

## Transcription of the interview with Helmut von Verschuer (Paris, 25 May 2009)

**Caption:** Transcription of the interview with Helmut von Verschuer, a civil servant in the Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Forestry from 1949 to 1958, a member of the Permanent Delegation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the negotiations on a European agricultural union (the 'green pool') from 1952 to 1954, a participant in the Val Duchesse negotiations on the Rome Treaties, their compatibility with the GATT, and the free-trade area from 1956 to 1958, a civil servant in the Directorate-General for Agriculture at the EEC Commission, assistant to Director-General Lucien Rabot from 1958 to 1967, Director of General Affairs at the Agriculture DG of the Commission of the European Communities from 1967 to 1972 and Deputy Director-General at the Agriculture DG of the Commission of the European Communities from 1972 to 1986, carried out by the Centre Virtuel de la Connaissance sur l'Europe (CVCE) on 25 May 2009 at the German Historical Institute in Paris. The interview, conducted by Christian Lekl, Scientific Collaborator at the CVCE, particularly focuses on the following subjects: the early plans for a common agricultural policy, the establishment of the common agricultural policy (CAP), the beginnings and first reform of the CAP and the enlargements of the European Union from the perspective of the CAP.

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### 1. The early plans for a common agricultural policy

**[Christian Lekl]** Mr von Verschuer, thank you very much for kindly agreeing to answer some questions for us and to share with us your personal experiences of the creation and development of the common agricultural policy in Europe. In 1952, on completing your studies, you entered the Agriculture Ministry as a graduate in agriculture. What were the main features of farming in the Federal Republic in the early 1950s?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** I would say that big changes were on the horizon and that the problems facing agriculture because of the predominance of small farms were already very much on the agenda.

**[Christian Lekl]** And immediately, that is to say in 1952, you took part in negotiations on a European Agricultural Union, the *Pool vert*, in Paris. What were the Federal Government's objectives at the negotiations in Paris?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** You rightly ask about the Federal Government, because as far as I remember it was the Federal Chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, who personally appointed Andreas Hermes, the former *Reich* Minister for Agriculture, to head the delegation. The Agriculture Minister of the time was Mr Niklas from Bavaria. And I believe that importance was attached to having a well-known figure such as Hermes operate on the international stage because, with 15 participating countries, it was certainly a major opportunity for Germany to be accepted into the European community of nations in such a complex sector as agriculture.

**[Christian Lekl]** And how was the possibility of a European Agricultural Union received in the Ministry of Agriculture?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Well now, there was a great deal of willingness within the Ministry to gather the countless data that were required for the inventory in Paris. I came there as a young man, had to collect the statistics and the answers to the other questions in all the divisions, fill in the questionnaires that had to be completed, and I must say that I encountered goodwill in all the directorates-general of the Agriculture Ministry.

**[Christian Lekl]** And did the same apply to the Ministers, Wilhelm Niklas and his successor Heinrich Lübke?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Well, maybe Mr Niklas was less interested in it, but that was quite legitimate, because Hermes was really the representative. Later, Lübke was very strongly committed to it.

**[Christian Lekl]** And how do you assess the work that was done on the *Pool vert* in the light of the subsequent creation of a common agricultural policy?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** In my view, the first result of the *Pool vert* was, I'm almost tempted to say, integration on the level of personal friendship. The fact is that we met in Paris over a long period, a year and a half, with consecutive interpreting. As you can imagine, meetings took two to three times as long with consecutive interpreting as they did later with simultaneous interpreting. As a result, we had time together. Those were the personal contacts. The second outcome was the inventory and having 15 countries discuss present and future problems — which is a very considerable achievement in itself. And also, although the

project as such was never completed, it did lead to the creation of the Committee of Agriculture Ministers in the OEEC and it meant that agriculture was henceforth dealt with in the OEEC, and later in the OECD, at ministerial level.

**[Christian Lekl]** And what ultimately caused the negotiations to fail? What were the key issues, the sticking points, in the negotiations?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** I cannot really answer the question about the main issues — I would have to read the documentation. In any case, the cause was not material issues but political motives. I feel that Britain had a lot to do with halting the process. That is why I travelled to Britain afterwards to get to know the country better. But maybe this was a subjective impression.

