

Denis de Rougement's memories of the Hague Congress (Geneva, May 1968)

Caption: In May 1968, on the 30th anniversary of the Congress of Europe held in The Hague, Denis de Rougement outlines to the monthly publication Communauté Européenne his memories of the preparations for and the proceedings at this militant event which he attended in his capacity as rapporteur for the Cultural Affairs Committee.

Source: Communauté européenne. Mai 1968, n° 118. Paris. "La Haye, 7 mai 1948. Lorsque tout commençait", auteur:Rougement, Denis de , p. 31-35.

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http://www.cvce.eu/obj/denis_de_rougement_s_memories_of_the_hague_congress_geneva_may_1968-en-7eb6991f-2c62-42e4-8e81-2b3801aeb548.html



Last updated: 05/07/2016

The Hague, 7 May 1948. When it all started

Just as there was a 'banquet campaign' to prepare the ground for the Revolution of 1848, the European Revolution, 100 years later, came out of a campaign of a series of congresses held between 1947 and 1949. These meetings both demonstrated and stirred up the spirit and the main trends of a movement which took many, contrasting forms, and was curiously inefficient in its tactics and simplistic when it came to its strategy. And yet, the Council of Europe owes its existence to that movement, and thanks to it the Communities of 'the Six' were able to take shape in the minds of a great many economists and win acceptance from public opinion, and thus from the parliaments and governments which depended on that opinion in our countries at the time.

Historians may maintain that none of these congresses did anything. Indeed, congresses do not usually do anything, that is not what is generally expected of them. People in the same profession go to them to be bored during the sittings and make up for it by having fun afterwards. But there was a very specific kind of passionate commitment, now dead, which was the only motive for bringing the militants for Europe together and made them prefer the night-time sessions in the committees to receptions or visits to the opera. That is what has to be explained if we want to describe, in psychological and historical terms, what the campaign of congresses was really like, and to do justice to the work it did.

The congress period began in August 1947, in Montreux, and ended in December 1949, in Lausanne. The history of that time has yet to be written, and unless someone sets about it fairly soon, there is a real fear that it will not be done adequately or truthfully.

As a small contribution to that great task, here are a few pages on the Hague Congress. Incomplete and deliberately subjective as they are, they aspire only to bring back to life a little of the creative freshness which propelled the enterprise, and might perhaps have made a surprising success of it, if cautious 'realist' calculations had not crept in, like a maggot into an apple. Yes, it was the naivety of a few federalists which almost 'made Europe' in 1948, just as it was the manoeuvring by politicians, who embraced our cause so that they could stifle it more effectively, which reduced everything to the level of the 'possible', where you can be sure that there are no miracles.

A memorable convergence

Before The Hague in 1948, there had been Montreux in 1947. But in the background to that first federalist congress there was a whole, rather complex history. Let me mention three major events: by a curious coincidence, in space as well as in time, they all took place in Switzerland, at the end of the summer of 1946.

First of all, in Hertenstein, near Lucerne, at the end of August, there was a symposium which was organised by the Swiss movement Europa Union (founded in 1925) of representatives of federalist groups from France, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom, as well as Germany, Austria and several eastern European countries. From this symposium there sprang the Union of European Federalists, which went on to convene the Congress of Montreux, after two constitutive meetings in Luxembourg (in October 1946) and Amsterdam (in April 1947).

Not long before Hertenstein, though, there had been the resistance movements to Hitler and the various forms of totalitarian nationalism. The momentum that they had built up fed into this determination to take action for Europe, and several of their leaders, from Italy, Germany, France and the Benelux countries, were at Montreux.

Lastly, behind the thinking of most Resistance members, there was a common source: the personalist movement, first set up in Paris as early as 1932 (grouped around *Esprit* and the 'Ordre nouveau') and later spreading to the rest of Europe, including Germany (the 'Gegner' group with Harro Schulze-Boysen), though not to Italy, where federalism emerged independently in the camps of the Lipari islands (the Ventotene Manifesto of 1942, and the publication *L'Unità europea*). This personalist-cum-resistance

component was represented in Montreux by men such as Robert Aron and Alexandre Marc (who, like me, had been involved with *Ordre nouveau* and *Esprit*), by Eugen Kogon, and by Henri Brugmans, who said what had to be said to Mounier and Dandieu, among others.

