

René Courtin's memories of his European commitment (March 1964)

Caption: In March 1964, René Courtin, former Delegate-General of the French Council for a United Europe, recalls the successive stages of his commitment to European unity.

Source: COURTIN, René. Pour les autres et pour soi : articles et récits. Montpellier: Imprimeurs Causse et Castelnau, [s.d.]. 100 p. p. 31-34.

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URL:
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Last updated: 05/07/2016



Commitment

(Bicêtre Hospital, 2 March 1964, unpublished manuscript.)

A little more than 20 months passed between the country's liberation, that is, the end of the Resistance, and the beginning of my commitment to Europe.

I had been European for a long time and, shortly after 1930, despite the economic crisis, in the review *Foi et Vie* and in various lectures, I elaborated on the programme conceived by Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, whom I did not know personally at that time.

I naturally imagined only a fraternal and democratic Europe, an idea that I was forced to abandon during Hitler's rise to power. Later, having returned to France, I was too engrossed in my lectures, in *Le Monde* where I was responsible only for economic matters, in *Réforme*, in the Protestant Federation of France, etc.; above all, I felt surrounded by an atmosphere that was too hostile to allow me to pursue my old dream once more. In my eyes, Europe was well and truly dead and, in thinking only of Europe, I should have been afraid of abandoning my friends, especially those who had not returned from the death camps.

And yet, when this second commitment came along, as with the first, I seized it immediately and unquestioningly.

It was one evening in May or June 1946 — I cannot recall the date — and I was invited to dinner at the Bristol by André Istel, who returned occasionally from the United States and whom I had known at the Ministry of National Economy.

Although the conversation had been of little importance, I stayed on after our friends had left and chatted with Istel in the empty lobby.

What precisely did we talk about? I do not know, but, gradually, I saw the situation unfold in a truly relentless sequence of events.

Ailing and devoid of hope, Europe and France were slowly wasting away. Three quarters of Eastern Europe had already been enslaved, and now, inexorably, the same fate was being prepared for Western Europe. Our chances of escaping our fate were diminishing with each passing day, and only a handful of students obstinately sought the opportunity to create, if there was still time, a happier and less threatened world. We absolutely had to turn the tide.

By the time I left the Saint Honoré suburb, it was close to midnight and I had made my decision. From that moment on, I would devote myself to a United Europe. It was the only chance that our ancient nations had of finding within themselves a reason to live, first of all, followed by stability and, ultimately, strength in a world that was being fought over by the two superpowers and was in grave danger of being devoured by the Russian Bear.

However, I assessed the seemingly insurmountable difficulties involved in the task to be completed. After years of neglect and the surrender of France in June 1940, a real hammer blow, the Resistance had gradually built on the French people's traditional patriotic sentiment, which had become irresistible.

However, the European ideal was nothing more than an empty shell. A few years earlier, the attempt made by Aristide Briand had failed miserably. Eager to retain the independence that they had fought so hard to regain, the French would be less willing than ever to agree to limit their country's rights. In whose interest, anyway? The Nazi regime had demonstrated its ignominy. At that time, we spoke only of collective responsibility, and the Jewish people, who had suffered so much, would refuse to forgive their executioners, even if, one day, they should ask for forgiveness. Morgenthau dreamed of converting Germany into a primarily agricultural and pastoral country, while General de Gaulle envisaged dividing it into small, independent states that France would freely dominate. Finally, the Communists, who inspired fear in the

people, ruled with too great a power not to succeed in opposing a plan which, if successful, would destroy all Soviet hopes.

However, these difficulties did not stand in my way and, looking back, we can only laugh at the meagre resources that we were able to scrape together. I immediately gathered a few friends, including Daniel Villey, André Kaan and Michel Debré, whom I will mention again in a moment, with the support of Emmanuel Monick and André Philip, but we were getting nowhere when, in the autumn, I had a visit from Coudenhove-Kalergi, who had been sent by Istel. At the instigation of Churchill, a British United Europe Committee was being set up. It consisted of eminent Britons and was led by Churchill's son-in-law, Duncan Sandys, whom I first met at that time. It was up to us French to take similar action!

I spent the entire winter paying visits to people: Paul Reynaud, René Mayer, Pierre-Henri Teitgen and François de Menthon immediately offered me their unreserved support.

Léon Blum welcomed me with great kindness to Matignon, shortly before the fall of his government, but, once again, he was paralysed by his party and merely put me in touch with Salomon Grumbach who, as an Alsatian and Jew, harboured an immense hatred for the Germans and, what is more, was almost incomprehensible. Jean Monnet, engrossed in the preparation of the First Plan and forced to maintain the confidence of the Communists, turned me away, somewhat embarrassed. I do not believe that I was received at that time by Robert Schuman, since he was caught up in his ministerial duties. Urged on by Paul Bastid, Edouard Herriot limited himself to giving me his name. In his view, this was no small contribution. We were obliged to dismiss him from his role as Honorary President after he voted against the European Defence Community.

When the French and British Committees that had finally been established met in Paris in July 1947 for the first time, the situation had been completely reversed, more so than we had hoped for. In France, Ramadier had ousted his Communist ministers, and the US Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, had provided the support and financial assistance of the United States, the only condition being that we should cooperate.

A year later, in May 1948, the great Hague Congress formally introduced the world of politics and the general public to the European idea. It was a collective work, but a special tribute must be paid to Duncan Sandys, who proved to be a remarkable leader and who secured, on the Belgian side, the participation of Paul van Zeeland and the support of Paul-Henri Spaak, who had been detained at the Rue de la Loi but had appointed as his representative the Head of his Private Office, the zealous Jean Drapier.

Duncan Sandys, whose ideas unfortunately soon began to diverge from ours, had the commendable quality of persevering until he had fully succeeded. After the Hague Congress, rather than simply relish his success, he struck while the iron was hot, increasing his contacts in London, Brussels and Paris with Bevin, Spaak and Ramadier, who had played a crucial role in The Hague, until he achieved a final agreement on the establishment of the Council of Europe.

At that time in France, we created a solid structure for our Movement with our Secretary-General, René Lhuillier, and our three successive Presidents: Raoul Dautry, André François-Poncet and René Mayer. From then on, I had the comforting feeling of being part of a team.

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