**[Christian Lekl]** Two years later, beginning in October 1956, you also took part in the negotiations at the Château of Val Duchesse. In particular, you were involved there in the negotiations on the EEC Treaty, on the relationship between the European Economic Community and GATT and on the creation of a European Free Trade Area. What were your impressions of the Val Duchesse negotiations, for from March 1958 you were taking part in them as a representative of the European Commission?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** I should like to tell you briefly the story of how I came to cross that bridge from the negotiations on a Free Trade Area to the European Commission. I took part on behalf of the Ministry in the coordination meetings of the six Member States for the agricultural negotiations — in this case, of course, for the European Free Trade Area. The Commission was represented by Sicco Mansholt's *chef de cabinet* and by the *chef de cabinet* of Jean Rey, the Commissioner for External Relations. Mansholt dealt with agriculture and Rey with external relations. They came to me one Friday and said that Rey and Mansholt had instructed them to ask me whether I could come to the Commission. Certainly, I said, but when? Tomorrow, they said. I told them that was impossible, because I would have to ask my Minister first. The following Monday — that was 24 March — I went to Lübke and told him about it. He said, 'Congratulations!' And when I asked, 'When can I arrange to go?', he said 'Tomorrow.' I went to Brussels on 25 March. At midday, I boarded a hired limousine that the Commission, which comprised about 30 people at that time, including the administration, had booked. It went by the Rue de la Loi, where I was joined by Mansholt's *chef de cabinet*, Jaap van der Lee, who was also going to Val Duchesse. He told me, 'You are now representing the Commission on the coordinating committee for the negotiations on the Free Trade Area in the agricultural sector.' I asked him, 'What are the Commission's instructions?' He replied, 'You'll have to make them up yourself.' That was the beginning.

**[Christian Lekl]** So, in other words, you were thrown in at the deep end. And how did the actual negotiations then go — that is to say, in this agricultural coordinating committee for the negotiations on the Free Trade Area?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** Well now, that has never been foremost in my memory. Coordination among the Six was very important, of course. And the negotiations in the wider framework really did just stutter along. But from that time on, my own priority, my absolute priority, was the work of the Commission, and after that I did not represent the Commission any more in that forum. We immediately focused on preparations for the Stresa Conference.

**[Christian Lekl]** Now you just said that you received no instructions from the Commission. What about the start of the Val Duchesse negotiations? Had you been given instructions by the Federal Ministry?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** For the negotiations on an EEC Treaty?

**[Christian Lekl]** Yes.

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** Here is how that happened for me. On the Monday, Alfred Müller-Armack would send his official vehicle to pick me up. He was the head of delegation; it was he who essentially invented the social market economy — a great man. I had to tell him what instructions I had received at the Ministry. I had been given these instructions by Lübke on the preceding Saturday. I reported them to him, and he was in agreement. Then I had my mandate for a week's work in the agriculture ... in the little agriculture committee,

for there were only six of us, you know. That was all. It is impossible to imagine today how intimately and informally the whole thing unfolded. It was all very practical, the aim simply being to find the best solution, to explore the options. In short, all went smoothly. If Müller-Armack was not in agreement with the instructions, he would phone the Minister, Heinrich Lübke, when we arrived at Val Duchesse, discuss it with him, and then I would receive my new instructions from the head of delegation. And on Friday, I would return to Bonn, and the routine would begin all over again. Astonishingly, there were widely differing views within the Ministry as to how seriously these negotiations should be taken. Lübke was very committed, whereas his State Secretary, Theodor Sonnemann, was actually against them. So was the Director-General. My head of division was sceptical but very perceptive and duly appeared at the ministerial conference when the time came. I did the day-to-day business in Val Duchesse. And although, because of various situations in the past, I was very much in favour, I took the view that reunification could only ever be possible at some future time through European union. Mr Stademann and Sonnemann, for their part, actually believed that integration into the West would make German reunification impossible. I am summarising here, but those were serious arguments. And they were very relevant arguments in Bonn.

## 2. The establishment of the common agricultural policy (CAP)

**[Christian Lekl]** You mentioned the Stresa negotiations in which you took part in June 1958. How did the Commission prepare itself for those negotiations?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** For one thing, there were the logistics, where we were helped by our colleagues from the Coal and Steel Community, because we had no administrative infrastructure yet, of course. There were also the substantive preparations. When I arrived on 25 March, there was no directorate-general for agriculture yet; I was the first person engaged to work in the directorate-general. Louis Rabot had already been appointed but had not yet taken up his post as Director-General. I knew him from the *Pool vert*, because he chaired the interim committee. Then there were the *chef de cabinet*, Jaap van der Lee, the deputy *chef de cabinet*, Franz Loppe, Georges Rencki, who had also become involved in this area, and myself. That was all. We used to meet at nine in the morning; at lunchtime, we would eat in the *Grand Laboureur*, as the restaurant was called. Back to work in the afternoon, a meal in another restaurant, then we carried on working after dinner — either in van der Lee's flat or in Mansholt's. We went our separate ways between midnight and two in the morning, and at nine we got back to work. And during that time we not only compiled material but also painstakingly drafted a resolution so as to be equipped for the conference.

