

Yvonne de Wergifosse remembers ... Secretary General of ELEC (1962-1988)



Interview by Jean-Claude Koeune (23 October 2006)

Q: *Mrs. de Wergifosse, you were Secretary General of ELEC for 26 years, from 1962 to 1988, but your involvement goes back even further, since in the book that Professor Michel Dumoulin wrote on the history of ELEC between 1946 and 1981, your name appears for the first time in 1955, with the mention of a letter addressed by you to a certain Mr. Meimberg...*

A: Ah yes! Professor Rudolf Meimberg, a charming man who spoke very good French. He was a member of the German section. It was he who said, of a young person, "she's a temperamental blonde"...

Q: *... let us leave Professor Meimberg, if we may, and return to your history within ELEC. How - or by whom - were you drawn into the orbit of ELEC?*

A: My mind was already open to international affairs. I was involved - this is in the early 1950s - in the international aid branch of Caritas Catholica, and I worked among others in Palestine. But I felt like changing. I had a brother in law, an engineer, who was a manager of the Solvay Company in Italy and who offered to submit my cv to Solvay, just on the off-chance.

ELEC's Secretary General at the time was Lucien Sermon, a delightful man who worked around Louis Camu - he was economic adviser at Brufina - and who gratuitously took care of ELEC's general secretariat. On his way back from a forum in the south of France, he had a serious car accident and was in hospital for some time. Count Boël, ELEC's president, was greatly inconvenienced without a Secretary General, so he had a look in the CVs held by Solvay, found mine, and saw that I was also the voluntary secretary general of the National Women's Council. Now it happened that his mother baroness Boël - a truly remarkable woman - was the Belgian president and international president of that Council. He asked her about me, and she said "you can take her with your eyes closed", without other comment. That's how I first became Mr. Sermon's deputy at ELEC, until the day when he said to Count Boël: "Listen, it's Mrs. de Wergifosse who practically does all the work at ELEC ..."

Q: *...and so you then officially replaced Mr. Sermon as Secretary General of ELEC. Was that a full time job?*

A: Yes, until I retired. Then I worked half time in principle but I was there all day: the work had to be done. But it was fascinating, and there was an exciting atmosphere.

Q: *You have just mentioned René Boël, who was president of ELEC for thirty years, from 1951 to 1981. Tell me what kind of man he was, and what sort of boss he was for you at ELEC.*

A: He was an extraordinary man, but I think he frightened the people who came into contact with him a bit. I remember one day his secretary at Solvay telephoned me: "Madame, Count Boël was talking to me about something with initials, I don't know what, and I dare not ask him..." Some people found him a bit stingy, but he could be very generous to the causes he believed in, and ELEC was one of those. If I needed to organize a dinner for ELEC members he would open his large house, and countess Boël obviously had to do her bit. He did that more than once. I remember that one day I said to him: "Listen, there are national sections that have not paid their contributions yet, the coffers are empty and I must at least be able to pay the salaries." Straight away he said, "I don't want you to have money problems at ELEC; I'll transfer you 500.000 francs (editor's note: Belgian francs)." So you see I did find him rather generous. I went to see him regularly at home, I was always very respectful and a little nervous, his butler used to bring him a glass of buttermilk in great style - since then I also drink buttermilk. We would have a conversation, I wouldn't say friendly, because he was my boss, but it was very pleasant, and he was open to suggestions, even if he did sometimes accuse me of being a communist! Above all he was a man of vision, a disinterested man who gave himself up to what he believed in.

Q: *What was the main impetus he gave to ELEC?*

A: He was very much committed to monetary unification. He strongly believed in it. He had met Jean Monnet in the USA. It was Jacques Rueff who said "Europe will forge itself through its currency or not at all", and that became Count Boël's motto, to some extent. But he didn't like spectacular demonstrations which, to him, were nothing but a sort of high mass serving no useful purpose. Even the meetings of the Monetary Commission in Kronberg he didn't like much, though for me, the fact that ELEC could bring together in Kronberg all those important bankers from the four corners of Europe gave it a certain weight, so it wasn't without importance.

