

'Robert Schuman, architect of Franco-German reconciliation' from Sie und Er (19 May 1950)

Caption: On 19 May 1950, the Swiss publication Sie und Er paints a glowing portrait of French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman, who on 9 May 1950 invited Germany and other interested European states to place their coal and steel production under the control of a European supranational institution.

Source: Sie und Er. 19.05.1950. Schweiz. "Robert Schuman, der Mann der deutsch-französischen Versöhnung", auteur:F.P.

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Robert Schuman, architect of Franco-German reconciliation

From Prussian officer to great European statesman via the French Resistance

France's Foreign Minister, Robert Schuman, sober, lean, bald, without illusions, serious but not without a sense of humour, incorruptible, hard-working, deeply religious, a mite quirky, does not quite fit the image of a statesman of the French Republic. He does not even speak very good French. His mother tongue is German and, unlike most of his compatriots, he has absolutely no ear for music. A confirmed bachelor, Schuman admits quite openly that he is intimidated by women. In the Third Republic, he would have been unthinkable. That he is today playing such an important role is symptomatic of the transformation that France has undergone, of how fundamentally modest it has become.

Schuman is not intransigent in the manner of Poincaré, brilliant in the manner of Briand, he is no wily bel esprit like Blum, he is not corrupt like so many ministers of the Third Republic, he is not grandiloquent and unbending like de Gaulle, nor does he share the dazzle and wit of his Party and Resistance friend Bidault; he is straight and honest — nothing more nor less. A politician who eschews trickery and affectation is a rarity, and an agreeable one at that — and not only in French politics.

That is probably also why Schuman came to the fore very late, just as the other leading lights in French politics were reaching the end of the road. In 1947, at 61 years of age, he became President for the first time, and the most striking thing about him at that time was that hardly anyone knew anything about him. Even today, when this matter-of-fact achiever has become one of the world's leading politicians, he remains one of the least well-known among them.

Schuman was born a German citizen in 1886, his native Lorraine still German territory at that time. The Schuman family were among the many inhabitants of Lorraine who, following Bismarck's annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, remained French in their hearts and so, for a time, moved to Luxembourg, which indeed is where Schuman himself was born. Nonetheless, he grew to manhood in a German environment. It was at the Metz High School that he passed his *Abitur*. One of his teachers had this to say at the time about this hard-working but rather unimaginative pupil: 'This boy is destined one day to write an encyclopaedia.'

He studied law in Bonn, Munich and Berlin before, in the family tradition, working for his doctorate at the Sorbonne. He went on to practise as a lawyer in Metz. During the First World War, he served his country loyally as a reserve officer in the Prussian Army — a fact of which the French Communists subsequently made great capital.

When Lorraine returned to the French fold, he was elected as member of parliament for Metz in 1919, representing the Catholic *Démocrates Populaires* group; over the next twenty years, as one government followed another in quick succession, Schuman's role went largely unnoticed. It was not until that grim first year following the German offensive that Schuman was discovered by Paul Reynaud, who in March 1940 appointed him Under-Secretary for Refugee Affairs. Just a few weeks later, the military collapse put a stop to his work in this capacity.

He then returned as a private citizen to his legal practice in Metz but was soon caught by the Gestapo. 'Imprisonment,' he explained later, 'could not be called a painful memory. It gave me time to meditate.' The Germans invited him to collaborate, accompanying their invitation with threats. He told them: 'A concentration camp is not an argument.'

The prosaic, lacklustre Schuman nevertheless managed, in schoolteacher garb (a disguise which must have come naturally), to escape from prison and flee to as yet unoccupied southern France, where he lay low for a while in monasteries and soon came into contact with the Resistance movement. He spoke at secret gatherings and one night, addressing the bishop of Metz and 1 500 refugees from Lorraine in the crypt of a church in Lyons, declared: 'Hitler is finished! Of that you can be sure!' The Gestapo got to hear of this and put a high price on his head.

Following the Liberation, he was a founder of the Catholic *Mouvement Républicain Populaire*, the MRP, along with Bidault, Maurice Schumann and Francisque Gay. But his great hour had not yet come. In the immediate post-war years, amid the frenzied enthusiasm of the Liberation period, the prosaic man from Lorraine could not hope for a front-row seat. De Gaulle was the dominant figure at that time and, alongside him, only men like Bidault and Maurice Schumann, the latter popular for his wartime Resistance propaganda activity, came to prominence.

In 1946 Robert Schuman was appointed Finance Minister for the first time, with the unpopular task of bringing order to the state's chaotic finances and curbing inflation. Though a believer in the free market economy, he took whatever draconian measures were necessary to bring prices down and curb the rising wage trend, with sovereign disregard for his personal popularity. In so doing, his only guide was his sober reason and the conscience of a patriot. At that time, many were still sceptical as to his future prospects. However, his reputation grew from month to month and today there is not an honest person in France who would not express sincere esteem for him.

It is however only at the helm of France's foreign policy that Schuman has come to be recognised, both at home and abroad, as a truly important statesman. The former Prussian officer, the proven French patriot and Catholic true-believer with so little concern for popularity, has steered his country's foreign policy down paths which, at the time of Briand or his fellow Lorraine-born Poincaré, would have been unthinkable. When Poincaré was in office, France was still a major power and Germany its defeated enemy. In those years the mistrust between the two countries was profound and they could at best arrive at an arrangement, never at a genuine understanding.

Things are different today. Neither Germany nor France can lay any claim today to world power status. Neither is in a position to endanger peace or even simply to pose a threat to its neighbour against the will of the true major powers — the USA and Russia. Lucid Frenchmen realised this the very day after the German collapse, and said so. They understood that only a united European area had any prospect of playing some kind of role on the world stage.

But not all Frenchmen were so clear-sighted. Paris continued for some time to pursue 'as though' politics: as though France still had something decisive to say. Robert Schuman's great merit is to have been the first member of the governing elite to have broken with those politics. It was he who formulated the notion that France must accustom itself to being less powerful than it had been. He did away with illusions and showed the country the way back to a wretched reality. France's historical path has led from Richelieu via Poincaré to Schuman. In Richelieu's time, Germany's disunity signified France's greatness; in Poincaré's time, Germany's weakness signified France's security. Schuman has understood that, today, the unity of France and Germany signifies the strength of both. As the man whose policies are shaped by this maxim and who has now set in motion the great project of merging the two countries' economies — may he succeed in this historic task — Robert Schuman will go down as one of the great figures of European history.

F. P.