

# Transcription of the interview with Lex Roth (Sanem, 3 June 2010) — Full version

## Contents

I. The personality of Pierre Werner.....	1
II. The Luxembourgish language as a marker of identity.....	9
III. Luxembourg and Europe.....	10

## I. The personality of Pierre Werner

**[Elena Danescu]** Today, 3 June 2010, we are honoured to welcome Lex Roth, who has agreed, in the course of this conversation, to give us an account of his recollections of Pierre Werner and various events which contributed to the contemporary development of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. So a very good day to you, Lex Roth. If I may, I'd like to start by recalling some key dates in your career as a senior government official. In 1980 you joined the Ministry of Cultural Affairs where you were tasked with coordinating the preparation of the law on the Luxembourgish language, passed on 24 February 1984. In 1984 you were appointed as a government advisor at the Ministry of State, and from 1988 to 1993 you headed the government's Press and Information Service. I should point out that you have played a prominent part in promoting Luxembourgish language and culture, you have written many specialist books and directed countless radio and television broadcasts on the national language. You have considerable experience in the field of education, as a teacher of Luxembourgish, including a position at Court in this capacity. You have been a member of the Grand Ducal Institute since 1974. In 1971 you founded Actioun Lëtzebuergesch, a cultural association which you still chair. It seeks to disseminate and develop the Luxembourgish language, a mission to which you attach particular importance. I should like to start by asking you about Pierre Werner and national identity. When and under what circumstances did you first meet Pierre Werner, and how did your relations subsequently evolve?

**[Lex Roth]** Well, thank you Madam for your very kind words. I think that, regarding myself and my relations with Pierre Werner, there was never any question — really no question at all — of European affairs. I really must emphasise that point. I met Pierre Werner by chance. Never in my whole life had I spoken to a minister. It happened in the National Library of Luxembourg, for the presentation of a gift by a bank which was celebrating the 15th anniversary of its establishment in the Grand Duchy. There was a very large gift and, at a certain point, Mr Werner — I knew who he was but he didn't know me — came up to me and there was something remarkable about the way he looked at me. He said: 'You're Mr Roth.' 'Yes, Minister.' 'Listen,' he went on, 'I saw you on television, last Sunday. You provided a remarkable explanation of Luxembourgish spelling.' I think that even then he was just the same as when we became better acquainted, and I think that I somehow realised that, even then. Anyway, he had certainly broken the ice. He asked: 'Would you like to join my team at the Ministry of Cultural Affairs?' To which I replied: 'Minister, I'm obviously not going to

say no, but I cannot say yes either because I'm responsible for two final year classes in two separate secondary schools and I don't want to leave my pupils before their exams.' 'Well, do let me know once you make up your mind.' Three months later I did just that, having discussed the matter with my pupils, who were already adults, and the headmaster of the school. Someone else, a deputy head, said: 'Listen, if you don't go for it, after a few years you will end up with the same impression as I did. I was offered a job in another ministry and I've regretted it ever since.' Well, so be it. The following summer, in June, Werner called me at home and said ...

**[Elena Danescu]** That was in 19 ...? Which year was that?

**[Lex Roth]** It was 1980. So he said: 'Could you possibly come and see me this afternoon? I would like to talk to you.' OK, so off I went to his office in Luxembourg. Imagine that! I had never been anywhere near a minister. I was acquainted with a few members of parliament and such. That was usual. But not a minister, less still a 'Minister', a monument like Pierre Werner, you know. I mean, it was rather impressive. He said to me: 'You must come at once, because I'm having trouble at the ministry.' I am not going to go into the details of these problems at this juncture. It would not be right, to my mind. So I said: 'If you say that I need to come, Minister, I will go and speak to my headmaster and I will come as soon as I can.' Two days later, there I was. I had no experience of ministerial matters, office work or anything like that, so it was hard going. But I could see he was not pushing me. He would ask me: 'What do you think about culture in the broad sense of the term, not just culture reduced to museums, national records, the national library and all the big confederations (which were fairly important, including from an electoral point of view)? What do you think about all that?' I replied: 'Your predecessor, Robert Krieps, attached great importance to a very broad view of culture, perhaps even popular culture in the broadest sense of the term.' I said to him, 'I think the basic idea is excellent; perhaps not in that form, but that's another matter, it's a question of character, it demands a decision on your part. It's up to you to tell me what you think of this idea.' From that point on, our views really started to converge, and that included some extremely practical advice. To cite an example of this, there is a building made of rough-hewn stone near the cathedral in Luxembourg. It used to be a secondary school and had an adjoining cloister, named Sainte Sophie. Werner said to me: 'Listen, someone told me this structure has to go.' 'But, Minister, that's impossible.' 'Oh, why don't you think it's possible?' 'Well Minister,' I said, 'you — or the gentleman you're talking about, who says it's made of paving stones — may very well not like the building, but as far as I know it was the first building where young Luxembourg women received a proper, classical secondary education.' 'Yes, of course, you're right,' he said. 'Wait a moment, I'll ask Jetty about this.' Jetty was his wife, Mrs Werner. 'I'll ask Jetty about this and call you back this afternoon.' In due course he phoned. 'Jetty says you are quite right. We mustn't demolish this building.' It is still there. Obviously these are just little anecdotes, but they are things I have never forgotten.