After that, from 1 to 12 September 1946, there came the first International Meetings, in Geneva. Over and above any political concern, in the strict sense of the word, these meetings memorably raised the question of the European Spirit in a world racked by the upheavals of the post-war period. Julien Benda, Georges Bernanos, Francisco Flora, Jean Guéhenno, Karl Jaspers, Georges Lukacs, J. R. de Salis, Stephen Spender and I were concerned, in nine lectures followed by public debates, with defining how aware Europe was of its fate and its cultural values in the face of the challenges posed by the (apparently) contradictory ambitions of the two 'Great Powers'. With support from Jaspers, in particular, I had argued for a political union of Europe on federal lines. With a somewhat sceptical Jean Guéhenno, Stephen Spender and a few others, we had even attempted to draw up a sort of federative charter — I have unfortunately lost the rough drafts sketched out by Maurice Druon in the Café Landolt. These meetings drew attention to the European problem among a wide circle of influential people. They helped create a favourable climate of opinion and almost started an intellectual fashion.

And then, a few days later in Zurich, on 16 September to be precise, there was a speech by Winston Churchill proposing, cautiously yet boldly, the setting up of 'a kind of United States of Europe', casually leaving out the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, who were to be the well-disposed witnesses to a marriage of convenience between France and Germany. Shortly afterwards, Churchill set up the United Europe Movement, which his son-in-law Duncan Sandys represented at Montreux.

There was a fourth component which went in the same direction as all these developments. In London there had been regular contacts between the heads of the governments-in-exile of Belgium, the Netherlands, Poland, the Baltic States, the successor-states to the Dual Monarchy and Greece, with preparatory studies for joint projects and even a number of agreements, officially signed, which looked towards a union of Europe in the future. The kingpin of this discreet operation was Dr Retinger, right-hand man to General Sikorski, the head of the Polish Government. At the age of 56, he had been parachuted into occupied Poland, an experience which had left him with a curious limp. With Paul van Zeeland, just after the war, he had set up the European League for Economic Cooperation, on whose behalf he came to Montreux.

I was to discover all this in dribs and drabs during the Congress and the ensuing months, but it is only now that I get a clear picture of it all, with the main lines firmly traced out. For me it was a plunge into a new environment, and I was keenly aware of its strangeness, its particular flavour, its consistency, the unforeseen currents which swept through it and the new impetus behind it. During that autumn of 20 years ago, I was not in the least concerned to find out about the extremely complicated origins of an organisation of which I was not yet an official member, or of a movement within which what I mainly perceived were opportunities for action to be taken as a matter of urgency.

I have talked elsewhere about Montreux, which saw a memorable convergence of the forces we have just identified. This Congress of the Union of European Federalists, which I launched with a speech on 'the federalist attitude', was my first contact with the great movement I had always imagined during my six years in exile in the United States. Today, as I once again read the minutes of that gathering of militants, I see defined in them the framework and the objectives of everything that was done subsequently: 'a united Europe in a united world', organised on federal lines to preserve the independence of all parties and the precious differences between them, not to reduce them to a uniform pattern. The determination to unite all the peoples of Europe, including those of eastern Europe, was affirmed as the only way of forestalling the risk of colonisation by a party or a currency. The myth that a choice had to be made between the two Great Powers and that the world would be divided between them, and the myth of each country's absolute national sovereignty, were condemned and stripped of their power to terrorise, as were the false notions of a contradiction between freedom and planning, loyalty to one's country and universalism, federal authority and local autonomy. To conclude, there was a remarkable report by Daniel Serruys proposing that the economy of the continent be organised in stages, as follows: a customs union must be the final expression of an economic union, i.e. of a common plan of production; complete freedom of trade should be achieved by

successive cuts in duties over 10 to 15 years; ‘there must be a European Monnet plan’, not just to secure a balance between French and German production (of coal and steel), but a balance in production over the entire union; there should be a pooling of energy resources derived from tidal energy and nuclear power; and lastly, a settlement of the ‘agricultural question in Europe’, examined from the point of view of a regional union, would be ‘constantly measured against the yardstick of developments in the world economy’. It has to be said that not much has been added to that programme since; on the contrary, some essential features have actually been removed from it — economic policy, for example.

