

Interview with  
Paul COLLOWALD

## "I discovered the Schuman Declaration and thought to myself: This is incredible"

Paul Collowald followed the Schuman Declaration and the first steps of the Coal and Steel Community as a journalist, before becoming spokesman for the Commission and then Director General of Information for the European Parliament. In this interview he gives the Foundation his account of the historic day of 9 May 1950 and his vision of Europe today.

To understand the significance of the Schuman Declaration, I think we have to set the scene a little.

There had already been an attempt in the Council of Europe to bring Europeans together, but it had failed because the British and Scandinavians did not want it.

In August 1949, I was a young journalist, it was the first session of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, and it was there that I met Robert Schuman. We were walking together towards the Prefecture and I asked him: "What will your next trip be? He said to me: "Listen, I'm going to see my friend Acheson, the American Foreign Minister, to think about the post-war period".

It's like he's thinking out loud. I hear him say: "You know, we have a heavy responsibility in this post-war period. We're facing the German problem again, it must be solved in a way other than with a Treaty of Versailles, the revenge that generated Hitler, this infernal vicious circle. We shall have to find other ways of doing things, and think of different ways of behaving towards Germany".

This was all said while he was walking along, he didn't have a plan at the time, but I remembered that post-war reflection.

Later he told me that three people met in Washington: Dean Acheson, Ernest Bevin, the British Foreign Secretary, and himself – a little group that had to think about the post-war period, about "what do we do with Germany?". Dean Acheson said to his two colleagues:

*"This is too serious a matter to be dealt with in one meeting, we will ask Robert Schuman, a man who knows a lot about Franco-German relations, to prepare our next meeting".* They decided to meet in London... on 10 May 1950.

On 9 May 1950, I was in the editorial office. In each newspaper, you had a small office where the AFP wire was running all day. The editor had asked me to keep an eye on it. All of a sudden, on May 9, I took a look and there was a dispatch about a press conference at the Quai d'Orsay. I said to myself: "What's going on? They were sending the first few sentences. Slowly, I realised it was the Schuman Declaration. So I called my editor and said to him: "This is exactly the answer to all the questions that Robert Schuman was thinking about when I was walking with him nine months ago".

The extremely courageous way they shaped something other than Versailles is a wonderful thing, it was the "Gleichberechtigung" [equal rights], the sharing of sovereignty. This is the core of the Franco-German reconciliation. It is the opposite of imposing things, it is sharing them. The characteristic of 9 May was a renewed, unique relationship between France and Germany, which was to share sovereignty by creating a community, one of Coal and Steel.

It was only coal and steel, but when you unpack the 36 political lines of the Schuman declaration, it ends with a perspective towards the United States of Europe, and peace. So, there you have the sort of grand, almost global plan. Moreover, the first sentence - "World

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*peace cannot be safeguarded without creative efforts commensurate with the dangers that threaten it*" - is set at world level.

I was discovering all of this and thinking to myself: "*This is incredible*". I had studied history at the faculty of Strasbourg, I had no memory of relations between two countries that had been hereditary enemies which were now in this situation.

There are several versions of what happened on 9 May, but I think I have the right one. Robert Schuman had sent Robert Mischlich, a member of his cabinet, to take a letter to Konrad Adenauer, the German Chancellor. Mischlich said to him: "*Without an appointment?*". "*Yes, you will say that you are coming from Robert Schuman. Here is a letter*", etc. It seems for the sake of the anecdote that Schuman said to him: "*With the grace of God, you'll manage*".

Mischlich arrived unexpectedly in Germany in the middle of the Council of Ministers, but when Adenauer, via an usher, learned that it was his friend Schuman who had sent him a letter, he said: "*We are interrupting the meeting, I'm going to see what's going on*". He read the text, and it was there and then that he found the word "*Gleichberechtigung*", which in fact proposed a community, a real sharing of sovereignty.

Mischlich explained to Adenauer: "*The Council of Ministers in Paris is sitting now they are waiting for my call*".

Adenauer said to him: "*I have just read this text, I am enthusiastic. Before we exchange official letters, since you tell me it is very urgent, you can phone and then we shall do everything else in writing.*"

Mischlich rushed to the phone. It was about half past noon and Bernard Clappier, Robert Schuman's director of cabinet, was waiting in the office next to the Council of Ministers for Mischlich to call and tell him whether Adenauer agreed in principle and under what conditions. Mischlich said: "*The Chancellor is delighted*". Clappier then drew up a small paper and sent it by usher to Schuman, who had started to get worried. The meeting was chaired by Georges Bidault, the President of the Council, who was not aware of what was happening. So they added this point to the agenda.

Bidault was rather an Atlanticist, not quite on the same wave length as Schuman. There were the two vice-presidents, René Pleven and René Mayer. Bidault, who did not want to decide alone, turned to his two colleagues. They said: "*Well yes, listen, it's great*". He said: "*Come on, it's a done deal, we can go ahead*". At that moment, the chiefs of staff and other colleagues rushed to all available telephones to alert all the newspapers, those dealing with foreign affairs, to say: "*There is a press conference at 6pm, for an extremely important proposal*".