**[Elena Danescu]** It was a mark of familiarity, but also of trust.

**[Lex Roth]** Yes, but there was never any familiarity between us. Never. As I said before, he never addressed me as 'tu'. In terms of age, he could have been my father, but he never addressed me as 'tu'. I once told him straight out: 'Prime Minister, I see you as an elder brother.' By that time we had really broken the ice. So anyway, we organised cultural fortnights all over the country, but cultural fortnights together, with all the 'cultural' organisations in a locality or region. It worked very well and I recall that Robert Krieps, who I knew quite well — he was at school with one of my brothers — once said to me: 'You have slightly destroyed what I developed before.' To which I replied: 'But Robert, I haven't destroyed anything at all. I thought your idea of taking culture to a large, perhaps even more popular audience, was a good idea, but not in the streets.' Everything that happens on the pavement is not necessarily popular. That much is obvious, but I did give people the opportunity to see, for example, a little exhibition on the country's land registry. These things worked remarkably well. But after a time, it became more than I could manage, physically and in terms of organisation, so I asked Werner to bring someone else onto the staff, someone I knew who was a very good organiser, Professor Gast Geimer. From then on things went very smoothly and we had absolutely no problems whatsoever with Werner, because his memos were sometimes admirable and always handwritten. His memos were always handwritten and we carried on, we carried on the usual work of a ministry, such as administering cultural institutes and so on, but we also ran into some unexpected problems. For instance, you know that the Gëlle Fra — the Gëlle Fra is the war memorial on Place de la Constitution which is currently in Shanghai — well, we had — though I shall spare you the details — we had found, so to speak, the wreckage of this female figure made of gilded bronze — which is why she immediately became known as the Gëlle Fra, or golden lady. Werner phoned me and said: 'We must respond in some way, because there is no stopping this.' 'Minister, I don't think we should try to stop it at all.' 'So, what would you do?' 'Rebuild it.' Just as it was in 1940 when the Nazis destroyed it. 'Yes, but how would go about doing that?' I said: 'I suggest holding a meeting of the heads of the federations, all the so-called patriotic organisations — the people who were forcibly conscripted, the prisoners, those sent to concentration camps, the Resistance fighters and so on — we'll hold a meeting for them to talk about this. That's what you're going to do.' And that is what I did. There I was, and I felt I was there to stand up for a minister, you know. It seemed the right thing to do. I organised a meeting for all these people, but they did not agree at all, not the least bit. They were so hostile to one another that I wondered what I was doing there. They were all much older than me. Fortunately I belonged to a family of Resistance fighters. One of my brothers was killed in action after being forcibly conscripted. So I said to these gentlemen: 'Listen, we shall stop this discussion and I shall refer the matter to my minister.' 'What did they say?' Werner inquired. 'This and that.' There was this little noise he used to make. 'Hummm,' he went, while continuing to look at me with his pale blue eyes. 'What are we going to do?' he asked. 'Well Minister, whatever happens we're going to rebuild the memorial.' 'But with whom?' 'We'll see.' 'Roth, tell them that if they don't behave themselves next time we will take the bits and some fine bolts, clean them all up and bolt them to the walls of the Musée de la Résistance in Esch-sur-Alzette.' 'All right.' So I summoned the leaders [of the various federations] and said: 'Listen, this is what the minister has decided.' You could have heard a pin drop. Not a murmur. Which made Werner laugh,

never in a nasty way but quite understandably. Then we rebuilt the Gëlle Fra and that was that.

Now, not so much an anecdote as a little story: the matter of the law on the Luxembourgish language. At the time I was still the President of Actioun Lëtzebuergesch — of which I was of course one of the founder members — and we had sent a letter to the minister. It was all done properly. He said to me: ‘But you could have brought it to me by hand.’ ‘No, Minister. I draw a line between my official duties and an altogether private matter.’ ‘Very well, but I have a proposal for you. Please convene a committee to look into the matter.’