Q: *Are there other major figures in ELEC who you would like to remember? At Kronberg you must have met Herman Abs?*

A: Of course, he was chairman of the Monetary Commission for a long time, and he was also president of the German section of ELEC, which he had founded in 1950. He was a very important man, internationally. He had a prodigious memory and spoke French, English, and even Dutch perfectly, because he had worked in the Netherlands at the start of his career, I think. In the beginning the Monetary Commission met at his home; he was a very knowledgeable connoisseur of fine German wines, and was the patron of a young pianist who played at his receptions. That went on for some years, and then we moved to Kronberg. I remember that at the time when extreme left wing terrorism was rampant in Germany, the president of the German employers' federation had been murdered and a price was put on Abs' head, but he formally forbade anyone to pay a ransom if he was captured. We were in Kronberg at that time and there were policemen on every floor of the Schlosshotel!

Abs was also the advisor to the major Arab countries, and even to the Vatican: I remember that at the last meeting he chaired at Kronberg, we had the closing luncheon on the Saturday and he made his excuses, because he had to leave for abroad. We met up with him again at the airport in Frankfurt and his secretary, very mysterious, came to tell us that Herr Abs had been called to the Holy See very urgently, in connection with the bankruptcy of an Italian bank (editor's note: Banco Ambrosiano) of which the Vatican was the principal shareholder and whose president (editor's note: Roberto Calvi) had just been found hanged under a bridge in London. Abs really was a great international figure.

Q: *He chaired the Monetary Commission with a good deal of authority, I imagine?*

A: Yes, but drafting the minutes of these meetings was a little difficult for me, and I sometimes relied on the help of Roy Harrod, who invited me to dine.

Q: *Is that Sir Roy Harrod, the famous British economist, the disciple of Keynes?*

A: Yes, he was a member of the ELEC British section, and he always came to Kronberg. However, he wasn't a convinced European; the Commonwealth, imperial preference, that was what mattered to him. But his intellectual contribution to ELEC and to ELEC's debates on monetary questions was important in the 1950s.

Q: *Other eminent Britons whom you have you known in ELEC?*

A: There was Lord Walston, whom I very much respected. He was a member of the Labour Party and our agriculture expert, and also UK's expert in the Council of Europe. He had a large estate in England but also properties in the West Indies. Agriculture, working the land, was his great passion, but when he came to London he had a flat near Piccadilly Circus where I was once, and on another occasion - I have always been grateful to him for that - he invited me to dinner in the House of Lords. He was completely opposed to the granting of subsidies to, for instance, large cereal growers, and he called for farmers to turn to quality products and to pay more attention to preserving the farming landscape, which were new ideas at that time. He was a remarkable man. He had married an American, a very beautiful woman, who was later the great love of Graham Greene, it lasted for years. It was to Catherine Walston - "to C." - that Greene dedicated his novel, "The End of the Affair". But it did not get out in the press until Lord Walston's death in 1991. Greene died at almost the same time. I also knew Sir Edward Beddington-Behrens, the first president of the British section and a good man. He was wealthy and used its wealth to support the European cause. He was a convinced European, arguing right from the start that the UK should join the European community.

Q: *We have mentioned a Belgian - Count Boël -, a German, some British figures... Do any French figures spring to mind?*

A: Of course, there was Edmond Giscard d'Estaing, the father of Valéry and Olivier, who succeeded as president of the French section to Daniel Serruys, who had founded it. Lucien de Sainte Lorette, its Secretary General, greatly contributed to that section's flowering. It was he who suggested co-opting to the ELEC Central Council Sir Brandon Rhys-Williams whose mother, Lady Rhys-Williams, was from the start the main spring of the British section. I also knew for instance Pierre Dieterlen, a famous economist, well, and so many brilliant members of the French section!