From Montreux to The Hague

In the long view of history which is beginning to emerge now that 20 years have passed, the Congress of Montreux seems to me to hold a decisive place at the centre of events. It was there that most of the pro-Europe currents came together, having until then been unknown to one another. It was Montreux which gave birth to the idea of a coming together of these forces in a spectacular display, which was to happen a few months later in The Hague.

In Montreux, the UEF devised a plan to convene a Convention of Europe, which it expected to give birth to federal politics and form the nucleus of a European government. But the Liaison Committee of the Movements for European Unity, set up in Paris on 11 November 1947 by representatives from Churchill’s British Movement, its French counterpart (Paul Reynaud and Dautry), the Economic League (F. van Zeeland and D. Serruys) and the UEF (Brugmans, Silva and Voisin), was dominated three to one by the ‘unionists’ (or minimalists), and at its meeting of 14 December it set the following targets for the Hague Congress:

1. to give a striking demonstration of the power and scope of the support which the European ideal already enjoyed;
2. to supply material for discussion, information and technical research;
3. to deliver a new and powerful impetus to pro-Europe campaigns in all countries.

The difference in level between the federalists’ ambitions and the objectives of the unionists was obvious. Shall we say that the Liaison Committee was tacking towards what was ‘possible’, i.e. what the political parties and their leaders could be expected to agree to? That would mean admitting that the federalists had, by the same token, abandoned the idea of creating what was possible, which is the fundamental act of any political or spiritual revolution. I think the UEF actually still hoped that it could turn the Hague Congress into something more than just a congress.

When Duncan Sandys, in January 1948, and then Joseph Retinger, on 25 February, came to see me in Geneva and in Ferney to ask me to commit myself wholeheartedly to the movement (I promised to devote two years of my life to it, and here I still am after 20 years), I laid down the following conditions under which I would take responsibility for the cultural side of the planned congress:

1. the Cultural Committee, far from being just an ornamental adjunct to the ‘serious’ committees (the Political and Economic Committees), would adopt the decisive role of stating the point of the whole enterprise and of the steps that were expected to follow on from it;
2. to prove that it shared this view, the Liaison Committee would make the Cultural Committee responsible for drawing up the Preamble defining the long- and short-term objectives of the Congress and of the movements which were to carry its work on through joint action;
3. this Preamble must also contribute to codifying the terminology used in the Resolutions; it was therefore vital that the content of it, drawn up by the cultural section, should be discussed before the Congress by the leading lights in the political and economic sections.

Retinger gave me his agreement and undertook to secure that of the Liaison Committee and the Movements.

By the end of February, I had been given promises of collaboration by some 50 philosophers, scholars, writers and educators to whom I had submitted a first sketch of the report to be discussed by the cultural section at The Hague. These included Nicolas Berdiaev, Étienne Gilson, Jules Romains, Ignazio Silone, bishops, academics, trade union leaders and Ministers for Education (both former Ministers and some still in office). T. S. Eliot wrote to me: 'I feel that at the present time, one ought to do what one can to support a movement of this kind, however desperate the attempt.' And from Salvador de Madariaga I had this: 'I will be happy to devote some time (to the committee), though I have to say, I am short of it.'

Retinger had found a very clever way of supporting me. On 29 March he wrote me a letter (with 'copies to some of our colleagues') speaking of the Preamble in terms which gave it its full value, just as I had wished.

'I think that this declaration should be taken as the starting point for our joint action after the Congress and must become the manifesto for the whole European Movement. We must try to gather millions of signatures from Europeans and thereby create a sort of powerful people's movement. That could only have the effect of putting extra pressure on timid and recalcitrant governments.

