Carlo Curti Gialdino, The Symbols of the European Union: origin of the design for the European flag

Caption: In his book entitled The Symbols of the European Union, Carlo Curti Gialdino, Professor of International Law at the University of Rome 'La Sapienza' and Legal Secretary at the Court of Justice of the European Communities from 1982 to 2000, considers the authorship of the European flag.

Source: CURTI GIALDINO, Carlo. I Simboli dell'Unione europea, Bandiera - Inno - Motto - Moneta - Giornata. Roma: Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato S.p.A., 2005. 224 p. ISBN 88-240-2503-X. p. 80-85.

URL:
http://www.cvce.eu/obj/carlo_curti_gialdino_the_symbols_of_the_european_union_origin_of_the_design_for_the_european_flag-en-df9f9dde-98a3-461b-a8a8-8f9c13012343.html

Last updated: 29/07/2016

[...]

6. Origin of the design for the European flag

Fifty years after its adoption by the Council of Europe, there is still some doubt about the exact origin of the design for the European flag.

It would appear from two internal Council of Europe memos in late 1953 and January 1954 that the proposal for a circle of 'fifteen' gold stars on a blue background was made in September 1951 by Hanno F. Konopath from the Hamburg branch of the Europa-Union, and was placed fourth of the 12 designs selected[251]. A similar design, in a different document, again attributed to the Hamburg branch of the Europa-Union, was submitted on 30 August 1952, again as a result of a public competition[252]. Konopath energetically defended his authorship with the Secretariat General of the Council of Europe[253]. He stated *inter alia* that he had sent the design to the secretary of Paul-Henri Spaak, who was attending a convention in Hamburg in 1951, and that the latter had been taken to hospital suffering from influenza. The Secretary General of the Council of Europe denied having received the design and maintained that the idea of the circle of stars was the outcome of parallel proposals, and so it was not possible to attribute the design to one specific person[254].

It also appears that, by means of two letters dated, respectively, 25 January 1952 and 13 February 1952[255], the former Spanish diplomat Salvador de Madariaga, who at the time was President of the European Centre for Culture, had put forward a design for a flag with a blue background on which there were a number of gold stars on an imaginary map of Europe, indicating the capitals of the Member States (who were independent in 1938), with a larger star denoting Strasbourg. This proposal, including the artwork and a brief explanation, was published in a document entitled *A Flag for Europe* dated Oxford, 1 December 1951[256].

Furthermore, the Council of Europe Archives hold numerous designs attributed to Arsène Heitz, an employee in the internal mail service of the Council of Europe. Many sketches show a blue flag with a number of stars, sometimes 15, arranged in various ways (nine in a circle with six inside the circle[257], or ten in a circle and five inside[258]); sometimes 11 stars in a circle with five inside, all encircled by a gold laurel wreath[259], or 13 stars, 12 forming a circle and one larger star in the centre[260].

It appears from an examination of the documents relating to the choice of flag within the Council of Europe that, on 20 May 1951, the Committee on Rules of Procedure and Privileges of the Consultative Assembly had itself given general, provisional approval for an emblem having a circle of gold stars on a blue background. Furthermore, in January 1955, the Committee of Ministers meeting at Deputy level, decided to select just two designs, one containing the circle of twelve stars, attributed to Heitz, and the other with the constellation of stars proposed by Salvador de Madariaga. However, the preferred choice of the Deputies, which was communicated to the Joint Committee, was the circle of 12 stars, and this was what was finally adopted by the Assembly and by the Council of Ministers. Credit for the design of the flag is given basically to Heitz, who in any case did the artwork for the first flag produced, according to the Council of Europe's own website, under the heading *How the twelve stars were born*.

However, if we leave aside the documentary evidence and heed oral sources and memory, it becomes less clear that Heitz can be credited with authorship of the flag. This was categorically denied by Paul M.G. Levy, for example, who was the Council of Europe's Director of Press and Information Services at the time and who claimed virtually all credit for the proposal himself. Levy was quite clear about this in an interview given on 26 February 1998, the recording of which has been transcribed on the Council of Europe website. To the specific question 'Who really designed the flag?', Levy replies 'I did, and I calculated the proportions to be used for the geometric design. Arsène Heitz, who was an employee in the mail service, put in all sorts of proposals, including the 15-star design. But he submitted too many designs. He wanted to do the European currencies with 15 stars in the corner. He wanted to do national flags incorporating the Council of Europe flag, which the British wanted to prevent at all costs as they did not like

it'[261].