**[Elena Danescu]** What was in the letter you wrote in your capacity as president of the association?

**[Lex Roth]** Well, the content of the letter was primarily ... how should I put it? The basis of the letter, its backbone, was the fact that in 1941 the Nazis had organised a purported referendum, which in fact was a census, not a referendum, asking the people of Luxembourg to state that their language was German. This was wrong. It is a Germanic language, but it is not German. Anyway the response was marvellous because more than 96 % or 97 % of the population answered: ‘No, our language is Luxembourgish.’ So in our letter we said: ‘We are not going to betray our elders, nor yet our forebears.’ Once and for all the language had to have some legal purpose. Werner agreed: ‘Yes, go ahead with it.’ So I assembled various people who I knew had the necessary legal skills or an opinion on the linguistic side. We had meetings and fairly soon we drew up a draft bill which Werner endorsed. The bill progressed following the usual procedure, being submitted to the Government Council, then the Council of State, before reaching the Grand Duke who obviously [...], well. Things ground to a halt. On several occasions I asked Werner: ‘Minister, don’t you think we may be forgetting about the bill a bit too much [...]?’ ‘Yes, you are concerned.’ Now if I might add a very nice anecdote, I remember that day very precisely, the day Belgium devalued its currency, the very same day, and Pierre Werner was not simply unhappy. I had never seen him like that before. We were travelling in the same car, on our way to Oesling to see work on the restoration of various churches, because he was also the Minister for Religious Affairs and from time to time we would go and see what was going on. I could even point out the very spot on the road from Diekirch to Troisvierges, in the north. He asked: ‘Listen, Roth, do you really want this bill to be passed and signed into law?’ I replied: ‘Oh, Minister, that is really the kindest question you could ask. Yes, I do!’ Which prompted one of his most remarkable responses: ‘I cannot afford to fall out with you over this law,’ while once again giving me his characteristic look. He was so tired that day. I remember that on our way back to Luxembourg, just before reaching the city, I felt his head on my shoulder. He had fallen asleep. Just like that. He had to go into Parliament and just near the Post Office, before turning into Rue Notre Dame, he woke up. ‘I think I must have dozed off,’ he said. ‘You deserved it, Minister.’ ‘Mee ech muss an d’Chamber goen,’ and so we went into Parliament. And there he was fine, spot on.

**[Elena Danescu]** To defend the bill.

**[Lex Roth]** Not exactly for the bill. There were other problems. As I said, that was the day when Belgium devalued without warning Luxembourg, which was not very nice to say the least. As for the law on the language, there were some extremely conservative MPs who wanted the law to include a clause specifying that if a letter was sent to an official body in Luxembourg, the reply should be in Luxembourgish. I told them it was the stupidest solution of all, because you would end up with a garbled version of Luxembourgish. I think you need to start by having some grasp of what our normal way of speaking would be like — our natural, mother tongue — in official correspondence. Just try to picture someone writing a letter in Luxembourgish to the Tax Office or maybe the Finance Ministry. It makes no sense. There needs to be some give and take in such matters. We gave Mrs ... now, her name escapes me ... it was for the report on the bill ... Viviane Reding, we gave Viviane Reding the job of presenting the bill. So she came to see me at my office. She said: 'Can you help me with this? Because I know a bit about it, but you know so much more and a lot more precisely; what's more, you're a teacher.' I said: 'Viviane, just sit down a moment.' It was the lunch hour. 'Sit down, get some paper and write this down.' So, as you can see, the report on the law started life in an interesting way. Reding wrote very well. She was very good at presenting things and she stuck to it subsequently — by the way, if I'm not mistaken, she was the person at a meeting in Andorra who convinced the Council of Europe to improve the status of so-called minority languages. Personally I have always refused to refer to Luxembourgish as a minority language, because in the country itself it is not in a minority position, unlike three or four very different languages in France — not to mention Belgium or Italy. Even in your country, Madam, there is a less common, less widely used language, as the EBLUL (European Bureau for Lesser-Used Languages) puts it — that being the right term, of course. Anyway the bill itself was passed without the ominous Article 4 which [would have] made it obligatory, even if it did say 'in so far as possible'. There was a bit of give and take in all that. The law is now 25 years old — it has celebrated its silver wedding anniversary, so to speak — but what we still lack — and I believe that if Werner was still here the language would already be part of the Constitution — because it is still not in the Constitution and that is a drawback, a mistake. Since then, we have passed laws on nationality and obliged those who want to obtain nationality to learn and be familiar with Luxembourgish. We have passed a law setting up the National Institute of Languages (INL) in which Luxembourgish plays a leading role. That is all perfectly clear. After all, what is the basis for these laws? Not the Constitution, because it ignores Luxembourgish. Which is why, for the time being and perhaps a long time still to come, we spend our time trying not to force the hand of Parliament but just to remind them of this point. That is why I refer to this passage as *ceterum censeo Carthago delenda est*. We shall see. Of course unfortunately this has nothing to do with Werner any more. I must say that he was prepared to trust some people or he was convinced they would not do anything without informing him and that nothing went on behind his back, unlike what often happens with ministers ... very often, sometimes for the good. But with Werner such things never occurred. As I said at the beginning, regarding European affairs and Werner — I know as much about that part as anyone else who has read Werner's memoirs — but the two of us never discussed Europe. I know he had a great deal of respect for Robert Schuman. Moreover he was made of the same stuff as Schuman. Except that Schuman was a bachelor and Werner was the father of five children, which opens up other perspectives for

