

Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers, Rebuilding Europe: Memoirs

Caption: In 1989, Baron Jean-Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers, former Secretary-General of the Belgian Ministry of Economic Affairs and also former Head of the Belgian Delegation to the Intergovernmental Committee established by the Messina Conference, relates to journalist Jean-Claude Ricquier his memories of the Conference, held from 1 to 3 June 1955, which was attended by the Foreign Ministers of the six Member States of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) who were in favour of reviving European integration.

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Jean Charles Snoy et d'Oppuers, *Rebuilding Europe: Memoirs*

[...]

— *Hardly had the new Belgian Government got down to business when the European revival began. Did it play a leading role?*

— 1955 was the year of European revival, and it was mainly brought about by the Benelux. As early as 13 September 1954, I had asked Jacques Van Tichelen and Louis Duquesne de la Vinelle, senior officials in the Ministry of Economic Affairs, to have a study carried out into the creation of a free-trade zone among the six countries of the smaller Europe. It might even have been limited initially to five countries if France could not accept it from the outset. This study was speeded up following the news of the Franco-German agreements of 24 October 1954 concerning the Saar and the Franco-German communiqué of 26 October which opened up the prospect of special economic cooperation between the two countries. On 29 November 1954, the Benelux Ministers decided to use the ECSC structure as the framework for the revival, even if it had to be extended later.

— *Was this preparatory work by the Benelux Governments carried out unbeknown to our other major partners?*

— It was done very discreetly, because Paul-Henri Spaak acted with the utmost caution. He actually waited for the fall of the Mendès France Government in February 1955 before making real political overtures. It was at that point that we drafted a Benelux memorandum which set out a series of suggestions for the revival of European unification. These included proposals based on the Monnet method which he had used for the European Coal and Steel Community, that is, pooling nuclear energy, electricity and transport. We had also been impressed by the negotiations aimed at creating a customs union that had taken place in Rome spearheaded by Johan Beyen, the Netherlands Foreign Minister.

— *It was now the spring of 1955. The Messina Conference was about to begin. The Benelux proposals would be adopted there, as you wrote, 'to your great surprise and delight,' by the Ministers of the Six. Could you depict for us the climate at that Conference?*

— Paul-Henri Spaak, André de Staercke, Robert Rothschild, Albert Hupperts and myself left for Rome on Whit Monday, 29 May 1955, and we were received by Baron Joseph van der Elst at the Villa Doria Pamphili which had been marvellously restored and was now the Belgian Embassy. We flew to Palermo where a car from the Embassy awaited us, escorted by carabinieri outriders, for two days of sightseeing. We saw Segesta and Selinunte and stopped off at Agrigento. There we were amused to see on the same open-air electoral platform, Giovanni Malagodi, followed by Guiseppe Pella, who both harangued the crowds with a view to the forthcoming regional elections in Sicily. This was why we had been summoned to Sicily, since Minister Gaetano Martino would not have attended a Conference anywhere else with the election campaign taking place.

— *Why was Messina chosen?*

— Messina was chosen because it was close to Taormina, where the delegations could be accommodated.

We arrived at the Hotel San Domenico in Taormina on the evening of 31 May.

The French Delegation, led by Antoine Pinay, arrived at the same time. There was Olivier Wormser and Jean Sauvagnargues, as well as some representatives from the town of Saint-Chamond who had been at the Vatican the previous day for the beatification of someone from the town. It was sunny and warm, but Etna was hidden by cloud.

The Conference was to begin on 1 June at 4 p.m. It was, we were told, the first international conference to be held in Sicily since the days of the Hohenstaufens.

— *Was the solidarity between the Benelux Ministers as much in evidence as it had been during the preparatory work?*

— On the morning of 1 June, the three Benelux Ministers, Johan Beyen, Joseph Bech and Paul-Henri Spaak, had agreed to meet on the balcony of Bech's apartment in order to agree on their tactics. They were uncertain of the reaction from the three large countries to their joint memorandum and decided to leave their options open and concentrate their efforts on the negotiating procedure. The negotiations had to be chaired by a leading politician who could, at any moment, by acting directly at government level, overcome any deadlock which might easily arise at the level of the experts.

The name of Paul van Zeeland was mentioned in this context.

The Conference was convened in Messina on 1 June. Towards 6 p.m. on that day, Mr Bech, who was in the chair, since Luxembourg at that time was chairing the ECSC Council of Ministers, adjourned the meeting and asked me, along with the Ambassadors and the Ministers' personal aides, to put down on paper the conclusions that the Conference had reached and take a text to Taormina where the Ministers would be at the theatre.

It took under half an hour for us to realise that the Ministers' statements were not in agreement and that it was impossible for me to draft a concluding statement. My colleagues asked me to explain the situation to the Ministers.

I found them on the stone seats in the Greek Theatre in Taormina where the ballet troupe from Rome was performing. I asked Mr Bech to organise a further ministerial meeting, and it took place at San Domenico, following a dinner hosted by the Italian Government and to which the ballet dancers were invited. It was two o'clock in the morning. It lasted two hours and was tough and decisive.

Agreement was reached on a resolution that included all the proposals set out in the Benelux memorandum. It was also decided that the preparations for the conference that would draw up the treaties would be entrusted to an eminent political figure. It was decided that the British Government would be invited to take part. It was in this way that Europe was revived, not in Messina, but in Taormina, between two and four o'clock in the morning!

This unexpected success for the Benelux plan allowed us to harbour new hopes for Europe.

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