to sustain that right.

With men like de Gerlache, Bastin and Derom, Belgium has little to fear.

Yours sincerely,

*John Hanessian, Jr.*

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