Q: *... and Edouard Bonnefous, who celebrated his hundredth birthday a few months ago, did you know him?*

A: Certainly, he was a handsome man. It was thanks to him that we were always invited to the Senate when ELEC met in Paris, and Alain Poher often gave for us a reception where they used to serve stuffed prunes that were very good. He was a lovely man as well. He was president of the French Senate for more than 20 years, which enabled him to be acting president of the Republic twice: between the resignation of de Gaulle and the election of Georges Pompidou (against whom he stood in the election) and between the death of Pompidou and the election of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.

Q: *And in Spain?*

A: The first president of the Spanish section was Miguel Mateu Pla, an important industrialist from Barcelona and a friend of Franco, whom he had served as ambassador to Paris. We held a remarkable Central Council at Perelada, where he had a magnificent estate. Have you ever tasted the Spanish champagne from Perelada? I've never seen it on sale here, but they made very good champagne at Perelada...

Q: *The next question may take us a little time to discuss, because the subject deserves it. During the 1960s, you played an important role in the East-West dialogue for economic, scientific and technical cooperation. How did that start?*

A: I can tell you that it was neither me nor ELEC that had the initial idea. But Louis Kawan, a European Commission expert in the problems of the East, came to see me and said: "Listen, we would like to enter into contact with countries of Eastern Europe but it is difficult for us to do it ourselves, and we thought, since it is a matter of economic, scientific and technical affairs, that ELEC was ideally placed." I replied that that seemed a very good idea to me, but that I could not take the decision alone. So I went to talk to Count Boël who wrinkled up his nose, the way he always did when someone came up with a suggestion that turned aside from the beaten track, and he said "Well, I shall talk to two or three people and I'll let you know my answer". I had his response some days after: "You are completely free to do what you want on condition that you succeed. But you must know that the Germans do not want you to invite East Germans under any circumstances."

So I was more or less given a free hand, but I didn't have a very clear idea of what I was going to do. I telephoned the Soviet embassy and explained what it was about to someone or other. They said, "That's not our area, you should contact our economic division." So I went there, on avenue des Arts, not far from the French embassy, I made my little speech, and the answer was: "Listen, I don't think that this is of interest to us, firstly because we do not work with non-governmental organizations, and secondly because we do not hold multilateral talks, we discuss things State to State. So, I'm very sorry. Good luck, and so forth." So there was nothing left to do but to go and see the embassies of two or three other communist block countries, and there I had a very different reaction to my proposals: they were very interested, especially the Hungarians and the Czechs. At that time Hungary was ahead ... and I was lucky enough to meet Suzanne Havas, a Hungarian economist who gave me a lot of help in organizing all that. Her husband was a man of great urbanity, who had been a banker "under the old regime".

We had to organize a meeting, and I assume - because I haven't kept any papers - that we contacted other countries, Yugoslavia certainly, Bulgaria too I think. I was helped, perhaps, by a contact I had as a member of the committee of the Belgian Association for the United Nations: we sometimes had meetings there, and we had just held one during which I had got on very well with a Russian, Professor Novikov. He was the *rapporteur* of a commission and spoke excellent French, but he always came to me for advice regarding the nuances of the resolutions he was preparing. With Suzanne Havas, we drew up the list of countries to invite, obviously excluding East Germany, and we held an initial meeting at Val Duchesse. Officially, the Russians did not take part. We were about to start the meeting when who should appear but the minister-counselor at the Soviet embassy, Yuri Buzikine - he had come up by the back stairs. And he said, "Madame, *off the record*, may I attend?" I was amused by that. "Of course you may, Monsieur". Afterwards the French said to me: "Be careful, your phone is certainly tapped. Because they know everything".

Q: *This initiative was very largely your own. But was it preceded by discussions in the Central Council?*

A: We talked about it in the Central Council, certainly, because afterwards I wasn't out on my own, I needed the support of my president. Then we went to Prague for another meeting, then we were due to go to Moscow and that fell through.

