

Interview with Paul Collowald: the early days of the Information and Press Service of the Council of Europe (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] What were your experiences of the early days of the Press Service that was set up by Paul M. G. Lévy at the Council of Europe?

[Paul Collowald] They played a part in my initiation, and Paul M. G. Lévy, who was the first Director of the Press Service of the Council of Europe and who had been part of the Belgian Government team in London, was a professional. He was a radio journalist, a Belgian, so when we learnt during the first press briefing in Strasbourg that the director well, that is the procedure was a former journalist, our reaction was: Good, we are getting a fellow journalist, a senior figure with greater experience and awareness. We were therefore able, with his help, to be initiators. What can we do for the journalists? Then there were, of course, the first meetings, with their particularities to which I have referred briefly; the second meeting in 1950 and Spaak's resignation in 1951. Each time there were big events, so it was quite easy to make the news, as they say; we even managed to make the headlines in the newspapers. However, when it came to everyday matters the routine it was very, very hard.

Firstly, practically speaking, we had to organise how a press release should be prepared, and in how many languages. The model adopted by Paul M. G. Lévy was later also used by others, with the paradox that the Council of Europe, in which there had been at the outset 10 or so countries, with 44 now, had two working languages French and English right from the start, and that was all. Afterwards, when the European Community started with six, there were more complicated language issues. So we started off with two languages and there was a press room. Beforehand, an explanation was given. Throughout, there was a help service offering a summary immediately, which meant that the journalists in Strasbourg & Some were covering the Council of Europe, but only part time, or they had other things, such as an important interview with one of the Members of the Assembly and were not present to cover the proceedings. Paul M. G. Lévy had therefore invented a system for the press room: a summary was distributed as work progressed. So, in the beginning, I was earning my living at the <ita>Nouvel Alsacien</ita>, later I was the correspondent for <ita>Le Monde</ita>, and I had to reconcile the two. After work, I would go to take note of what had happened, but when there were important debates, of course, I would go there in person and, if necessary, I would ask Paul M. G. Lévy for further explanations.

To some extent he pioneered European information, and afterwards, he was to be the precursor of this Press Service. Personally, Paul M. G. Lévy introduced all sorts of initiatives it would take too long to talk about them, but one should nonetheless mention the European flag and the European anthem; all that originated in the design bureau of Paul M. G. Lévy, Press Service. Of course it all had to go through the mill of the Permanent Representatives, the Ambassadors, the Ministers who took the decisions. I shall always remember, one fine morning there was a large rectangular table, we were all sitting around Paul M. G. Lévy one day he told us: Right, here there are 15 flags, in all the right colours and so forth; my job is to make a proposal for a European flag. This is just to give you an example. Then the next day he did something else. So these beginnings enabled me to see how European information was born.