

'Jos Schroeder: Reconstruction in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg' from Bulletin d'information (October 1946)

Caption: In October 1946, Jos Schroeder, Luxembourg Commissioner General for Reconstruction, takes stock of the material destruction suffered by the Grand Duchy and explains the first measures to be taken to rebuild the country.

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Reconstruction in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg

by **Jos. Schroeder**
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Background

Out of 589 towns and villages which make up the Grand Duchy, 250 have been affected to a greater or lesser extent by the war. The damage to the country is very unequally distributed, with respect to both time and location. It began in May 1940 when, after the German invasion, the southern part of the country was hit by artillery fire from the Maginot Line defences. For repairs to the damage, the occupying force set up the War Damage Office, which was supposed to deal with all war damage, be it material, bodily or other. Even though the material damage was very slight, the said Office undertook only very few reconstruction projects during the war.

During the occupation, there was a comparative calm, apart from the few thousand bombs that were dropped erroneously by the various air forces.

However, the bombing raids in May and August 1944 and the German retreat in September 1944 caused very serious damage to the capital and to the eastern part of the country. The capital suffered quite severely from German long-range artillery fire.

The final straw was the bloody but fruitless Von Rundstedt offensive in December 1944 that almost destroyed Luxembourg. More than half the country was reoccupied by the enemy who pillaged and ransacked to their hearts' content, in an unrestrained spirit of revenge.

In 1935, there were 58 069 buildings in the entire country. At the final liberation, the total number of buildings damaged since the beginning of the war was roughly 18 000, of which:

| | | | | | |
|------------------|---------|---------|---|-----|--------------|
| 10 650 buildings | damaged | between | 0 | and | 25 % |
| 3 690 | " | " | " | " | 25 and 50 % |
| 1 585 | " | " | " | " | 50 and 80 % |
| 2 070 | " | " | " | " | 80 and 100 % |

in total, therefore, 17 995 privately-owned buildings representing about one-third of all the buildings in existence before the war. The cost of repairs may be estimated at between 3.5 and 4 billion Luxembourg (= Belgian) francs. Not included in this figure is the cost of the damage caused to public buildings, railways, highways and farm roads both publicly and privately owned, the telephone network and the electricity grid. In total, the damage to buildings alone will be about 5 billion, that is 18 000 francs per inhabitant.

Faced with such a disastrous situation, the Government of the Grand Duchy established, in February 1945, the General Commission for Reconstruction. The role of the Commissioner-General consisted mainly in taking charge of the reconstruction of private property and in overseeing the reconstruction work relating to the entire country.

Clearing up

As soon as an area had been liberated, everyone set to work with unfailing courage. The first and most urgent task was to clear the streets of the rubble and refuse which, in some areas, had prevented all movement of vehicles. The gaping holes in the walls and roofs were patched up with whatever could be found.

In order to remove the enormous quantities of rubble that came both from the streets and the inside of the houses, some of the strangest contraptions had to be used, ranging from handcarts to simple wagons.

Urgent maintenance measures

The first rudimentary repairs were all done by the victims themselves, because, even had it been possible to feed and house outside helpers, it would have been physically impossible to arrange transport to the affected areas. In fact, during their retreat, the invaders had destroyed all the road bridges and every railway bridge, except those on the line that runs along the western border. In three-quarters of the country there were no telephones whatsoever. The few trucks and buses left by the occupying forces were stranded without petrol. Every type of construction material was lacking in the devastated regions. Fortunately, the country had quite a large reserve of cement, roof slates and thin laminated metal sheeting. But these products had to be ferried over long distances by horse-drawn carts. Wood, in particular, was scarce, and much further damage could have been avoided had this precious material been available to repair the roofs. Poor-quality and badly-laid tarred cardboard was torn away by the wind and had to be replaced several times. Better results were achieved using 1 mm-strips of black metal sheeting, laid flat to begin with. The situation was significantly improved later by funnelling the sheeting in the same way as strips of zinc or galvanised metal. These panels of black metal sheeting, properly laid and made watertight by a protective layer, could well last ten years or so.

As in every region affected by the war, shattered windows were a particular problem. People made do at first by replacing the panes with planks of wood or cardboard. From April 1945 onwards, we were able to use glass, albeit in very small quantities, but this was already a great step forward.