**[Christian Lekl]** You have indicated that the Stresa Conference was unique. In what way?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** In that it was possible to achieve consensus on a very — how shall I put it — a very rational plan of approach among six agriculture ministers — six governments, in fact, because agriculture ministers were not the only ones present. And the farmers' organisations from all of those six Member States, which were also represented. There were big debates. There was an editorial committee, and in the light of the development of these debates, we would keep adapting our draft resolution. And it really was adopted by consensus, and the whole thing was over within a week. That takes some beating.

**[Christian Lekl]** What role did the Stresa outcome play in the Commission's proposals for the formulation of the common agricultural policy in December 1959?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** It must be remembered that the Commission worked on these proposals for a year and a half, and it very definitely took this resolution as its basis, after which all the work and the debates focused on how the individual proposals could be implemented. The fact is that detailed proposals had to be drawn up for structural policy, for market policy and for social measures designed to cushion the impact that modern developments would have on small farms in particular.

**[Christian Lekl]** And how were these proposals received in the Council?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** Well, that is when the big debates occurred.

**[Christian Lekl]** Why? Because the Commission's proposals prioritised structural policy? And the Council maybe attached higher priority to market and price policies?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Now I must say it is astonishing that this whole process, which began with the Commission's proposals in 1960 and was essentially completed by 1967, when the common agricultural policy was up and running in all but a few sectors and the Community was already setting prices, was implemented within seven years. That is the first point. The second is that, for this to happen, compromises had to be made. And the most important divergence from the Commission's line of approach and from its proposals, as you rightly say, is that top priority was not assigned to structural policy but to market policy. This meant, of course, that it was left to the Member States to encourage the essential structural adjustment and that they did so with varying degrees of vigour, whereas market policy became a Community matter and, what is more, was then fully funded from the common purse.

**[Christian Lekl]** December 1961 to January 1962 saw the first negotiating marathon. How did you personally experience those negotiations?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** We did indeed call it the 'agricultural marathon', and we sat there day and night thrashing things out. I don't have any unpleasant memories of it. It was just the birth of a process that continued over several decades.

**[Christian Lekl]** Yes, but what caused the negotiations to be drawn out over a lengthy period? What were the main bones of contention? What were the issues?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Well, everything was controversial, I would say, more or less. And the differences between Member States were certainly considerable. To answer your question accurately, one would have to undertake some studies. But what was growing increasingly difficult at the time was striking a balance, keeping intervention measures, that is intervention to support the market, at the right level and keeping price levels low enough to maintain a balanced market. The efforts to do that were ultimately unsuccessful. The price for cereals was simply set too high, even though it was still considerably lower than the going rate in Germany for cereals at that time. Nevertheless, it was a key price, and it led in the course of time to general price levels that were not very sound in economic terms. Inevitably, it was pointed out more and more frequently that prices are like wages, that prices are to farmers what wages are to workers. But prices are also a means of controlling the market.

**[Christian Lekl]** How was the creation of a common agricultural policy viewed in the United States? And how did the negotiations progress in the GATT framework?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** In 1962, I was invited, on the basis of that fine scheme known as the Leader Grant Program, to travel around the United States delivering talks as well as being shown what I wished to see. That was an important and interesting journey. The Americans whom I met were all enthusiastic. Not on account of agricultural policy, though that came into it, but simply because Europe was uniting and, as they saw it, following a path modelled on the one they had trodden themselves. Perhaps I could put it like that. By a stroke of luck, at the start of that journey, I was with the President of the Commission, Walter Hallstein, when he met President Kennedy and, as has largely been forgotten today, the two of them signed a Declaration of Interdependence. It was a recognition of mutual dependence, in other words a bond of cooperation.