life in general. But he did very much respect Schuman and he sometimes talked about him, after they had met. He also told me some of the stories he heard from Joseph Bech, for instance. Schuman and Bech, when they did not want anyone else listening in, would swap anecdotes exclusively in Luxembourgish ... and Werner was familiar with these tales. He had great respect for them and in my view they made a perfect pair. Werner never bragged about being one of the fathers of the euro and all that. I am sure that at European Council meetings he never raised his voice but just said exactly what was required and was highly respected. As part of my subsequent duties at the Press and Information Service ... I was obviously able to keep up to date on all the European Summits, and I spoke to dozens of journalists from France, Germany and so on. They displayed truly remarkable admiration for Werner. He was a real gentleman. No doubt about it, with no mannerisms. He was never affected. But at the same time he was almost never overly familiar with people. He spoke very quietly ... he had a very gentle voice, a fine voice too. He belonged to the choir of Luxembourg Cathedral and, as I said before, he was an accomplished piano player too.

There is another anecdote which I think shows what he was like, even after being a minister and Prime Minister for 25 years. One Sunday we went to see a castle — I believe it was at Larochette — there was a small gathering there. Werner said: 'I'm going to see that. All right. Come to my house and we can drive there together in my car.' He never used a chauffeur on Sundays, preferring to drive himself, which was very revealing. So off we went to Larochette. We came back and the same evening there was a little reception, I think, to celebrate the birthday of the president of a Luxembourg music society. The man turned out to have been one of Werner's classmates. 'I must drop in at Eugène's,' he said, 'but right now I'm a bit peckish. Come along.' He parked the car near his house in Limpertsberg. 'Come in!' He sat me down in an armchair and said: 'I'm going to make us a nice little sandwich.' That was typical of Werner. Anyway we ate our snack and then he said: 'We'll be much better now, with the wine we're going to drink afterwards.' That was so typical of Werner. Really, he knew exactly where to draw a line between official and private matters. And of course it is the sort of thing that sticks in your mind. It is fair to say that I've had dealings with dozens of ministers, but they have revealed very different personalities. I know Jacques Santer very well and like him a lot, but there is a huge difference between them.

**[Elena Danescu]** Now as you happen to mention Jacques Santer, we know that Santer joined Werner's last government as state secretary. In 1982 Jean-Claude Juncker also entered the government as a youthful state secretary, an initiative by Werner which may have upset some of the party elders. Do you think that in so doing, Werner hoped to train future leaders, future heads of government for Luxembourg?

**[Lex Roth]** Santer had climbed the rungs of the Christian Social Party, in a perfectly normal way. He worked his way up from the first rung, so to speak. So he was well acquainted with Werner. The latter obviously knew and appreciated Santer, and after the then minister, Madeleine Frieden, resigned, Werner chose Santer as state secretary. To begin with, he was in charge of the Ministry of Labour, which is not an easy task, and he progressed in a perfectly normal way — quite in keeping with his personality. He was an accomplished student, a

student of Classics, which counts a great deal in Luxembourg, much as the current Mayor of Luxembourg, Paul Helminger, who also studied Greek and Latin. Santer is very thorough in all he does, but when in company he is also very approachable. I knew him well, even before he was appointed state secretary, because I had Mrs Santer, who is French, in one of my Luxembourgish classes. That is how I got to know Santer. Jean-Claude Juncker is another matter. All three — Werner, Santer and Juncker — are very different, with very different personalities and backgrounds too. Juncker comes from the Luxembourg coal mines, from a family I have known for three generations, as I come from Wiltz. His grandfather was from Dahl, near Wiltz, and worked at the Ideal tannery, as it was called. I can still remember Juncker's grandad who would down come to work every day on his bicycle and go back up there after work [...]. They were simple folk, as we used to say, working people. But I also know some of old Mr Juncker's sons and they are all very bright, you know. But they could not afford to go to secondary school because there wasn't one in Wiltz. The nearest secondary school was in Diekirch. And that was hard to accept. It is something I saw in my own family. But because of this, one of Jean-Claude Juncker's uncles got a job as a nurse at the health centre in Ettelbruck. As he was hard-working and always very conscientious, people in Ettelbruck thought highly of him and he was elected as the local mayor. He had a very successful career, became an MP and ended up as the Speaker in Parliament. So it was only to be expected that in a family like that, with everyone on good terms — Jean-Claude Juncker's parents and the branch of the family that settled in Ettelbruck all got on very well together — it was only to be expected that Juncker's mind should gradually turn to politics. He certainly got a good grounding in political science as well as studying law. When he finished at university he was taken on immediately because people had seen he was bright, particularly Werner.

**[Elena Danescu]** Do you remember when Pierre Werner brought Jean-Claude Juncker into the government, how their relations evolved and whether at some point he saw him as a potential successor?