Repairs

From the outset, and wherever possible, long-term repairs were undertaken at the same time as the more urgent maintenance work. If the necessary materials and manpower had been available, we would have completely abandoned temporary repairs. Wood, especially, was lacking and it still is to this day. Glass only arrived in sufficient quantities from the end of 1945.

The shortage of men with building skills was not unexpected. Before the war, there were only just enough workers to fulfil day-to-day needs. During the war, the workforce was depleted by the withdrawal of the foreign element, especially the Italians. A disastrous situation such as the one which we are facing now was bound to catch us on the hop. Fortunately, heavy industry and the mines – which suffered little in the war – had been idle since the arrival of the Allied troops. During these long months of inactivity, those companies, at the instigation of our Minister of Labour, formed teams of 20 to 25 workers, made up of key elements of the building trade, masons, carpenters, roof specialists, electricians, etc., in other words those most needed in the devastated areas. Without those teams, it would have been impossible for us from the outset to repair the worst instances of destruction.

But the next problem was to feed and house those extra 2 800 craftsmen and workers. If the victims have priority over the workmen as regards housing, as indeed they should, it is also true that, in order to repair and rebuild as quickly as possible to prevent further damage, it is essential to bring in non-indigenous manpower. The situation was made even more desperate, because even those houses which had remained more or less intact had been stripped of furniture and livestock; all had been removed or destroyed by the enemy hordes. Fortunately, as the work progressed, the situation improved so that, after a few months, we were able to house the ordinary workforce (about 5 300 men) as well as the 2 800 industrial workers.

One particular dilemma, common to all war-torn countries is the following: is it better to repair everything as far as possible without carrying out a survey of the damage or should an expert survey be carried out before any work is started? We think that, in every affected country, the answer has been the same: repair as far as possible without bothering about the survey. During the time spent on this work, even supposing that there are enough qualified personnel available, the extent of further damage would be unjustifiable. Now, with the immediate maintenance work being practically all finished, we require an estimate of the damage before authorising any *interior repairs*. An estimate is also required in all cases where complete reconstruction is necessary.

According to a decree passed on 30 April 1945, demolition and clearance work, as well as the maintenance repairs, are paid for by the State. All this work was done in the beginning under the aegis and supervision of

the General Commission. Since prices have stabilised, the work is practically all done on the basis of unit prices. The devastated areas were divided into 41 sectors of roughly equal size, each with an architect in charge, controlling the work on site and responsible for acceptance. Checking the bills and the accuracy of unit prices, verifying calculations as well the awarding of contracts to builders, is done by the General Commission.

Since January of this year, we have also established a local committee in each town, called a 'local council', consisting of officials and victims. This committee has as its main task to prioritise the repairs and reconstruction work, to check the bills, where necessary, and to make sure that the work is done with the requisite care and the proper attitude. Some local councils take a more active role in the work by taking a direct interest and dispensing with the role of the architect.

Temporary homes

From the outset, we took the view that a permanent home – even partially restored – would be better for the victim as well as for the country. Temporary homes of whatever sort and wherever they come from are all too expensive and will never be very comfortable. We therefore reduced the number of such houses to the strict minimum. Their total surface area is 17 628 m², of which 11 637 m² is made up of concrete huts. These are of two types: the first consists of a structure made from a metal frame filled in with concrete blocks; the external walls are double thickness, lined with fibreglass. We have built 10 605 m² of this type. The second is made entirely of concrete or reinforced concrete.

The occupying force left behind in Luxembourg a considerable number of wooden huts, most of which belonged to the Department of Labour (Reicharbeitsdienst). All these huts have been transferred to the war-torn zones, where they are used as temporary homes.

Our country has also received from the 'Swiss Fund' through the hands of the 'Workers' Self-help' organisation about 2 600 m² of wooden huts.

The total cost of temporary homes has been 26 943 375 Luxembourg francs, that is around 1 530 francs per m². A total of 177 families have been housed in this way.

Reconstruction

In some areas where repair work was minimal but the total damage was extensive, reconstruction proper began during 1945. The building contractor responsible for repairs in the area generally carried out the work. Repairs were nearly always – of necessity – paid for by the hour, bringing them under State supervision, but the reconstruction work, from the outset, needed a contract between the State and the builder, on the basis of plans and detailed statements drawn up by the architect designated to that area.

