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2100 M Street Northwest, Suite 707, Washington D.C. 20037 • Telephone: (202) 296-5131

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MAY 9, 1950: A BEHIND-THE-SCENE ACCOUNT OF WHAT HAPPENED

by François Fontaine

Mr. Fontaine is head of the European Communities' press and information office in Paris. At the time the Schuman Plan was taking shape, he was chef de cabinet to Jean Monnet. Mr. Fontaine tells, for the first time, the inside story of political circumstances and events in France leading up to the Schuman Plan Declaration 20 years ago.

Never had conditions in Europe looked more confused, never had the Continent been nearer the explosion point than it was on the morning of May 9, 1950, despite the constant efforts of dedicated men who had been appealing for unity since the end of the last war. The morning newspapers were full of speculation about how the French Minister for Foreign Affairs, Robert Schuman, would respond to his British and American colleagues, Ernest Bevin and Dean Acheson, who awaited him the next day in London for important decisions about West Germany.

France was almost resigned to the removal of the last vestige of tripartite occupation control. Allied control over the Ruhr could no longer be justified, nor could the ceiling placed on coal and steel production in a country that was recovering rapidly. The problem of Germany's entry into the Western defense system was uppermost. How would the Russians respond to the relaxation of Allied control? The

French Government was ready to propose a High Atlantic Council, the "Bidault Plan," in which Germany would have no role. The more the obsession with the German presence grew, the harder everyone tried to ignore it.

However, the head of this reconstituted state, an exceptional man, saw the dangers of power and isolation. Chancellor Konrad Adenauer did not want to take advantage of every chance that arose for the nationalistic rebirth of his country. He himself proposed limits on the sovereignty that would be restored to Germany. In an interview two months earlier, he had spoken of a full union between France and Germany, a union open to other countries. But he spoke for a defeated nation that had no voice in international councils. The news took up only a few lines in the newspapers. However, General Charles de Gaulle echoed his words: "If we didn't force ourselves to look at the facts coolly, we would be almost blinded by the prospects of what the French and the Germans could accomplish together..." But France had to make that effort. Everyone knew that no initiative could come from the vanquished.

As for the conquerors, they were embarrassed by their responsibilities. France had to take the first step, according to the mandate given to her by her Allies. Bernard Clappier, Schuman's chef de cabinet at that time, tells that during a meeting of the three Western Powers in the United States at the end of 1949, Acheson stated: "We are absolutely in agreement on entrusting our French colleague with the task of defining our common policy toward Germany." That was the day Schuman understood that he would not escape his destiny: erasing the frontier whose absurdity he more than any one else had known.<sup>1</sup>

Schuman would seek a solution. Though he spoke the same language as the Chancellor and shared the same high ideals, he could not easily cast aside the rights of the conqueror. Particularly on the problem of the Saar, the

French nationalists were watching him. Little by little he came to believe that he would have to make a radical departure to get anywhere.

#### Jean Monnet Steps In

At the same time, another Frenchman had also come to the same conclusion. Jean Monnet, creator of France's post-war modernization plan, had watched the rapid transformation of the world balance of power, the heating up of the cold war, the swift recovery of Germany, the American decision to use this recovery for the benefit of the West, and the French reluctance to oppose it. To Monnet it appeared that Europe was reviving every past error.

He was in a better position than anyone else to gauge the economic consequences of this disequilibrium. He saw a return to national rivalries that would lead to protectionism and international cartels: France would crawl into a shell; and, in the face of Europe's silence, the United States by itself would organise Western defenses against the USSR. Thus, his fears were not limited to economic activity. He did not think only in terms of organizing production-related areas as did many of the European pioneers who sought international control over the French and German coal and steel economies. Like Robert Schuman, he wanted to change Germany's image in Europe's consciousness once and for all. Like Adenauer, he thought the time had come to help fix the destiny of an unstable people who shifted dangerously between feelings of national superiority and inferiority.

The paroxysm of anxiety reached in the spring of 1950 and the convergence of the thoughts of two men who barely knew each other would later seem extraordinary. Schuman had had little contact with Monnet. Moreover, Monnet did not approach the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he decided to act. Instead, he sent Premier Georges Bidault a letter proposing

"concrete and resolute action, in a limited but decisive area." There was to be a "basic change" in French relations with Germany "by creating a common base for economic conditions and new European rules and institutions accepted by the sovereign nations."<sup>2</sup> It was to be the Coal and Steel Community with Europe's first supranational institutions. But Bidault did not consider this proposal important. Monnet became impatient as the clouds gathered over Europe. On Friday, April 28, he saw Clappier and gave him the same message for Schuman. That very night, Schuman thought about this message in the solitude of Scy-Chazelles. Monday morning, getting off the train at the Gare de l'Est, he said to his colleague: "The answer is yes. I will take care of it." Events would unfold swiftly.

#### The "Conspiracy"

It is Monday, May 1. Before the London conference on May 10, a revolutionary economic and political proposal must be put into shape, adopted, and published by the French Government, and Europe's answer received -- with all preparations in absolute secrecy.

