

Joseph Retinger, Memoirs of an Eminence Grise

Caption: In his memoirs, Joseph Retinger, one of the founder members of the European Movement, describes the circumstances surrounding the creation of the European League for Economic Cooperation (ELEC) and the first actions taken by the organisation.

Source: RETINGER, Joseph. Memoirs of an Eminence Grise. POMIAN, John (Ed.). Sussex: University Press, 1972.

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URL: http://www.cvce.eu/obj/joseph_retinger_memoirs_of_an_eminence_grise-en-9bfcae37-96f9-4187-83d5-346e9cfda4b1.html

Publication date: 23/10/2012

Joseph Retinger, *Memoirs of an Eminence Grise*

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In 1946 I felt the time had again come to make a new effort in the direction of the unity of Europe. I made a start by giving a lecture at the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House on 7 May under the title *European Continent?* A few weeks later I went to Brussels, where I had a long talk with Paul van Zeeland, who agreed with me that we should try to revive the concept of the unity of Europe by applying it first to the economic field. Thus we started the Independent League for Economic Co-operation — a clumsy title, but the word “independent” was intended to convey that we were in no way associated with any government; while “economic co-operation” spoke for itself. We omitted the word “European” because we wanted to have the help of extra-European countries; first of all the United States and Canada, and also Russia, which we saw as a continent in itself. While in Belgium I also talked with Paul-Henri Spaak and Roger Motz, who both concurred in the idea, and that is how the League was started in Brussels in June 1946. Mr. Van Zeeland, who was not yet in the Government, had a good deal of time to devote to the League and until he later became Foreign Minister was extremely active, travelling round, contacting people and promoting our ideas.

Neither van Zeeland nor I had to alter any of our views on Europe, but in those days of feverish political activity, both in the domestic and international fields, we thought it better to limit ourselves to practical suggestions on economic matters. In fact at that time, not only were conditions chaotic, but there was a complete dearth of ideas as to how to overcome economic difficulties. There was as yet no Marshall Plan and Europe was critically short of raw materials and food and could not afford to buy them from overseas. But we never considered the unity of Europe, especially in the economic field, as being limited to the Western part of Europe. We believed, and I think rightly, that the solution to aim at should be such that both Western and Eastern Europe could co-operate for the economic welfare of the Continent. We tried to establish sections of the League in every European country we could reach. From Brussels I went to The Hague, and here again, my Dutch friends, and especially Senator Pieter Kerstens, gave us their full support and at once started to organize the Dutch Section of the League.

Coming back to London I consulted my old friend, Major General Sir Colin Gubbins, who by that time had left the Army and joined industry. He too proved enthusiastic and helped me to start the League in Britain. Although later he himself never took a very active part, he always gave good advice and helped with practical matters. He suggested, for instance, that I approach Sir Harold Butler, former Director of the International Labour Office and later Minister in Washington, who had just retired and had a good deal of spare time. Sir Colin also put me in touch with Edward Beddington Behrens. He had been a brilliant young officer in the First World War and, after a spell at the International Labour Office, became a well-known industrialist and financier. Among others who joined the League in London were Leslie Hore-Belisha, Harry Price, Harold Macmillan, Peter Thorneycroft, Henry Hopkinson (now Lord Colyton) and Roy Harrod.

As for France, we thought the best man to approach would be Daniel Serruys. As a young man he had worked with Clemenceau and had been Secretary of the French Delegation at the Congress of Versailles. Later he negotiated many important international economic and financial agreements. When I saw him in 1946 he had already retired from Government service and was on the board of the great chemical firm of St Gobain and the Chairman of the Union Economique et Douanière formed many years before the War to promote free trade in Europe. Paul van Zeeland, a friend of Serruys, had written to tell him of my visit and I was very glad when Serruys mentioned at the start that he had recently written a pamphlet on French economics laying great stress on some form of economic unity in Europe. He too joined us without hesitation.

At that time Serruys was already quite an old man, with a distinguished appearance, an amazing memory, and an extraordinary facility of speech. He knew everybody in the Western economic world and, notwithstanding his dictatorial manner, he managed to interest many important people in our ideas, and brought into the French Section of the League François Poncet, Michel Debré, Fould, Lacour Gayet, Etienne Giscard d'Estaing, Christian Monnier, André Voisin and André Noël.

Mr. van Zeeland arranged for the setting up of the Luxembourg Section, under the chairmanship of Mr. Guill Konsbruck. He also took in hand Italy, and obtained the support of Ugo La Malfa. Later I also went to Italy and found much goodwill on the part of the Government, but nothing was really done for quite some time until the late Senator Enrico Falck took an active interest and formed the Italian Section of the League.