'The launching of a manifesto of this kind must be one of the main and immediate objectives of the Congress and our movement. The collecting of signatures should keep our ideas constantly alive in the eyes of ordinary people. Every meeting held by one of our affiliated groups should end with a collection of signatures (and perhaps of a small amount of money from each person who signs, to keep our campaign going).'

At the committee meeting in Paris on 8 April, it was suddenly decided that 'the text known up to now as the Preamble' would be a Message to Europeans to be adopted by acclamation and would therefore be read at the closing session. Representatives of the three sections would consider it before the Congress 'to make sure that the reports by the three committees were on the same lines'. That was what I wanted more than anything else.

The Hague Congress (7 to 11 May 1948)

Extract from my diary

That architecture of great beams, rafters and carved cross pieces supporting a huge roof, high above, I had a momentary vision of us as children leaping from one beam to another without looking down at the yawning chasm beneath us ... I felt suddenly dizzy. I lowered my gaze to look along the bare, white walls, as far as that line of shields with the lions lying down in threes. Lower still there were hanging carpets. Above us was a wide, square canopy, draped with red and gold silk. I leant my head against the folds of a heavy purple velvet curtain. Who were these people all around me, their faces lit by the beams of the film projectors? I was sitting on the platform, behind two rows of fascinating backs and necks which extended above the backs of the chairs. That very wide, red neck — that was Ramadier; the placid, fair-skinned neck, that was van Zeeland, and that non-neck was Paul Reynaud. A white, puffy neck rising out of the collar of a Victorian frock coat, that was Winston Churchill. To left and right of me were several friends in profile; that young man was a former Dutch Socialist Minister, another young man was a former British Conservative Minister, the slit eyes of Coudenhove, Lord Layton's Voltaire-like smile, a man in black wearing a long chain round his neck. Where was I? When was this happening? Was it a dream? What was going on?

Very near to me, Churchill was talking into a microphone, and his voice came back to me from the hall: 'The task before us, at this Congress, is not only to raise the voice of Europe as a united home ... We must here and now resolve that a European Assembly shall be constituted ...'

Yes, it was a dream which had come true, and which I had been having for 20 years.

In front of us, all round us, in that great Knights' Hall, which was the meeting place of a very ancient parliament, there were a thousand people, a thousand Europeans. I recognised a few faces in the crowd:

Anthony Eden's moustache, Daladier's sunken face, the profile of the Mad Hatter from Alice in Wonderland (it could only be Bertrand Russell), Prieto's shiny skull, the white curls of William Rappard, a larger-than-life Englishman: Charles Morgan, an archbishop representing the Vatican, a Lord Bishop representing the see of Canterbury, some Labour members of the UK Parliament, a smiling Italian anarchist, German Ministers in rimless glasses ... But why that deafening applause? 'Europe,' someone had just said into the microphone, 'is the civilisation of non-conformists!' I looked at the text that I had been handed. 'Europe is the land of people in constant struggle with themselves, a place where no certainty is accepted as the truth unless it is constantly being rediscovered. Other continents pride themselves on their efficiency, but the atmosphere in Europe is the only one which makes life dangerous, adventurous, magnificent and tragic — and therefore worth living.' (It was my friend Brugmans, a Dutch Labour man, who was speaking before 12 former Council presidents and 600 other representatives who had come from 25 countries. But I said to myself that, after all, our Congress was doubly non-conformist: it had managed to bring the conformists and the non-conformists together to work on a common project.)

On 8 May, the delegates to the Congress split up into three sections. I could only take part in one, of which I was in charge.

The discussions on my report (the establishment of a European Cultural Centre and the drafting of a Charter of Human Rights) took place in the type of confusion that is usual at congresses. In the end, all the positive content of the report went into the Resolution which was adopted unanimously — the Cultural Centre, the Human Rights Charter and the Supreme Court, a body 'with supra-state jurisdiction to which citizens and groups can appeal'. All of this came into being in 1950, as laid down in the Resolutions adopted at The Hague.