**[Lex Roth]** Yes, I remember very well Werner asking me one day in 1981: 'Do you know Mr Juncker?' 'Not very well,' I answered. 'But I think there's some potential there. I have that feeling.' 'Yes, so do I,' he said. When he had the opportunity to put himself forward, to replace a minister, Camille Ney, who had just passed away, I remember very well the discussions that took place. You see, under normal circumstances his uncle Édouard Juncker, the mayor of Ettelbruck, should have been appointed as Ney's successor. I had no idea, and I did not want to know what went on behind closed doors. I had a secretary who knew everything that was going on and she was always trying to tell me stories about that. I said: 'Listen, drop the matter. Above all I don't want to be mixed up in things that are no concern of mine.' Édouard Juncker gave up the idea of becoming minister, giving precedence to his nephew, I would say. He was quite right, quite right, because, as we now know, from his very first day as state secretary ... for one thing, he had plenty of ideas, he is extremely bright, he spoke beautifully, enviably I'd say. In short I do not think anybody now has any doubts about Jean-Claude Juncker's outstanding abilities.

**[Elena Danescu]** Now I should like to move on to 1984, when Pierre Werner retired from politics. At the time you were at the Ministry of State. Do you recall the reactions at home and abroad when Werner announced he was leaving the political arena in Luxembourg?

**[Lex Roth]** Properly speaking I was not at the Ministry of State. The Minister of State was also Minister for Culture. It is not the same thing at all, quite separate, you know? As I said before I only worked with Pierre Werner in his capacity as Minister for Culture.

**[Elena Danescu]** Regarding the Ministry of Culture, in 1972 Werner set up a state secretariat for culture, which he added to the duties of the Prime Minister. In 1979 this secretariat became a ministry, but still under the responsibility of the Prime Minister. Subsequent Prime Ministers assumed the dual function of 'Minister of State, Head of Government and Minister for Culture'.

**[Lex Roth]** Yes.

**[Elena Danescu]** Jean-Claude Juncker changed all that. What do you think prompted the head of government to include among his immediate duties that of being Minister for Culture?

**[Lex Roth]** Well, bear in mind that it was not called the Ministry of Culture. It was called ...

**[Elena Danescu]** ... the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

**[Lex Roth]** ... the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. There is a semantic distinction here, in my view. And Pierre Werner could just as well have called his cultural affairs the Ministry of Culture from the outset. He certainly had his own views on the subject. But it has to be said that the Minister of Cultural Affairs before Werner [took over] — Robert Krieps — had given the institution an importance which obliged his successor to give the ministry more weight. It was still referred to as 'cultural affairs' under Werner, even under Santer, I think, but then it became the Ministry of Culture.

**[Elena Danescu]** Yes, while Erna Hennicot was in office.

**[Lex Roth]** That's right. It does mean something though and I must say that the socialist minister, Robert Krieps, had ideas of his own for giving culture another official face, so to speak, and he undoubtedly succeeded. He also recruited people he could trust to put his ideas into practice, that is absolutely clear. At the same time it was only to be expected that Pierre Werner should subsequently have other ideas or want to change existing ideas. That happens in all democratic governments. But Werner really tried to quieten things down because it was beginning to get on his nerves. 'Yes, I know!' [he would say]. Nor did he want 'street culture', as he put it. He wanted popular culture, but refused to consider everything that happened on the pavement or by chance as culture. That was his point of view, but I think one sometimes has to break a window to show there is glass in it, you know. It is quite usual, all part of evolution. Yes, indeed.



## II. The Luxembourgish language as a marker of identity

**[Elena Danescu]** On another matter, since Jean-Claude Juncker took over as Prime Minister in Luxembourg, the annual reports on the state of the nation submitted to Parliament have been in Luxembourgish. Since 1996 all the debates in Parliament have been in this language too. So there has been a shift towards to a more balanced national identity.

**[Lex Roth]** Yes, but contrary to what you have just said parliamentary debates in Luxembourgish did not start in 1987 [1996]. That goes back to the end of the Second World War, the late 1940s, early 1950s, so at least 25 years earlier. But foreign journalists always had difficulty understanding this situation, when I tried to explain it to them. A bill is tabled in Parliament, where it is debated in Luxembourgish, it is discussed in German in the press, then published in French, and the French version is legally binding, I used to say. But as for Luxembourgish identity I am quite convinced, much as many foreigners — above all I met hundreds of them in my language classes, so I'm not making anything up — who would say: 'Your language and your linguistic situation are really the key ingredients in your identity.' People say that historically Luxembourg came about by chance, which is fair enough, but name a country that did not come about by chance. Look at Italy, look at a political map from 1850 and look at Italy. It is a patchwork. Pre-Bismarck Germany was a patchwork too, whereas Luxembourg has been Luxembourg since 1839 when the Belgians, so to speak, pinched the last little bit. But since then Luxembourg has had its own place in history, it has had its own stories, it resisted when the situation demanded it and in a way that was permitted, as you can see from the general strike against the Nazis in 1942 and so on. Luxembourg was quick to recognise the importance of European integration, even before the European Coal and Steel Community, when they were still in London, during the war and just afterwards. Which is why we are quite proud, and that too, I believe, is part of our identity. We are quite proud to have been one of the six founding members of the European Union. Naturally it is something people often overlook. But Luxembourgers do not go around blowing their own trumpet and bragging about their identity. It's not like that.