Around 6pm, the press arrived in the Salon de l'Horloge, some seated, others standing. Jean Monnet, who was largely the author of the text, was there with his wife



Paul Collowald and former Commission President Jacques Delors at the 60th anniversary of the Schuman Declaration in Scy-Chazelles

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Robert Schuman in the Salon de l'Horloge at the Quai d'Orsay. Contrary to popular belief, the photo was not taken on 9 May 1950.

among the officials. This is how Robert Schuman made his declaration. They had trouble with the microphone. It's difficult to get hold of the sound archives. There was no photographer, because we were improvising.

In many history books you've seen that there's a photo, with a caption. It's the Quai d'Orsay, okay; the Salon de l'Horloge; okay. But there's one small important detail. In front of it, there's a table. That's impossible. What happened is that since we didn't have a photo of 9 May, it's the photo of the declaration that Schuman made at the first Council of Ministers of the Six, which took place three weeks later, I think. This photo is symbolic, it's the Quai d'Orsay, it's Schuman speaking, but it's not 9 May.

It was a total surprise. The next day, a newspaper headlined: "*The Schuman Bomb*". All of this recalls the atmosphere of suspense, starting with the meeting in Washington where Schuman was entrusted with a mission that he only just managed to fulfil, since the Council of Ministers was coming to an end when Mischlich succeeded in making the phone call.

No journalist from the provinces, including myself, was able to attend this press conference. But when I saw the summary of it on the teleprinter, I was able to say to my editor-in-chief: "*Go for it, it's great*". So, I became the Europe specialist at the daily newspaper *Le Nouvel Alsacien*. I followed all the ECSC Councils of Ministers. This gave meaning to my life as a journalist. Having become the *Le Monde* correspondent covering Europe in Strasbourg at the same time as the region, Collowald was

a frequent feature. I was also the first correspondent of *Agence Europe* in Strasbourg.

So, when the ECSC was set up in Luxembourg, and Jacques Rabier, director of the information service of the High Authority, was in charge of forming the first press service, he knew perfectly well that journalists should not only be informed about coal and steel, but that this should be extended to young people, the academic world, etc. My profile suited him perfectly because I was the correspondent for *Le Monde* and I had been the general secretary of the Journalism Centre at the University of Strasbourg. That's why I was taken on board in Europe!

In Luxembourg, and then in Brussels, we had already digested the historical aspect, and we were settling into what you might call a sort of routine. We managed this in an atmosphere of "*we have to make a success of this great project*", and to make a success of it, we had to take certain decisions, to get organised. As Europe developed, it was necessary to establish a spokesperson's organisation and information services. In this area, as in so many others, with six members, it is hard work, but with twenty-seven members, I plead for extenuating circumstances. You can have ideas, but you have to implement them in a certain context.

Generally speaking, an almost indispensable condition for the future of Europe is Franco-German relations. I



Paul Collowald (left)  
at the European  
Commission in 1971.

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remember a sentence that Bernard Clappier said to me in August 1983, which I put in my book *J'ai vu naître l'Europe*: "Believe me, Collowald, when there is an important, technically complex dossier, if it is well put together, and when there is a strong political will in Bonn and Paris to achieve identifiable European objectives, then Europe moves forward, and in fact our partners do not hold it against us in this case". It was a good analysis.

Currently conditions are not being met. In particular, if we refer to the very recent and somewhat excessive media episodes, the incidents between the President of the Commission and the President of the European Council. I put myself in the shoes of my fellow citizens, who have their own worries, the consequences of the virus, unemployment - they open their newspaper and what can they possibly think of the great project that I helped carry forward among others?

How, despite what the ordinary citizen suffers in his daily life, can Europe withstand these current events? My generation, which came after the war, had an easy way of saying: "Now we must build peace". My generation had the wonderful opportunity of having "prospects". It's crazy what this word "prospects" means. When the Schuman Declaration provided the prospect of a United States of Europe, we had not yet achieved it. There is still work to be done.

These prospects must be established on a terrain that is likely to accept them. We accepted them because we had such a longing for peace after the war. But I don't know what the aspirations of the current generation are.

At the Robert Schuman Foundation, you give hope, so we really must continue.

*Interview by Eric Maurice on 28 April 2021*

Paul Collowald, born in 1923 in Strasbourg, was a journalist with the daily newspaper *Le Nouvel Alsacien* and later a correspondent for *Le Monde* and *Agence Europe* in Strasbourg. In 1958, he joined the European Coal and Steel Community, before becoming spokesman for European Commission Vice-Presidents Robert Marjolin and Raymond Barre, then Director in the Commission's Directorate-General for Information. In the 1980s, he became Director of the Cabinet of the President of the European Parliament, Pierre Pflimlin, and then Director General for Information and Public Relations of the institution. He is the author of [\*J'ai vu naître l'Europe : De Strasbourg à Bruxelles le parcours d'un pionnier de la construction européenne\*](#) (éd. La Nuée Bleue, 2014). A biography is devoted to him: [\*Paul Collowald, pionnier d'une Europe à unir\*](#), by Sabine Menu (éd. Peter Lang, 2018)



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