Quite rightly the Schuman Plan has been called a conspiracy. Had it been publicly debated, conservative forces would have torn it to pieces. The diplomats would have "negotiated." There had been more than enough talk of improvising. Another criticism rested on a more solid base: that fusing two huge systems of production, eliminating economic frontiers and ancient protectionist practices, would need months of consultations and technical study. However, the case had to be settled in a week, without experts. On this point, Monnet and Schuman had the same ideas and the same clear conscience: experts would come later. It was an essentially political proposal.

For fear of arousing suspicion, Monnet and Schuman communicate through an intermediary, Clappier. Monnet shuts himself up with his two aides, Etienne Hirsch and Pierre Uri. They are joined by legal expert Paul Reuter,

inventor of the High Authority<sup>3</sup> and the originator of Europe's first federal institutions. Each night the day's notes are burned. Only two ministers know about the work: René Mayer and René Pléven.

"Europe Will Not Be Made All at Once"

The morning of May 9 the text of the declaration is taken to Schuman as he enters the Council of Ministers meeting. It was said that instead of reading the text to his colleagues he "recounted" it, which is in keeping with the style of this man who could seem sincere while being deliberately vague when interests of State required it. Meanwhile, in Bonn a handwritten letter was being put into the Chancellor's hands. Adenauer, surprised and moved, immediately answered: "I approve wholeheartedly."

In Paris, the Council meeting dragged on, but it had already turned to other topics. Schuman had immediately received the Council's carte blanche for the London conference, without revealing his intentions of telling the public of his plan that very night in Paris.

In a few hours a vast operation had been readied. The press corps was asked to come to the Quai d'Orsay at four that afternoon for a message of prime importance. The ambassadors were to meet with the Minister one hour earlier. Those present that afternoon recall the constant stream of visitors to Schuman's office. On leaving, each was intercepted by Monnet who told them: "You know it is not a joke. Read the paper carefully. It is going to happen. Believe me, there is no other way out."

At the last moment, Schuman wrote by hand the beautiful preamble: "It is no longer a question of empty words, but rather of a bold act, a constructive act. France has acted and the results of her actions can be immense. We hope they will be."

Only a few men could gauge the meaning of these phrases. "No more empty words..." Yes, thought the intrigued listeners, that's what they

always say, but we'll still be talking about it, in vain, for a long time to come. "A bold act...", that's a fancy phrase for just another proposal for the Ruhr problem. "France has acted...", perhaps, but whether or not the other nations follow her remains to be seen. There was some scepticism in the Salon de l'Horloge as Schuman read the declaration in his monotonous, soft voice. "Europe will not be made all at once, or according to a single, general plan. It will be built through concrete achievements, which first create de facto solidarity..."

Those words contained the terms of an empirical method meant to reassure and even mislead certain people. The prospect of pooling coal and steel resources disturbed only the steelmen who declared war at that very second. But for the public, the plan conformed closely to ideas of the moment. A note drafted at the last minute by Pierre Uri was simultaneously distributed to journalists so that it would be clearly understood that the High Authority would be completely different from a cartel. This could only be to the good for the French, haunted by the reemergence of the German steel cartels.

#### The Reaction

To convince political commentators to treat the plan in a way that would capture the public imagination at that time of disenchantment, it had to be played up. A note from Agence France Presse stressed the importance of the event. "It is a political gesture of exceptional importance -- some people go so far as to call it 'revolutionary'."

The transformation of economic sectors that had provided the means for two wars into an instrument of peace was emphasized. However, most people scarcely saw beyond the settlement of the Franco-German dispute. "Europe" was not yet clearly seen. Nonetheless, the key word had been uttered, the word that has given validity to every political development in the Community for the past twenty years: "This proposal will build

the first concrete foundation of the European Federation which is indispensable to the preservation of peace."

In 1950, the word "peace" was stronger and better understood than the expression "European Federation." It was a chance for peace that the French and all Europe welcomed that night.

The news dispatches announced the agreement of the German, Italian, Belgian, Luxembourg, and Dutch Governments. In retrospect, the feeling remains that this was a well-mounted operation. Now it seems astonishing that the Community of Six, which has stood the test of time, simply fell into place in a matter of hours, without any lengthy deliberations by kings, queens, and presidents; but this is what actually happened. Sovereignty, like privilege, either abdicates in an instant with one generous surge of feeling, or not at all.

After all, no one had yet spoken of the Six when Schuman concluded: "Gentlemen, France is making a proposal, with no idea of how it will turn out. It is up to Europe to answer..."

"Is Russia a part of Europe?" someone immediately asked.

"Of course..."

"Then it's a leap into the unknown?"

"That's right, a leap into the unknown," said the French Minister.

"I thank you, gentlemen."

In a little while he would leave for London to meet with Bevin and Acheson. Perhaps the English read the text more carefully or understood the meaning of the French proposal less fully, for the British declined membership. In any case, the London conference took place, but the original agenda was thrown out. May 10 dawned over a healing Continent once again imbued with hope.

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## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The son of a farmer from the Lorraine, Schuman was born German but became French when the Treaty of Versailles restored the province to France.

<sup>2</sup> This introductory note (nine pages long in the final version of May 4, 1950), is still a secret historical document. It may be published on the May 9 anniversary.

<sup>3</sup> The 8-man Executive of the Coal and Steel Community.

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