Moreover, when speaking in a debate in Louvain-la-Neuve in 1990[262], in the above interview on 26 February 1998[263], and in a letter of 19 August 2001 to C.E. Cossermelli[264], Levy states that the initial proposal for a gold star on a blue background was put forward by Carl Weidl Raymon[265], but that the proposal foundered because the design was identical to the flag of the Belgian Congo. In the same letter, Levy claims credit for the idea of the stars arranged in a circle, and adds 'the proposals of my friend Arsène Heitz are not mentioned'.

Finally, according to a recent reconstruction[266], the idea of the circle of 12 stars on a blue background should be credited to the Irishman Gerard Slevin (1919–1997), at the time assistant to the Chief Herald of Ireland, who, it will be remembered, was one of the heraldry experts of the Council of Ministers. It is claimed, in particular, that during the first *ad hoc* Committee meeting, held on 12 November 1954[267], it was the design with the circle of 12 stars, suggested by Slevin, that finally found favour with the members of the Committee[268]. However, that reconstruction does not hold water because Slevin's involvement in the work on the European flag certainly postdates[269] the designs of Konopath and Heitz. It is likely, however, that Slevin could have contributed to the drafting of the heraldic description of the European flag[270].

Irrespective of the statements by Paul M. G. Levy and the recent reconstruction by Susan Hood, crediting Arsène Heitz with the original design still seems to me the soundest option.

In particular, Arsène Heitz himself, in 1987, laid claim to his own role in designing the flag and to its religious inspiration when he said that 'the flag of Europe is the flag of Our Lady'[271]. Secondly, it is worth noting the testimony of Father Pierre Caillon, who refers to a meeting with Arsène Heitz. Caillon tells of having met the former Council of Europe employee by chance in August 1987 at Lisieux in front of the Carmelite monastery. It was Heitz who stopped him and declared 'I was the one who designed the European flag. I suddenly had the idea of putting the 12 stars of the Miraculous Medal of the Rue du Bac on a blue field. My proposal was adopted unanimously on 8 December 1955, the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. I am telling you this, Father, because you are wearing the little blue cross of the Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima'[272] .

Caillon also recalls that he went to Strasbourg at the beginning of January 1988 and, having obtained the address of Arsène Heitz, went to find him and was duly recognised by the former Council of Europe employee[273]. Caillon also mentions another detail, namely the exchange of views between the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Léon Marchal, and Paul M.G. Levy concerning the religious inspiration behind the halo of 12 stars, to which I will return later[274]. The precise nature of this detail, which the priest could only have learned from Heitz (who in turn was told by Levy) provides definite confirmation that Heitz was directly involved in preparing the designs which led the Council of Europe to its choice.

Carlos Eduardo Cossermelli also credits Heitz with being the author of the design. Following in the footsteps of Father Caillon, Cossermelli went to Strasbourg on 13 February 1998 and met the 84-year-old widow of Arsène Heitz, who did not deny the role played by her husband in devising the flag design[275].

Moreover, the issue[276] of three postage stamps by the French postal services in 1975, on the twentieth anniversary of the flag, could be seen as further indirect confirmation of Arsène Heitz's involvement. On the first day cover[277] there is, in fact, a photograph of Heitz and, at the bottom of the envelope, the caption 'co-author and designer of the European Flag'.

The term 'co-author', seemingly chosen intentionally by the French postal services, neatly solves the question of the actual authorship of the flag design. The idea of a flag with a circle of stars originally equal in number to the member states of the Council of Europe plus the Saar, an associate member, was conceived almost contemporaneously (late 1951–early 1952), both outside the Council of Europe, in particular by Hanno F. Konopath of the Europa-Union, Hamburg[278], and within the organisation in Strasbourg, notably by Paul M.G. Levy and Arsène Heitz. In any case, the design of Hanno F. Konopath appears to have been devised later than those of Levy and Heitz, so it is not credible for the latter two designs to have been

'inspired' by that of Konopath!

As to the division of labour between Levy and Heitz, it is the latter who should properly be regarded as the author of the original design, submitted for the approval of the political organs of the Council of Europe, whereas Paul M.G. Levy should be credited with being the inspiration behind the idea and the one who had the patience and determination, both publicly and behind the scenes, to see through the whole symbolic operation of the choice of flag by the Council of Europe between 1949 and 1955, and who pursued his efforts up until 1966 to get the European Communities to adopt a flag which, whilst not identical, is at least very similar.