### **3. The beginnings and first reform of the common agricultural policy**

**[Christian Lekl]** What fundamental difficulties were encountered when it came to financing the common agricultural policy in the early 1960s? Or to what extent did the creation of the EAGGF provide a solution to the prevailing problems?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Well, I cannot answer that question precisely from memory alone. What was established quite quickly was that this market policy, since it related to a common market, was to be fully financed from the Community budget. And the wrangling was about procedures, not about the principle.

**[Christian Lekl]** From 1973 to 1979, your remit included overall responsibility for the EAGGF.

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Yes.

**[Christian Lekl]** How did the EAGGF develop over the years?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** The fact is that it kept growing in importance, but not only because the agricultural policy was becoming more and more costly — in some respects, indeed, that was no longer true to the same extent. At least maybe not until 1976. But the territory had been enlarged. There were now nine Member States instead of six. And that was no insignificant addition. The structural policy was launched — the three directives and then the directive on mountain farming. And new elements were also added to the policy. And then, of course, came the complication of the currency problems that arose. But that was a different story. Nevertheless, it became necessary to pay monetary compensation amounts and make all the other compensatory arrangements at the borders, and it became a complicated system. Amazingly, however, it worked, did it not?

**[Christian Lekl]** You mentioned the President of the Commission, Walter Hallstein. What was your own personal experience of the dispute between the European Commission and France that led in 1965 to the ‘empty chair’ policy?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** I have no specific memories of that, and I sometimes wonder why. I believe it has to do with the fact that life largely went on in the agricultural sector as if the empty chair crisis had never arisen. The fact is that French interests were so much at stake, and the French gave Mansholt a difficult time, politically speaking. But I may be wrong there; it is a subjective impression. I did not ... Well, Rabot calmed the storm brilliantly of course, during all these difficulties, you know. And we compromised and survived the crisis. As I remember it, no major damage was done in what was not an unduly long period of time.

**[Christian Lekl]** How and with what objectives was the plan for the modernisation of European agriculture, better known as the Mansholt Plan, developed in 1968?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** I was not involved in the development of the Mansholt Plan, because in 1967 I had become the Director for General and International Affairs and so was now operating in the realm of external relations. And the competent Council bodies in my field of activity were no longer the Special Committee on Agriculture and the Council of Agriculture Ministers but the Committee of Permanent Representatives and the Foreign Affairs Council. That distanced me. The external-trade element of my remit brought me closer to agricultural policy — I mean to the agricultural sector, of course — with the UN Sugar Conference and GATT and the International Grains Arrangement and goodness knows what else, but not to internal agricultural policy. Then there were the accession negotiations, which naturally involved a general inventory.

**[Christian Lekl]** You knew Sicco Mansholt very well. Can you briefly describe his personality and working methods to us?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Oh my goodness! (laughs) Well now, he had great charisma and a fantastic constitution. He was an independent spirit, and what was very important, I believe, is that he discussed his policies, as it were, at the round table. These discussions became somewhat legendary, because no other Commissioner had anything like that. The round table comprised Mansholt, his *chef de cabinet* or another member of his cabinet, Louis Rabot in his capacity as Director-General for Agriculture and Helmut von Verschuer as assistant to the Director-General. There was also the Director responsible for the matter under discussion and the competent Head of Department. So there were generally six people. And there was no hierarchy; the matter was debated, and the optimum solutions were sought. Only if no consensus materialised would Mansholt take the final decision. But, as a rule, he tried to deliberate with us until a solution emerged that had the support of everyone who would subsequently have to see to its operational

implementation. And I do believe that this round-table method contributed substantially to the clout enjoyed by the Directorate-General for Agriculture within the Commission.