**[Elena Danescu]** Regarding the law on language and Europe, there was surely some question at one point of Luxembourgish, once the law had established it as the national language, also becoming an official language of the European Communities?

**[Lex Roth]** Now that is an interesting question, which has interested me for years. Above all there was an MP, who was also the leader of the Christian Social Party group in Parliament, François Colling. He was very keen on Luxembourgish becoming an official language of the Community, of the European Union. What I always said was that if he really wanted to make a laughing stock of Luxembourgers he should make it a compulsory European language. We really do not need that. From the age of seven or eight our linguistic situation virtually forces us to concern ourselves with two foreign languages, two major languages: German — we learn how to read and write in German, as one would expect for a Germanic language —

followed by French, starting in the second year of primary school. If I might say so, what better grounding could there be for learning English than a grasp of German and French, because without those two tongues, the British would have little option but to bark. It is quite clear, in view of all that has occurred since 1066 and the Battle of Hastings. So, I think we are very well placed and there is no need at all for our little language — I always avoid the term ‘minority’ language, because it does not apply in the true sense of the term — and I have always opposed, by all available means, any attempts to make Luxembourgish a compulsory, official language. But when our Maltese friends joined the EU, the question resurfaced. People would say: ‘You see, look at that! If the Maltese have been able to dictate their terms and you agreed to them, you have been diddled.’ My own view has not changed, because in linguistic terms Maltese is certainly no richer than Luxembourgish. In any case, it is a mixture of Italian, Arabic and so on. That is perfectly all right and Maltese is neither written nor spoken by more inhabitants than Luxembourgish. The same goes for Icelandic. If one day Iceland joins the EU, it will be the same situation because Icelandic is spoken by about 270 000 people. But I think we should stick with the current status we have for Luxembourgish with regard to the EU. At the same time it would obviously be advantageous to have popular publications, on subjects like the behaviour of travellers in airports and so on, to have the text in Luxembourgish here in Luxembourg, but only very easy texts. Look at all the texts that are really couched in legal terms! The French themselves do not fully understand what is in their legal documents, and it’s the same in German.

**[Elena Danescu]** It is very technical language ...

**[Lex Roth]** It is so difficult, really difficult. Please do not do that to Luxembourgish. Leave it as it is. Before doing anything else we have to take care of the language in this country, to show Luxembourgers that their little language is not as little as they think. Little does not mean poor. It is not poor at all. Moreover in the past 30 or 40 years Luxembourgish literature has made enormous progress, in relative terms. One of our greatest writers, Roger Manderscheid, passed away the day before yesterday. He and his fellow writer Guy Rewenig, and some others, practically introduced novels into the language single-handedly. So the language has evolved. You cannot imagine what I went through in the 1970s because I stood up for Luxembourgish. Yet I was adamant that we had no bone to pick with German or French. Otherwise we would be fools, because our familiarity with these languages is a strength. But you must remember that we are typically Luxembourgish; from a linguistic point of view, we must stay that way. So we must also give Luxembourgish the importance it deserves. There is no question of ever discarding another language, but we must keep our present situation and it is Luxembourgish that acts as a catalyst for this situation. Of that I’m sure.

### **III. Luxembourg and Europe**

**[Elena Danescu]** In 1988 you were appointed to head the government’s Press and Information Service. You were consequently in office in this capacity when Luxembourg held

the rotating EU presidency in 1991, with the framing of the Maastricht Treaty as its outcome. What are your recollections of this presidency and the preparations for it? How did you contribute to the preparations and to the actual presidency?

**[Lex Roth]** I still remember very well the preparations, which were obviously not easy, because we did not have at our disposition even one-twentieth of the staff we usually met at summit meetings in other European countries. We made a good job of sorting out each person's abilities and potential. Our job was press and information, sure enough, but it was not our job to organise locations and such. It seemed quite usual for us to work alongside the specialists on public buildings, for example, at meetings and to indicate our requirements. But carrying out such tasks was never the responsibility of the Press and Information Service, which in any case only had a dozen members of staff. The preparations for a summit in Luxembourg City were always a bit of a miracle, but things went very smoothly because everyone knew each other, sometimes even in private. We did not need to organise meetings just for their own sake. What I mean is that it all seemed very natural. It has to be said too that there were only a dozen countries at that stage. But I think we had more work with visits, with the visit by Pope John Paul II in 1985, than with the 1991 summit. Of course the practical details were down to the people in charge of public buildings, in other words the Ministry of Public Works or Foreign Affairs. We never had a part in anything that did not concern the press. To clarify another misconception, past or present, unlike other countries, as a government advisor and head of the Press and Information Service, I was certainly not the speaker. Fortunately that was never the case.