As for the precise inspiration behind the circle of stars in the context of the Council of Europe, it is thought that this may stem from a painting seen by a member of the Council of Europe delegation attending the signature ceremony for the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, held in the Grand Salon of the Palazzo Barberini in Rome on 4 November 1950. In fact, lifting up one's eyes to the vaulted ceiling of the Grand Salon gives a view of the imposing fresco by Pietro Berrettini da Cortona, depicting 'The Allegory of Divine Providence and the Barberini Power'. In the central scene, to the left of Providence, wreathed in a golden mantle, her head surrounded by a halo of light to underline her divine, non-human nature, is the huge figure of Immortality draped in floating veils and holding a crown of 12 shining stars. Immortality, who moves at the command of Providence, is holding the crown out towards the Barberini heraldic emblems, above her in the centre of the vault, as if to honour them with eternal glory[279].

Even though this is an attractive theory, as it would enable the design of the European flag to be associated with fundamental human rights, it seems a somewhat unlikely solution, dreamed up after the event and perhaps just a 'trick of memory'[280].

I would therefore like to suggest an alternative hypothesis. I think — even though there is no documentary evidence, oral tradition or memory to back up my theory — that it is more plausible that the idea of the circle of stars was inspired by the design of the first United States flag, which has a circle of five-pointed stars in the blue canton. It is highly likely, in fact, that those who devised the design for the European flag knew the design of the American flag, which is probably the work of Francis Hopkinson, was adopted by Congress on 14 June 1777 and, according to popular legend, was sewn in June 1776 by Betsy Ross[281]. It would be hazardous in the extreme to draw any conclusions from these historical/vexillological sources as to any federalist or confederalist influence on the Council of Europe, which, unlike the European Union, is a classic type of international organisation. However, with reference to the European Union, it should be noted that the word 'federal' was expunged from the Constitutional Treaty, as it was from the Maastricht Treaty, as if it were a bad *nomen-omen* and something to be avoided by the constitutional legislature[282]. Nevertheless, the concept and the relevant terminology were certainly in the minds of the authors of the preamble to the ECSC Treaty, and so the idea could pass, metonymically, from the flag to the subject which it identifies, the European Union, just supposing the Union were to be viewed, in the well-known words of Jacques Delors, as a federation of nation-states[283].

[...]

(251) *Memorandum on the final adoption of the flag accepted by the Consultative Assembly*, Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, doc. 274.
(252) *Historique de la question de l'emblème*, Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, doc. 273. On 16 June 1952 the Europa-Union, Hamburg, submitted 12 European flag designs, including the design with the circle of 15 stars devised by Hanno F. Konopath (*Hamburger Abendblatt*, 17 June 1952, p. 10).
(253) Letters from Hanno F. Konopath to Paul M. G. Levy, 29 September 1953, 7 October 1953, 1 March 1954, 18 October 1954 and 9 January 1958, Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, docs. 256, 270, 339, 378, 539.
(254) Letters from Paul M.G. Levy to Hanno F. Konopath, 2 October 1953, 6 February 1958, 6 May 1958, in Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, docs. 262, 540, 546.
(255) Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, docs. 182 and 189.
(256) Council of Europe Archives, *Proposition de drapeau de Salvador de Madariaga*, 1 December 1951.
(257) Council of Europe Archives, *dessin de Heitz* (5).

(258) Council of Europe Archives, *dessin de Heitz* (21).

(259) Council of Europe Archives, *dessin de Heitz* (22).

(260) Council of Europe Archives, *dessin de Heitz* (9).

(261) Levy interview in Council of Europe Archives, recording from 29' 22" to 30' 22". It is also worth noting that Levy, in his reconstruction of events in the volume of his recollections entitled *Sauver l'Europe*, op. cit., pp. 163-167 (published in 1978), did not specifically claim authorship of the flag, nor did he cite Arsène Heitz at any stage.

(262) F. DASSETTO, M. DUMOULIN, *Naissance et développement de l'information européenne*, op. cit., p. 80.

(263) Levy interview, Council of Europe Archives, recording 20' 45".

(264) Reproduced in an annex to C.E. COSSERMELLI, *La bandiera europea*, op. cit., p. 125.

(265) Memo from C. Weidl Raymon to the Council of Europe, 9 June 1950, Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, doc. 22.

(266) S. HOOD, *Royal Roots, Republican Inheritance: The Survival of the Office of Arms*, Woodfield Press, Dublin, 2002, pp. XXV, 227-229; idem., *The Hope of Nations. The Irish Connection* in *Ireland of the Welcomes*, Nov./Dec. 2003 in '*http://www.irelandofthewelcomes.com/articles/article.asp?id=21788issue=62003*'; see also the obituaries of G. Slevin, in *The Irish Times*, 28 March 1997, and *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 1997.

