

Léon Paul Alexandre Germain Champy

*Born 20/08/1864, Saint-Josse-ten-Noode (Brussels, Belgium)
Deceased, Antwerp, 07/09/1938, 74 years*

*Married to: Elvira Marie Virginie Hassewer
Born 05/10/1872, Antwerp. Deceased, Antwerp, 31/07/1954, 81 years
One of the seamstresses of the balloons at the 1894 Antwerp fair
11 Children (9 girls, 2 boys), 4 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren*

Léon's father came from an established French family of winegrowers active in the business for more than 200 years. His grandfather left France for political reasons. A gifted student, Léon's father lectured for a while at the new school of Pharmacy of the Free University of Brussels (ULB). In the middle of the 19th century he then created his own factory for chemical and pharmaceutical products, which remained prosperous until the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. According to the family, he was in contact with Ernest Solvay, a few years younger than himself, who set up business in Saint-Josse-ten-Noode too. Later, a company called "Champy & fils" was created in Antwerp. Its various activities concerned among others the chemical domain of sugars and alcohol, probably also the production of acetylene as well as activities in the new field of electricity and telecom, this obviously with his sons. Almost nothing remains in the family archives about this period. The elder son was probably a chemical engineer and Léon, the youngest, was trained in electricity and phone technology. Where, how? No valid assumptions. We only know that both sons, and one sister began working together and did so for more than 30 years, until death ended their partnership.

Léon Champy was a pleasant young man, skilled and well trained physically and surely a balloon enthusiast. In 1891, Léon and le Chevalier Le Clément de Saint Marq brought together a sealed letter to the Royal Academy of Sciences, Letters and Arts of Belgium. They were thus well acquainted several years before the Antwerp fair. Le Clément de Saint Marcq, of distinguished descent, was a military engineer renowned for his activities in the balloon technology of the army and later as one of the first Belgian pilots. They both became public figures during the balloon adventure of the 1894 fair. We still have a picture of the "De Beukelaar" balloon. And also two poor pictures of my grandfather and the American circus artist Pawnee Bill test-flying one of his balloons. Nothing remains of the visit of King Leopold II to their factory.

In August 1901, the two Champy brothers began to acquire patents. In 1904 they founded the company "Champy frères" which persisted for more than 30 years. One of its objectives was to produce acetylene to light the streets, which remained unproductive and was then replaced by acetylene for autogenous welding. Patents (1913-14) about cylinders to be filled with compressed dangerous fluids, e.g. ethylene, were their main contribution to technology. They developed the process with the French company "Air Liquide" and had their offices and factory on a common ground until Air Liquide was urged out of the suburbs of Antwerp after two rather impressive explosions. The process is still in use today worldwide.

Besides his main activity, Léon was also a serving officer in the civil army “Garde civique” and remained so until old age. In 1894, this helped him to get over the disappointment of the failed De Beukelaar balloon.

But Léon Champy was most of all a convinced pioneer of Esperanto and he is still well remembered as a secretary and later as a member of the board of the Antwerp association. His eldest daughter joined him and remained active in the field until 1984. When touring Belgium in 1911, Ludwig Zamenhof stayed at his home in Antwerp.

A few documents lead us to think that Léon was an unconventional figure, fundamentally socialist in personality though maybe with the paternalist style that prevailed at the time. In one circumstance at least, he is known to have taken the side of indicted workers against their bosses.