**[Elena Danescu]** There was a spokesperson for the presidency and you worked with them?

**[Lex Roth]** Exactly. Work was always conducted at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The presidency did not have a spokesperson at the Ministry of State. In any case, from a legal point of view, all government advisors are advisors to the Prime Minister; even Ministry of Health advisors are ultimately advisors to the Prime Minister. That much is fairly clear. We had about 10 ambassadors who understood the situation perfectly, and we had people at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — much as is currently the case with the Minister, Nicolas Schmit — who were real specialists, who knew exactly what they were talking about. So if there was a problem, we could always turn to them. 'Listen Nicolas, we've got a call from a journalist on Die Handelsblatt.' 'OK, put him through.' And that was it. So we acted as a sort of dispatching service. The summit meetings themselves were held at Kirchberg, in the days when it was not quite as splendid as it is now, but all the gears were well oiled and everyone worked very smoothly.

**[Elena Danescu]** Do you remember any tense or difficult moments when you were presenting a press digest, for example, on debates in the Council of Ministers, some of which did not go smoothly?

**[Lex Roth]** Our job was primarily to organise all that was required for the members of the press attending the summit, you see, to organise the venue and so on, and, how should I put it,

to provide foreign journalists with the necessary memos. So our job was a material one. But as I had experience of many summits, I did wonder a bit how we managed to do it successfully with 20 times less staff. Of course there are advantages to smaller numbers, because everyone knows everyone else, in one way or another, whereas in London or Madrid I would see people rushing around trying to catch people's attention. We don't need that here. Not at all. But it was very hard work. We worked admirably well with the security people, with the police and army detachments, and so on. It went without a hitch.

**[Elena Danescu]** Among the European leaders you came across during these summits, who made the greatest impression?

**[Lex Roth]** Well yes, the most impressive ... I remember very well that in Madrid — no, Milan — I was standing at the bar waiting for a glass of water or some such, and there were two men who were not yet members of the European Union but who got on very well with each other. One was the Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe González, the other was [the Portuguese premier] Mario Suárez, who had been invited to Milan to sit in on the debates. At one point they spotted that I was wearing the Luxembourg badge. 'Ah, you're from Luxembourg?' 'Yes, Minister.' 'Well, well. Only a fortnight ago I did an interview in Lisbon with a young Luxembourgish journalist, and he was very good.' It was Suarez who was speaking. 'Yes, Minister, that was my nephew,' I replied. 'It only goes to show how small Luxembourg is. When you talk to one Luxembourger, you immediately run into three others who know him, at least by sight.' So we chatted for a moment and it was all very friendly, which made a big impression.

I also recall a time at the 1991 Luxembourg Summit when everyone had gone off to eat. That is to say all the official vehicles had left, but there was still one car with another in front and another behind, and there was a woman sitting on a sofa who was busy doing her nails. It was Margaret Thatcher. 'Excuse me, Madam, but everyone has left,' I said. 'Oh, excuse me!' As I had no car, she took me in hers as far as the Rollingergrund, where Villeroy & Boch is, that château. That was impressive! But when you say 'impressive', you probably mean from a political point of view. I have to say that most of these people are by definition impressive, but I think the two most impressive people I ever met were not at European Council meetings. One was Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow in 1989, and the other was Pope John Paul II. They had — Gorbachev even now — we were at the Kremlin and Jacques Santer was introducing his staff, and he [Gorbachev] gave me a piercing look, like a laser beam. I don't know why but that was how it felt. With Pope John Paul II, it was exactly the same. I remember when he climbed back into his plane to leave. On one side there were the representatives of the legislative and the government, and on the other the people in charge of organising the event. The Pope ... I had seen him two or three times during his two-day visit for introductions to the press and so on, and I was the last in line before the gangway he had to go up — I have a photograph of that — and he held out his hand, grabbing me by the wrist with the other, said: 'Thank you for all your good work,' and winked. I will never forget that. Because he knew that he had brought a large press contingent from the Vatican with him. He always brought them in his plane — and I am sure that they are the ones who pay for the plane.

Those are the two people who most impressed me, with the way they looked at me. As for politicians, well, you know when you are there in the morning having your breakfast at the same table as Wilfried Martens or Helmut Kohl, things go very smoothly. I do remember though that on one occasion Kohl called Jean-Claude Juncker ‘Junior’. He said: ‘Helmut, I’m not called Junior, but Jean-Claude.’ I never heard Kohl use the term again. Honestly!

**[Elena Danescu]** I suppose he was setting the record straight.

**[Lex Roth]** Yes.

**[Elena Danescu]** Did such amicable relations between political leaders help smooth progress on some matters? Were you aware of friendly relations between Luxembourg and European policy-makers?

