

A life with Europe - 50 years with ELEC

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Preface

My involvement with Europe started in 1948 when as a 19-year old student at the Netherlands School of Economics in Rotterdam (the Tinbergen School) I became much impressed by the Marshall plan, generously offered to us Europeans by our American liberators.

In 1949 I tried - without success - to work as a trainee for the American ECA (Economic Cooperation Administration) in Paris. But friendly Dutch civil servants in The Hague and at the OEEC (Organisation for European Economic Cooperation, which later became OECD) in Paris succeeded in getting me a job as a trainee at the Economics Directorate OEEC in the Hotel Iena. I had then plenty of time to study the recent history of the OEEC and to fulfil my specific task of making an inventory of all the steam-locomotives destroyed during WWII and of the needs for replacement. The kitchen of the OEEC restaurant in *Chateau de la Muette* kept me alive thanks to low franc prices.

Meanwhile, at the Netherlands School of Economics, interest for Europe was growing and around 1952 the "Student association for a world legal system" was founded. Many Dutch-European civil servants and businessmen had their roots in this association, trained by professionals like Dr Witteveen and the American representative of the ECA in the Netherlands.

It was also around this year that students from west European countries traveled *en masse* to Strasbourg in free bus rides to demonstrate with Paul Henri Spaak for a united Europe without frontiers. Helmut Kohl and later Prince Claus of the Netherlands were there too. Unfortunately, the Flemish and Walloon students in the Belgian delegation started fighting, probably as an aftermath of their country's division over the return of King Leopold III. Fake frontier barriers were destroyed.

Early ELEC years

In 1956/57 I became a member of the Overseas Territories Committee of ELEC while working at the Africa Institute in Rotterdam, being introduced by director Aukes who happened to be an ELEC friend of Mr Agnelli (FIAT). Having written many articles on the special custom treatment of tropical and industrial products, both at the Africa Institute and for a Dutch member of the European Parliament, I became known as an outside expert on the special system of "surprix" and quotas prevailing in the French overseas territories and which had to be abolished in conformity with the new Treaty of Rome. The president of the Overseas Territories Committee (OTC) of the European Parliament, Walter Scheel, invited us to Bonn for an exchange of views, presumably not aware then of the important role he was to play later in European politics.

A distinguished member of the OTC was Sir Cecil Kisch of the Bank of England. In the eyes of the 28-year old I was, he must have been over 82 and at meetings he fell asleep. Another member was Mr. Durand-Reville, of nearly the same age, whose father had been minister of the protestant Eglise Wallone of Rotterdam, and we could get along very well.

At the enlarged Central Council meeting celebrating ELEC's first 10 years, I was privileged to meet Edmond Giscard d'Estaing, René Mayer (President of the High Authority of the European Coal and Steel Community), Edouard Bonnefous (chancelier de l'Institut de France), Baron René Boël (Solvay) and Hermann Abs (Deutsche Bank), all of them committed Europeans.

Sir Edward Beddington-Behrens, president of ELEC's British section and a great music lover, received us for luncheon at his private home. After lunch there was a recital by a female opera singer accompanied by a pianist. The Dutch representative Dr Wertheimer of Philips whispered in my ear: this is a wonderful free trade aria! Dr Wertheimer and Mr Brijnen of Royal Dutch Shell were member of the Juridical Commission of ELEC. They always worked closely together, *inter alia* on the articles 85 and 86 of the Rome Treaty. In the Dutch Senate they were behind the introduction of a motion which got the nickname: motion Breinheimer.

The initiators of ELEC were Dr Retinger, a Pole who was in WWII a political advisor to General Sikorski, the Polish equivalent of de Gaulle in London, and Paul van Zeeland, a former Belgian prime minister. While in London they met several other refugees or British citizens who were to become later important figures in ELEC, such as Adolf Berle, former US Under-Secretary of State who became president of the American section of ELEC (which lasted only one year), Sir Colin Gubbins, head of the SOE (Special Operations Executive) in WWII, who later became the vice-president of ELEC's British section, Pieter Kerstens, a minister in the Dutch government-in-exile, and René Boël who later became ELEC's international president for thirty years. Did the CIA offer financial support to ELEC or to Retinger? This was never proven after thorough research. *

A great disappointment to me was to discover that after a request the head-office of ELEC was not established in 1946 in the Netherlands (in The Hague) as the Dutch government did not dare to face the consequences of Russian oppression. The head-office stayed in London where ELEC's first Secretary General Retinger lived until 1949, and moved then to Brussels where it stayed ever after. **

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* see a relevant excellent article "OSS, CIA and European Unity: the American Committee on United Europe", 1948-1960 by Richard J. Aldrich in *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 8, n° 1 (March 1977), pp 184-227

** see "The Origins of ELEC" (Febr. 1995)