Joseph Retinger, Memoirs of an Eminence Grise (1972)

Caption: In 1972, in his memoirs, Joseph Retinger, former Secretary-General of the International Committee of the Movements for European Unity and then General Delegate of the European Movement, considers the success of the Congress of Europe held in The Hague in May 1948.

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Joseph Retinger, *Memoirs of an Eminence Grise*

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The Hague Congress was a tremendous success. Among the eight hundred or so delegates were eighteen ex-Prime Ministers and twenty-eight ex-Foreign Ministers. Never in my long experience of public life have I seen such an imposing gathering. Important people volunteered to come and spend their time working out practical proposals for implementing this new idea. They did not know what the reaction of the public would be; many of them did not know what would be the reaction of their governments or of their respective parties. Many of them realized that because of the positions they held they were taking on an enormous responsibility. They could derive no special glory from it since they were too many for any one of them to claim much credit, and they therefore had to work more or less anonymously.

The Congress lasted from the 8th to 10 May, and an enormous volume of work had to be crowded into that short period. One Commission, the Economic, presided over by Mr. Van Zeeland, sat twice in succession until six o'clock in the morning; the Political Commission, presided over by Mr. Ramadier, spent night after night arguing about our programme and our aims and in its midst the greatest battles were fought; while the Cultural Commission, chaired by Don Salvador de Madariaga, also worked late hours setting forth a series of proposals, most of which have since been implemented.

Throughout the Congress, in the plenary meetings and in the commissions, one felt the enthusiasm of the participants, their infectious zeal and their recognition of the importance of the occasion. They spared no effort to give of their best and the oratory often reached great heights. The tone was set, right at the beginning, by the brilliant speech of Churchill, while among the many memorable speeches which followed I still like to recall that of Don Salvador de Madariaga, one of his best ever, calling for the growth of a European mentality.

The Congress received enormous publicity and the participants, once dispersed, added to it further and confirmed its impact. As a result the idea of European Unity was strikingly brought to the attention of public opinion.

I did not always see eye to eye with Duncan Sandys, but I must admit that he was superb at the Congress, displaying his organizing talent, energy, tenacity and, for once, admirable tact! I admired the wisdom of Winston Churchill and his untiring efforts to press home his points and to make the Congress a success. I was very grateful to Her Royal Highness Princess Juliana, now Queen of the Netherlands, for her kindness and for the help and good advice she and her husband, Prince Bernhard, gave us so freely.

The Congress expressed the unanimous desire to create a United Europe. Everybody realized that insistence on national independence and the preservation of national sovereignty were outdated. But while some participants aimed at Federation and wanted a very radical, revolutionary programme, others preferred a more pragmatic approach with a less clearly defined ultimate aim. There were heated debates, particularly in the Political Commission as the Federalists, led by Paul Reynaud, called for a European Constituent Assembly directly elected by the people of Europe. Others wanted a more modest consultative Assembly, more likely to prove acceptable to the governments. The British delegates, mindful of the hostile attitude of the Labour Government to the Congress, led the moderates, and in the end a compromise was reached on a less ambitious formula. Also for that reason the call for "the pooling and transfer of sovereign rights" prevailed over that for a "Federalist State". A timely intervention by Mr. Harold Macmillan did much to achieve general agreement on that point.

At The Hague we laid the foundations for all that was to mark the progress of the European Idea in the next decade. All the great European treaties were rooted in this fertile and daring Congress. At the same time we set down the principles and doctrines of European Unity. Thus the Congress gave the impetus and set the tone for our action in the years to come, while the enthusiasms it generated made our progress remarkably rapid.

It was also the forerunner of all the work which was done at the international conferences which we convened later in Brussels, Lausanne, Rome and Westminster.

During the weeks that followed we organized in each country influential deputations which called on the heads of their respective governments presenting the Hague Congress resolutions and urging the creation of a European Assembly. After many talks with Paul-Henri Spaak, who was at that time Prime Minister of Belgium, he finally agreed to propose to the other Western European Governments the idea of the Council of Europe and of the Consultative Assembly. At the beginning of August 1948 Duncan Sandys and I went to Paris to discuss this with our French colleagues. Suddenly, on the 15th, Paul Ramadier, who by then had become a Cabinet Minister, told us that he was willing to put this proposal before the French Government, asking it to take the initiative in calling a meeting of the Western Foreign Ministers, or at least some of them, to discuss our ideas. Within two days we had presented a memorandum to Ramadier which was largely the work of Duncan Sandys. The same day, making practically no changes, Ramadier laid it before a full meeting of the French Government, which accepted it and took the initiative of proposing it to the Governments of Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg. This was all done in a hurry and Paul-Henri Spaak, who was resting in Biarritz, could not be kept fully informed. However, we telephoned him and told him that the French Government intended to accept our proposals. He then agreed to leave it with them as it would be easier for France than for Belgium to take the initiative and make the idea a success.

Then followed a period of feverish activity on our part. At the end of October, the Foreign Ministers of the five countries met and decided to form a Study Commission under the chairmanship of Edouard Herriot. Its members included such prominent supporters of our Movement as Léon Blum, Paul Reynaud, François de Menthon for France, Max Busset, Auguste de Schryven, Fernand Dehousse for Belgium, Pieter Kerstens, Bruyns Slot for Holland, Fernand Loesch and Michel Rasquin for Luxembourg, while the British delegation, led by Hugh Dalton, included Sir Gladwyn Jebb (now Lord Gladwyn), Lord Inverchapel and Sir Edward Bridges.

The Commission was due to meet in Paris at the beginning of December and a few days prior to the meeting, in a talk with Hugh Dalton, I suggested that it would be helpful if people met and had an informal talk beforehand. Consequently I organized a luncheon for the heads of the delegations at Lapérouse in Paris, which I nearly missed myself as London Airport was fog-bound and only with great difficulty did I manage to get on the night train to Paris!

The lunch went very well and proved quite useful. While the French, Belgian and Dutch fully adopted our ideas for a European Parliamentary Assembly, the British Government’s view was that it was unnecessary to give a say to parliamentarians, and even possibly dangerous, and that it was sufficient to set up a Ministerial Council so that European Unification should be firmly under government control. That is why I thought it would be helpful if a friendly atmosphere prevailed among the delegates right from the start of these difficult negotiations. In this we succeeded and I left with a feeling of optimism in the outcome of the big battles that lay ahead.

The Commission produced a report endorsing our views, on which the British delegates only abstained, instead of voting against as we feared they might do. This document was in turn examined by a Conference of Foreign Ministers in January 1949, which marked some progress as Britain came closer to the Continental view. Further meetings followed, with the participation of other European countries, while all along we followed events very closely, presenting memoranda and lobbying the Governments to ensure the acceptance of our views. Finally, on 5 May a treaty establishing the Council of Europe, the main object of the Hague Congress, was concluded in London.

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