**[Lex Roth]** Well of course there are also people like François Mitterrand. No doubt about it. When he entered the room, he had sort of X-ray eyes. And the way he looked at you, what a look! But there are people like that. In Paris — I think it was 1991 — I remember seeing Robert Badinter and Jacques Attali, deep in discussion, at the long negotiating table, alongside several heads of state or government ... George Bush senior was there too ... and you sort of shrink, you feel like a little mouse watching all these great men and women from a hole in the wainscot, while they talk. But when there are no journalists, they are quite different from the way they are the rest of the time. Take away the photographers and the film cameras, and politicians, political leaders behave in a perfectly normal way. Bring in the press and you see that familiar gesture as they adjust their tie and sit up straight. But otherwise, when you have breakfast at the same table it is almost in private. Absolutely private.

**[Elena Danescu]** As we are nearing the end of our talk, I should like to ask you about Luxembourg’s policy on Europe. In the course of your duties you attended many government meetings and you are familiar with the relations between government and parliament. So I wondered whether it was true that there was a consensus on Luxembourg’s European policy, and whether that has always been the case. Do you recall any controversy, any disagreement over the decisions taken in connection with Luxembourg’s European policy?

**[Lex Roth]** I think that there was one thing that was always very positive. I have seen the same thing at European Summits, with Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Belgium always getting together before the start of the Council meeting and ... They always saw themselves as Benelux, you know, and they really respected that, all of them, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. I never had the feeling there was any real disagreement between them, any friction. I have no recollection of that. There was a good understanding between them, though of course each one had their own point of view on things. There is another thing too. When there were ministers at a meeting — it is still the case today — they would be there with up to two advisors, who were obviously specialists. Personally, when I attended these meetings, I took care of our press first, and of press conferences for one of our ministers, either the

Finance Minister or the Prime Minister. I well remember Maastricht ... my work was to organise things and, well, to ensure that in that respect the minister(s) had all that was required. That was all quite usual, but what was obviously very interesting was also being able to talk with leading lights of the French or German press. I clearly recall a very kind man, the French writer Philippe Alexandre, with whom I got on very well. Indeed we had some fun talking about Luxembourg. I also remember someone or other asking: 'But actually what is Luxembourg?' This sort of question was generally in German or English and sometimes they were very puzzled, really very puzzled. 'So, what are you doing there? [...] And what about your schools? [...] Do you have this, that or the other?' 'Yes, but on a very small scale, of course.' These are of course entirely personal recollections, but I must point out that for my part I was never present at any unpleasant discussions, if I may put it that way. I took care of the press and the specialists on foreign affairs or finance always assisted the minister or ministers. It was quite clear.

**[Elena Danescu]** Lex Roth, thank you very much indeed for your time and for all the very interesting things you have told us today. May I ask you to add a little conclusion, and please would you also repeat what you said earlier, off the record, regarding the historical value of Sanem castle?

**[Lex Roth]** Yes, I am very impressed to be here, because I am very interested in history, particularly 19th-century history, which brought Luxembourg into existence, whereas the 20th century gave it more solid foundations. This was particularly so after the 1920s, when there were problems. I am sure you are familiar with the fateful date in September 1919 when the people of Luxembourg voted in a referendum and wholeheartedly expressed the wish for a fatherland of their own, and not a republic. They voted in favour of a constitutional monarchy, with which we were very fortunate, particularly during the last war. The castle makes a deep impression because in a way the gentleman who was one of the key players at [the] London [Conference] in 1867 lived here ... Victor de Tornaco haunts the place in a way ... perhaps I should call him Baron de Tornaco. When the land was divided up between Belgium and Luxembourg — there are other stories I could tell, but we must never forget to thank these people who held on, who really held on during those difficult years, during the Franco-Prussian war, which was partly caused by Luxembourg of course. Emmanuel Servais and Baron de Tornaco played a very important part, which people all too often forget, I think, but on the other hand one cannot, one really cannot expect 'normal' people to know all about the history of the past 100 years. Anyway I must conclude. I believe, Madam, that our little country, before becoming a Grand Duchy, was simply a Duchy — it's one of the paradoxes of its history — they chopped off two-thirds of its territory and then they turned a Duchy into a Grand Duchy. It's a bit ... it's funny. But I am content, I am proud that here in this country there have been policy-makers, regardless of their political hue, people in politics who have had decent opinions. I am also proud of the part that Luxembourg has been able to play, that it was able to give the European Union the ECSC, the first offices, the first administrative table and chair, where you now see the Caisse d'Épargne, near Adolphe Bridge. Here again, it is quite typical, the Luxembourgers could think of nothing better to do than put up a tarnished plaque which no one notices or even looks at, but which does say that in 1953 it was here that

the first administrators sat down at a table. So I am proud of the part that Luxembourg has played in contemporary European history, and I hope it can and will carry on along the same lines. I think we are quite well equipped too, at a personal level, because the respect we have for our present Prime Minister may be different, but it has the same intensity with regard to Jean-Claude Juncker as it did for Pierre Werner, and so I believe the circle is unbroken.

**[Elena Danescu]** Lex Roth, once more may I thank you very much indeed.