We also tried, but without success, to organize a Section in Portugal. Our efforts in Switzerland also failed. In Austria, however, and later in Sweden, Sections were organized. For obvious political reasons we did not think it wise at that stage to try to organize a German Section. It was not until the Congress of Europe at The Hague in May 1948 that we began seriously to think about it. Later, under the leadership of Herr Hermann Abs, the German Section greatly contributed to the work of the League.

I also went to Czechoslovakia and had talks with Jan Masaryk, but although he was strongly in favour of the idea he could not act without the knowledge and approval of the Kremlin.

One of our first tasks was to write a letter to all the Foreign Ministers of Europe telling them of our organization and its aims. As a rule we received most encouraging replies, although in some cases they were obviously merely dictated by courtesy. Our letters were also sent to the Soviet Foreign Minister and to the Foreign Ministers of the newly-formed Eastern European Popular Republics adhering to the Soviet Union. To ensure our letter being delivered to Mr. Molotov, the then Soviet Foreign Minister, I gave it to the Soviet Ambassador in Paris, Mr. Bogomolov, whom I knew well when he was Soviet Ambassador to the Polish Government before diplomatic relations were broken, and with whom I had made the trip from Archangel to Scotland in 1941. We had no reply from the Russians.

In November 1946, I had a very long talk with Mr. Averell Harriman, American Ambassador in London, who showed the same keenness I had found among my European friends. He helped to arrange a trip to the United States and gave me the best possible advice. As a stateless Pole I naturally had difficulties in getting an American visa, but Averell Harriman was my sponsor and arranged my visit. He strongly believed in European unification and as Secretary of Commerce and later head of the European Co-operation Administration was responsible for the tremendous support the United States gave to this idea.

At that time (the end of 1946) I found in America a unanimous approval for our ideas among financiers, businessmen and politicians. Mr. Leffingwell, senior partner in J. P. Morgan's, Nelson and David Rockefeller, Alfred Sloan, Chairman of the Dodge Motor Company, Charles Hook, President of the American Rolling Mills Company, Sir William Wiseman, partner in Kuhn Loeb, George Franklin, and especially my old friend, Adolf Berle Jr, were all in favour, and Berle agreed to lead the American Section.

John Foster Dulles also agreed to help us and when he went to Moscow early in 1947 to attend a Conference we asked him — since we had had no reply from Molotov — to ascertain how the Russians would react to the idea. Dulles wrote back saying very bluntly that he had studied the Russians and that they were all for the unity of Europe on condition that it would be united under Russia. Later on, whenever we needed any assistance for the European Movement, Dulles was among those in America who helped us most.

A few months later, in March 1947, a meeting of the League was held in New York, which I attended with van Zeeland, Franz Leemans, Konsbruck and Kerstens. But after the Marshall Plan had been announced our American friends thought it preferable to concentrate their efforts on the American scene, and we in Europe, after a few months' experience, decided to confine our activities to Western Europe.

By the beginning of 1947 the League was firmly established. Meetings were held in Paris, London and Brussels and were well attended. Many useful studies were made and our voice began to be heard.

While we were forging ahead with our plans for the economic co-operation of Europe, three political organizations emerged on the scene. Mr. Churchill made his famous speech in Zurich on the unity of Europe on 19 September 1946, and some months later the United Europe Movement was set up by Mr. Duncan

Sandys in collaboration with Lord Layton, the Reverend Gordon Lang and many prominent, mainly Conservative, politicians. Then there was the Union of European Federalists which held its first Congress in the summer of 1947 in Amsterdam. Finally Count Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi came back to Europe from the States and started to organise the Interparliamentary Union.

Then in June 1947 George Marshall made his speech at Harvard, putting forward a plan which took his name.

These other movements for the unity of Europe were of great interest to us, and we decided that I should approach the United Europe Movement and the Federalists to see how we could all co-operate. So, early in 1947, on behalf of the League I went to see Duncan Sandys who, together with Reverend Gordon Lang, was Honorary Secretary of the United Europe Movement. I had only seen Sandys once or twice during the War, and remembered nothing about him except his red hair. I told him what we thought about co-ordinating the different Movements and he at once expressed full agreement. There and then we decided to call a small conference in Paris of the four existing organizations, and at the same time to approach the *Nouvelles Equipes Internationales* which was just being formed. The NEI was a Christian, or rather Catholic, organization which, in theory at least, was concerned with the whole world. We asked them to create a special section for Europe. In fact, however, the NEI confined its activities to Europe, and there was no need to do so.

Again, quite a lot of travelling had to be done in order to see various people, until finally on 20 July, we held a meeting in Paris with the representatives of the other movements and decided to create the Committee for the Co-ordination of the International Movements for European Unity. I should add that in the meantime Duncan Sandys, through his indomitable energy, succeeded in creating the *Conseil Français pour l'Unité Européenne*, which was a replica in France of the British Movement in London, with René Courtin at its head. Although the relationship between the League and both the United Europe Movement and the *Conseil Français* was most cordial and intimate from the outset, the same could not be said for the European Union of Federalists or for Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's Movement. There were no difficulties with the *Nouvelles Equipes Internationales* because they were still in process of formation.