(267) See above, chap. II, section 5.6.

(268) S. HOOD, *Royal Roots, Republican Inheritance*, op. cit., pp. 227-228, states that 'Showing both foresight and ecumenical sensitivity, Slevin persuaded them that a competing design, proposing to incorporate the Christian cross in the new emblem, would be inadvisable, because it was potentially offensive to non-Christian States, who might join the Council in the future. Featuring a clock-like circle of 12 gold stars or mullets on a blue background, the Slevin design aimed to encapsulate graphically the ideal of an evolving Europe over the course of time.' Suffice it to note, for the purpose of refuting the theory of Slevin's authorship, that — in addition to the fact that the heraldry expert was associated with the work of the Council of Europe after the Konopath and Heitz designs — a sketch of the design with the cross had already been devised by Turkish delegates in 1953.

(269) Letter of 8 October 1954 from the Secretary General to Gerard Slevin, Council of Europe Archives, folder 2191, doc. 383.

(270) Even in this context, however, Slevin's contribution was marginal, as was that of the *ad hoc* Committee's other heraldic experts. In fact, the heraldic, geometric and symbolic description annexed to the Decision of 8 December 1955 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe is basically the same as that contained in the resolution of the Consultative Assembly of 15 December 1953 — adopted previously, therefore, between the three heraldic experts — except for the reduction in the number of stars from 15 to 12.

(271) *Magnificat*, 1987. The debate was taken up again in the article *L'Europe violée par la Sainte Vierge*, in *Le Canard enchaîné*, 20 December 1989. It is significant that the first claims regarding the religious inspiration for the flag came from the protagonists of the affair, 32 years after the flag's adoption by the Council of Europe and two years after its adoption by the European Communities, respectively. One immediately wonders whether it was a conscious choice not to reveal this aspect until the European Community had decided officially by choosing the Council of Europe flag.

(272) P. CAILLON, *Le drapeau de l'Europe*, in *L'appel de Notre Dame*, 1989, No. 133, January–March, p. 1; ID. *Le drapeau de l'Europe*, in *Stella Maris*, No. 306, July–August 1995, pp. 18-19, text written by P. Caillon (Centre St. Jean, 61500 Seés, Orne) at the request of and in collaboration with Ch. Sauter, aumônier de l'Hôpital, 71250 Cluny.

(273) Arsène Heitz, another protagonist in the flag saga, was born on 20 September 1908 in Huttenheim, a small municipality in Alsace not far from Strasbourg. He studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Rouen from 1925 to 1928. After his military service he entered the police force. Later he was employed by the mail room (internal mail) at the Council of Europe. He died in 1989. He lived at rue de l'Yser, 24, Strasbourg. For further information on the life of Arsène Heitz see C.E. COSSERMELLI, *La bandiera europea*, op. cit., pp. 103-108.

(274) Father Caillon's account is virtually identical to the one given in the interview with Paul Levy, which took place in 1998, Council of Europe Archives, recording from 27' 03" to 29' 22".

(275) C.E. COSSERMELLI, *La bandiera europea*, op. cit., pp. 106-108.

(276) Limited edition of 800 copies.

(277) The artwork for the three stamps was done by Heitz himself, according to C.E. COSSERMELLI, *La bandiera europea*, op. cit. p. 108.

(278) Cf. chap. II, paragraph 2.3. above.

(279) A. LO BIANCO, *La volta di Pietro da Cortona*, Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Gebart s.r.l., Rome, 2004, p. 17.

(280) P.M.G. LEVY, *Douze étoiles qui resteront douze*, in *Revue mensuelle de l'Association des Amis et Anciens de l'Université Catholique de Louvain*, 1987, No. 9, pp. 235-244, and *Le choix du drapeau européen*, in *La croix*, 27 September 1989, makes the 'discovery' of the circle of stars in the fresco date back only as far as 1962; see also K. KOWALSKI, *Europa: mity, modele, symbole*, op. cit., p. 149.

(281) Elisabeth Griscom Ross (1752–1836). For more detailed information about the legend of the first United States flag, see '*http://www.ushistory.ord/betsy/flagtale.html*'.

(282) A. LA PERGOLA, *L'Unione europea: una federazione non dichiarata*, in *EuropaForum*, 1992, No 1, p. 7.

(283) See above, introduction.