For several months now, we have benefited from virtually stable prices and have dealt with individual claimants. The State has undertaken to pay to the latter compensation calculated by multiplying the total of the estimate (based on 1940 prices) by a coefficient representing the inflation index since 1940. This coefficient varies from one area to another and takes into consideration various difficulties such as the availability of materials, distance from the railway line, etc. With this compensation, which also includes provision for the architect's fees, the claimant himself undertakes to organise the reconstruction of his building. The State has only to check that public funds have been properly used for the intended purpose. The coefficient or index is subject to revision from one year to the next but stays the same for one particular individual.

If the claimant does not accept the private agreement which this lump-sum payment represents, the State takes charge of the project in question. To do this, it issues an open call for tenders, restricted tender or individual contract. The architect – chosen freely by the claimant – draws up the plans and the detailed specifications. The General Commission deals with the formalities for awarding the contracts. The work is then managed and accepted by the architect, whose fees are paid by the State. The laws and regulations

governing work done for the State also apply to the Reconstruction Department.

In one municipality, the victims formed an association and took responsibility for the reconstruction of their buildings without using contractors. The results are perfectly satisfactory.

In every case, whether the victim, the State or an association is responsible, work cannot start without first having received the green light from the Commissioner-General for Reconstruction. That depends on the proper submission of plans and estimates as well as on the survey verified by the War Damage Office.

Results obtained up to now throughout the country are fairly satisfactory. All the debris has been cleared without exception. Nearly all the houses that were less than 50 % destroyed are inhabited once more. Roughly 700 buildings have been reconstructed or are under reconstruction. We had to slow down for a few months this year because funds were in short supply. However, it will be possible to finish the reconstruction in four or five years, provided that a shortage or total lack of funds does not hinder our progress.

Legislation

All the work done so far has been carried out without any ad hoc legislation. The only exception is the decree referred to above which stipulates that the demolition and clearance work ordered by the Commissioner-General for Reconstruction, as well as the urgent maintenance measures, are to be paid for by the War Damage Office. There is not even a definition of these urgent maintenance measures, and it is, therefore, difficult to distinguish between this type of work and a definitive repair or reconstruction. Our two departments – Reconstruction and War Damage – have sought to fill this gap in legislation by establishing their own definition. Since all work, other than demolition and the urgent maintenance measures, must be deduced from a survey, the importance of the distinction is obvious.

Without the appropriate legislation, no victim would have had the right to compensation for war damage. As this would have been unthinkable, the Government has tabled before Parliament a bill concerning War Damage Compensation. Until that bill has been passed, it is futile to discuss the matter.

Town planning

The problems posed with regard to town planning are no different from those in other countries; consequently, we shall hardly be able to innovate in this field.

The total surface area of the country is 2 586 km². The surface area of the war-damaged localities is 1 508 km², that is 58.3 % of the total.

In 1945, the population was 281 572, of which 108 744, or 38.6 %, are victims.

The percentages, of buildings, surface areas and population, are very high, but, since it is especially the small villages that have been affected and not the big urban centres, town planning plays a secondary role as far as we are concerned. However, the Reconstruction Department does have to follow the guidelines laid down in town-planning regulations. There are, however, only four towns with about 4 000 inhabitants where larger projects have to be planned.

Town-planning issues are governed here by the Law of 12 June 1937, concerning the development of towns and other large urban centres. It stipulates that towns with more than 10 000 inhabitants, bathing resorts, conurbations which are expanding or of picturesque, historic or artistic interest, as well as areas partially or totally destroyed by fire or 'any other disaster' must have a development plan drawn up. This last provision would mean that every area affected in any way by the war would be subject to the plan. Our intervention is therefore restricted in most cases to improving traffic movement by rerouting roads in the small villages.

It must be noted that, as far as the development plans prescribed by the aforesaid Law of 2 June 1937 are

concerned, it is the General Commission for Reconstruction that must present them, in accordance with the Grand Ducal Decree of 30 April 1945.

Town planning within the reconstruction programme aims to deal more specifically with the following matters:

the safeguarding or the improvement of the visual aspect of roads and squares in the affected areas;

the improvement of the architectural style, comfort and hygiene of the damaged buildings;

the improvement of town plans with a view to the renovation and growth of urban centres with special regard to the environment, traffic, sanitation, aesthetics or future economic expansion.

In historic or picturesque towns, every effort is made to preserve the original character thereof, taking the opportunity to demolish any buildings constructed during the most recent pre-war period which offend against the aesthetics of the whole. In other areas, the cultural centres that were at the heart of the community will be restored where possible.

But, obviously, in all these projects, the natural beauty of the site must be protected.