The European Union of Federalists was supposed to be a mass movement whose principal aim was propaganda. Its members were much younger than those in the other movements, and as they had no experience or political responsibility they tried to forge ahead far more quickly than the rest of us.

Count Coudenhove-Kalergi's position was different. He had organized his Pan-European Movement twenty or thirty years previously and had helped Briand launch his plan for European collaboration. He had every right to be considered as a pioneer of European Unity, and notwithstanding other circumstances, he wanted to be treated as such. We had the greatest respect for his past, but we thought his share ought to be the same as that of other participating Movements. He accepted several times to participate in the Co-ordinating Committee, but each time after a few weeks or even a few days he retracted.

At the beginning of September 1947 I went with Duncan Sandys to the meeting of the Interparliamentary Union of Coudenhove-Kalergi in Gstaad, while ten days before we attended a big Federalist Conference in Montreux, at which Henry Hopkinson, Denis de Rougemont and several others made brilliant and constructive speeches. During this conference I spent most of the time with Duncan Sandys, and finally we clearly saw how to develop the Co-ordinating Committee and how to launch a large-scale campaign.

So far as ways and means of starting such a campaign were concerned three possibilities seemed open. One was to call a large-scale international congress for the unity of Europe. I remember talking with Sandys at Montreux the whole of one night about our future plans. We decided for the time being to devote all our resources to preparing such a Congress of Europe. I don't recall which one of us first hit on the idea, but from the outset we were in complete agreement. Otherwise we thought it would be necessary to enlist as many supporters among the younger generation as possible, but this was not realized until several years later. Finally we toyed with the idea of organizing a petition throughout Europe — more or less on the lines of the Peace Pledge in England some years before the War. This Peace Pledge had been a very important

means of propaganda, and we often spoke of starting something similar, but each time we were obstructed by lack of funds. This was our main difficulty.

Then in December 1947 our Committee assumed the title of the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity, while Duncan Sandys and myself were elected respectively Executive Chairman and Honorary Secretary. We then decided to organize the big Congress we had in mind and shortly afterwards we finally agreed that the best place to hold it would be at The Hague.

The preparation of the Congress of Europe was very difficult. We wanted to have a monster international gathering independent of any government and of any political party, and to get the most European minded, the most famous and the most representative participants. But rivalries were hard to avoid and, moreover, it was naturally difficult to gather seven hundred and fifty people — the number we had in mind — willing to spend a week of their time on work which, although we thought it most important, did not in some cases seem so to them. Our Movement had few national branches at that time who could give us any help. We were therefore largely obliged to rely on the personal contacts of Duncan Sandys and myself, while the advice we received, although proffered with the best of intentions, was not always very sound. Here I must say that so far as France, Belgium and Holland were concerned, our friends in those countries were of the greatest help, but when it came to other countries we generally had to use our own judgement and make arrangements ourselves. All this entailed not only an extremely extensive correspondence with persons who, in many cases, were unknown to us, but also personal visits by Duncan Sandys and myself to several hundred people. As time went by we found it more and more difficult to refuse invitations to persons whose names had been put forward but whom we did not consider suitable. After we had arrived at The Hague it fell to me to refuse admittance to some would-be delegates. One day, within half an hour, there arrived a delegation from Franco's Spain, which we had already decided to exclude, as well as a Republican leader from the time of the Civil War, who had come from Marrakesh and to whom I was also obliged to refuse admittance, though for quite different reasons.

As usual, the question of funds was a burning one. It must be remembered that in 1948, few politicians in Europe had the means to pay for such a trip, and even in the case of those who had, the difficulty of getting foreign currency had to be overcome. We were therefore obliged to pay the greater part of their travelling expenses. Moreover, the reservation of rooms for seven hundred and fifty, exclusive of journalists, was a gigantic task, and needed an enormous amount of money as well as an efficient organization. The Hague was still short of lodgings and many of the delegates had to go as far as twenty-five miles out of the town to find accommodation. However, they did not mind that nor the other difficulties. The Congress cost us well over forty thousand pounds. The raising of money, as well as the organizing work in Holland, was undertaken by Senator Pieter Kerstens, who was most ably assisted by Mr. J. C. Kaas Sypers, a prominent industrialist, and Mr. C. Vishil, a Dutch businessman who, I remember, had no sleep for five nights. Between them, but thanks mainly to the untiring efforts of Pieter Kerstens, they raised thirty-six thousand pounds, the balance being provided mostly by the United Europe Movement.

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