#### 4. The common agricultural policy and the enlargements of the European Union

**[Christian Lekl]** You mentioned the accession negotiations, which ran more or less parallel to the deliberations on the Mansholt Plan. (Yes.) What role did agricultural policy play in the first enlargement of the European Communities?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** Well, generally speaking, in overarching international negotiations, agricultural policy was not only one of the most difficult chapters but was often the most difficult chapter of all. That was not the case in the first accession negotiations. The constellation was like this: Norway posed a fairly big problem. It took a lot of searching to come up with good solutions. In Denmark, responsibility for agriculture lay with Finn Olav Gundelach who later became a European Commissioner; he was an intellectual heavyweight, which was all to the good. My interlocutor in the United Kingdom was Michael Franklin. At the next level were Permanent Secretary Freddy Kearns and Louis Rabot. Michael Franklin and I had known each other since 1952 through an association in Paris for civil servants with some active involvement in ecumenism. And at that time, he was also at the OECD and the OEEC, so there was a basis of mutual trust. We sat down, and it was something of a jigsaw puzzle to sort things out. We had to tackle some truly complex problems — the sugar problem with the Commonwealth countries and Commonwealth Preference and then there was — I don't know whether you are interested in anecdotes. Yes? (laughs) The British Hill Farming Scheme. Plainly and simply incompatible with the state-aid rules of the Community. Fair enough. I then argued in the Permanent Representatives framework for an exception to be made, which was very rare; exceptions from Community rules were scarcely ever made for an acceding country. Because I said it made sense. Good. Needless to say, they did not agree, so the matter went to the Committee of Permanent Representatives. The French Ambassador was instantly appalled. 'There can be no question of making an exception for Britain.' Out of my briefcase I pulled a copy of *Le Monde* and read a notification which stated that the French Minister for Agriculture had proposed to the Cabinet a special scheme for farmers in mountainous areas. The French Ambassador said he would have to ask Paris about this. And the result was that the exception was approved, and Georges Rencki was already in post at that time, the post that I later took over, with responsibility for the whole structural policy, for the drafting of the directive on mountain farming and farming in certain other less-favoured areas. And that directive was agreed in principle in 1975 — no, in 1975 it was even formally adopted.

**[Christian Lekl]** Structural policy played a significant part, of course, in the deliberations on the Mansholt Plan and in the Commission's proposals. What did this mean for the negotiations, for the accession negotiations based on the *acquis communautaire*?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** That was not too much of a problem, as I recall. This was because the structural directives already incorporated a relatively high degree of subsidiarity, as it is called today, and only part of the funding came from the Community. My feeling is that the Agriculture Ministers sometimes, or maybe even frequently, gave precedence to market measures, because the Community financed everything in that area. In the case of structural measures, the national contribution to the funding of measures lay between 50 % and 75 %, depending on the measure, and they had to obtain that amount from their Finance Ministers.

**[Christian Lekl]** Then, in 1979, you came to the External Relations Directorate and took part in the third set of enlargement negotiations, this time with Spain and Portugal. What were the key points in these negotiations as regards agriculture?

**[Helmut von Verschuier]** Once again, I would have to look up the files, of course. What I remember is that with Portugal, again because a relationship of mutual trust developed very quickly with my interlocutor, Enrico Cabral da Fonseca, we looked together for the best options and the arguments with which we could sell them to our respective higher authorities. With Spain, I tried to follow the same path. We made a good start. Then, after two years or so — the process took something like four years — there was a change of

government, and so the whole team was replaced. And that made the negotiations extremely difficult, because the ones who were familiar with the *acquis communautaire* and who had come with us to the brink of negotiation were now out of the game. And officials who had not been through the *acquis communautaire* or helped to prepare the ground suddenly had to call the tune. So that was certainly quite difficult. But it did, of course, come right in the end.

**[Christian Lekl]** One final question. We have just, or rather this morning, we looked at and discussed the various reforms of the common agricultural policy. How do you see agricultural policy in a European Union with 27 Member States or more?

**[Helmut von Verschuer]** Now that, of course, is a big subject. And if I am to hold forth on it, all I can offer are a few random thoughts. First of all, operating with so many Member States is certainly a great achievement; without modern communications technology, it would probably be a superhuman task and therefore impracticable. Secondly ... and the fact that it does actually work is truly impressive, to my mind. Yes, well, secondly, the bigger the Community, the more important it is that subsidiarity is properly organised. There is no need, in fact, for everything to be regulated through the Community. For my outdated taste — after all, I have been out of this business for more than 20 years and observe these things only from the outside — the Commission has some responsibilities that could equally well be exercised by the Member States. Maybe not always so successfully, but in many cases with less trouble or whatever. Yet I must say that, if we look more closely, we can see that the Commission has committed itself to simplifying administration and legislation on the one hand. On the other hand, it keeps acquiring more spheres of competence, which it has not necessarily set out to obtain but has had thrust on it. That is a very complex — how can I put it? — phenomenon. Needless to say, it will not become any less complex with more Member States. But I believe that the bond of European legislation, of European regulations, is very robust. That is the first point. The second is the awareness of the fact that, without this Community, Europe would be worse off in today's world; that awareness, I believe, may not always be apparent, but it is there beneath the surface. And the march of history will surely continue.

**[Christian Lekl]** A good final thought for us to ponder. Mr von Verschuer, thank you very much for this interesting conversation.