Q: *But you did go to Moscow to prepare for the meeting?*

A: Yes, but a French expert from ELEC had warned me: "Madame, you will fail. Because you are going alone, and there you will have to deal with a group. You have such a narrow mandate that you will not be able to negotiate anything at all." I was protected a little by the Belgian embassy. The date had been mutually agreed but shortly before they said "Madame, we are so sorry, but there is a big congress and there is no room in the hotel Rossia". I said "Put me in any hotel, but I don't want to postpone this meeting". So then they put me in the "Pekin", in Mayakovski Square, a hotel mainly reserved for the Kirghiz. Of course I had a "guardian angel", a young woman who took me to the Bolshoi twice and let me see things that were normally out of bounds, such as the Novodevichi cemetery. So it was all very good.

On the Russian side, it was Kosygin's son in law who managed all that. We had long talks over two days. But it was difficult. They were very good natured, they were most apologetic, but it really couldn't go ahead. I never really knew why, perhaps because I could give nothing away on certain matters. And to prove how sorry they were, they invited Count and Countess Boël, who were absolutely delighted and accepted. Count Boël bought himself a fine shapka, and they toured around Moscow with outriders, and the Russians asked him if there was anything he especially wanted to see. He was very interested in painting, particularly in all those Russian avant-garde painters whom the communists called degenerate - but whose works they nevertheless kept carefully - so he said, "I'd like to see those paintings ", and they showed him them, in the cellars of Tretyakov Gallery. I went back to Russia long after, I traveled the length of the Volga in twelve days and I saw, in little museums, pictures from that era which we saw again two years ago during the Europalia-Russia exhibition.

But the astonishing thing in the aftermath was this. We had not publicized these East-West meetings. We were rather careful. Obviously the European Commission had followed what we were doing. But our meetings were highly protected. And one day I had a visit from a professor from Harvard University, I believe, who wanted to see me in order to find out how I had done it. I told him that I hadn't done very much, that I had gone to see the embassies etc. But it just goes to show that this ELEC initiative had reverberated somewhat in the United States. And who came next? Klaus Schwaab, the great man who still organizes the Davos meetings. He was coming back from Aspen in the USA where they had meetings that were half snow, half business and which he took inspiration from, and he wanted to know how I had done it, although the first Davos meeting wasn't focused on Eastern European countries. He explained to me what he wanted to do with the help of the Swiss government and Swissair, the first large screen etc. And he succeeded. People really enjoyed skiing in the morning, and holding meetings during the afternoon. It was magnificent. I was invited free of charge three times, though the registration fee was around one hundred thousand Belgian francs. So... all that pleased me, because it showed that there had been an impact and, without our doing anything, a good idea had been picked up, though actually it wasn't ELEC's idea in the first place. And after that, scientific, economic and technical cooperation became very popular. Many organizations became involved, and I believe that's why we decided to stop.

Q: *A final question, perhaps. Do you think there are other areas where ELEC has played a pioneering role?*

A: We have already mentioned monetary unification, which very early became one of ELEC's major concerns. There were others, but I shall mention just one other area,

because I think it remains important today. This is the possibility of cooperation between Europe and the Arab countries. In October 1974 - we were still shaken by the first oil crisis - I had a talk with a Belgian diplomat, Fernand Spaak, the son of Paul-Henri Spaak. He died tragically in 1981. Fernand Spaak believed that we ought not to dramatize the climate of economic war between the West and the Arab countries, and that it was important to enter a dialogue with them as soon as possible. It took two years for us to do something, in the shape of a conference, *Europe and the Arab world* organized in November 1976 by our British section, and which was very successful. That encouraged me to suggest that we should organize a Euro-Arab conference the following year, but my proposal met with a lukewarm reception in ELEC. The German section in particular thought that it wasn't a priority task for ELEC, and unfortunately that was that. But I was delighted to hear about the creation of a Mediterranean Commission at ELEC a decade or so ago, and I think it provides a framework in which the possible economic cooperation between Europe and the Arab countries could be put back on the table.

So ELEC, I'm happy to say, still has plenty to do. And, you know, when I was 60, as ELEC is today, I wasn't thinking about retirement: I worked for ELEC for another fifteen years!

another encounter...



with Salvador DALI
organised by the Spanish section (1963)