Although federalism managed to have its effect on the wording of the reports and Resolutions, however, it was only victorious on the page. Unionism, the doctrine (or deliberate lack of doctrine) of those who hoped to make Europe without breaking any eggs, was the only winner when it came to exploiting the consequences of the dazzling show we put on at The Hague. Firstly, its partisans managed to prevent the Congress leading to the emergence of a wide-ranging people's movement and, secondly, the federalists were unable to make their tactics stick: they let themselves be lulled with promises of 'modest, but specific, results'.

The federalists, as I have shown, hoped that the Convention would give birth — though how? — to the nucleus of a European government, whose powers were not described. Churchill had talked of a 'Council of Europe', though nobody knew exactly whether it was more or better than an alliance of countries retaining absolute national sovereignty. The political report (unionist in inspiration) proposed an extraordinary council with a permanent secretariat, and a deliberative assembly appointed by the national parliaments. But the Political Resolution (also adopted by the federalists) only talked about an assembly 'chosen by the Parliaments of the participating nations, from among their members or others'. The message to Europeans, lastly, called for the establishment of '[an] Assembly where the live forces of all our nations shall be represented', the position adopted by the integral federalists. The European Movements, consisting of the six organisations which met at The Hague, very quickly, in fact, achieved a 'modest, but specific, result': the establishment within nine months of a Council of Europe, devoid of all powers and given a purely consultative assembly consisting of members appointed by the national parliaments.

From that moment on, the federalist content not only of the results achieved but also of the Movement's actual demands shrank from year to year. Everyone knows that, but what people are less aware of is the tiny, but decisive, incident which throttled all hope of 'revolutionary' action by the Movement.

The Message to Europeans, having been discussed for two months, and having had the finishing touches put to it by the Liaison Committee just before the Congress, had been printed at the top of a long roll of strong parchment paper. It had been agreed that at the end of the closing session, when I would read the text, all the delegates, headed by Churchill, would sign the document, which would then circulate throughout Europe to gather millions of signatures and become the instrument of a powerful campaign of agitation for a united Europe.

Now, while I was doing a radio interview in a corridor, 10 minutes before the time fixed for the closing session, someone was sent to get me: Duncan Sandys urgently wanted to see me in the Knights' Hall where the plenary sitting of the economic section was drawing to a close. I saw Churchill standing at the microphone, his hands grasping the lapels of his frock coat. Every now and then, all the lights dimmed, and, for a few seconds, were extinguished, by a violent storm which was raging outside. At the back of the hall, near the main entrance, I saw Duncan and his brother-in-law Randolph Churchill, who said to me: 'I believe you want a unanimous vote of the Congress on the text of commitment at the end of your message. Now, I know at least 30 delegates who will oppose it, because of the sentence: "We want a common defence system"'. Sandys added: 'That sentence wasn't debated by the Congress. I am sorry, but we must forget about the Message'.

My interviewer, Alec Plaut, had followed me, microphone in hand, trailing wires. I signalled to him and, speaking into the microphone, I repeated what had just been said and concluded by saying: 'OK! At the next European Congress, Stalin, who is stronger than you, will be sending 50 delegates! And there won't be a united Europe!' I shouted a bit, a think. The ushers asked us to leave. I sent for Retinger and Paul van Zeeland, who were on the platform. In a small room next to the entrance, six or seven of us sat down and, after ten minutes of stormy discussion, Paul van Zeeland, who was to chair the closing session of the Congress, convinced people to agree to a compromise: I would read the Message, but leave out the little sentence that they objected to. That seemed a reasonable, mild way of proceeding. What it actually meant was that we now could not get people to sign the Message as already printed, since that little sentence was in it.

I was still very pale, apparently, when van Zeeland gave me the floor to present the Message to Europeans. Just as I, pausing briefly, was about to get onto the final undertaking in five articles, Sandys gave an imperious sign to the effect that no one in the hall was to rise. I had a paltry revenge (though only in terms of my own self-respect) while Senator Kerstens was reading the Message in English. I had gone back to my seat on the platform, just behind Churchill, who was rocking backwards and forwards on his chair, and I heard him say out loud: 'But why? We should stand up at that! We should all stand up!' No one moved, however. And the Congress ended amid general enthusiasm, but it had just nipped in the bud all hope of a people's campaign which would have extended its impact throughout Europe

Denis de Rougemont