

THE PREHISTORY OF THE BUREAU

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The European Bureau for Adult Education (nowadays the European Association for the Education of Adults) has its roots in the Folkhighschools in Europe, and more in particular in those in the Netherlands. How has this come about?

BRUSSELS AND PARIS 1952

It was the "Centre Européen de la Culture" established in 1949 in Geneva, that under the directorship of Denis de Rougemont, developed the idea of having a number of "Foyers de Culture" throughout Europe in and through which European Culture in its diversity and unity could be experienced and spread. Or, as it was expressed in a paper resulting from a meeting in Brussels on March 15, 1952, a Foyer de Culture, on European level should contribute, particularly for young adults, to finding a new set of values in a world that has lost its sense of "culture" and of "community" (note sur le secrétariat Européen des Foyers de Culture 24 Avril 1952).

The meeting in Brussels, following a first one in Paris, had been convened by the Centre Européen de la Culture together with the French "Centre d'Échanges Internationaux".

Oscar Guermonprez, director of the Bergen Folkhighschool in the Netherlands, had been invited to both meetings, but, much to his regret had been unable to attend. He had asked Mrs. Oosterlee, warden of the "Centre Culturel Franco-néerlandais Méridon" to represent the Dutch Folkhighschools. Guermonprez, who with these Folkhighschools had already set up an exchange programme for young farmers and at the moment was preparing the second European Folkhighschool conference to take place at Méridon, saw his opportunity.

In a long letter (March 14, 1952) to M. Hervé Dufresne, secretary-general of the "Centre d'Échanges internationaux", apologising for his absence, he presented his operations to the organisers and suggested that Denis de Rougemont should be key-note speaker at the Méridon meeting. And he announced that, on his request(!) the Dutch Association of Settlements had shown interest in De Rougemont's plans and - subtly - asked how the relationship between a European group of "Foyers de Culture" and the International Federation of Settlements which then was chaired by a Dutch friend of his, was looked upon. There is little doubt that Guermonprez although apparently applauding De Rougemont's initiative feared that this would thwart his own plans of bringing together the Folkhighschools in Europe in order to promote the transnational

exchange of groups so as to foster their common European culture.

The Brussels meeting – announced as a "réunion d'études" – was meant to prepare the formal foundation of the "secrétariat Européen des foyers de culture" in Geneva in May 1952. Represented were, apart from the Belgian Ministry of Education, the World Assembly of Youth and the Belgian youth services (M. Hicter), mostly local and national youth organisations, the more important of them being the French Federation of the "Maisons des Jeunes et de la Culture" (A. Léger). (Geneva, 1952)

Although this seemed to have little to do with Folkhighschool work or residential adult education in general - it was not for the Geneva conference. It was the second European Folkhighschool meeting held from 5–12 May 1952 at Méridon that withheld not only Guermonprez but others as well from being present in Geneva. This second meeting - following a first one organised by the Dutch Agency for Folkhighschoolwork in Bergen (NL) had found support of the European Youth Campaign and proved to be a most fruitful one. With its more than 40 participants from the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Britain, Switzerland and Belgium, it has laid indeed a solid foundation for the more than fifteen subsequent European Folkhighschool meetings (for a survey of these, see: G.H.L. Schouten; "The European Bureau of Adult Education, 1953 - 1978" Bergen 1978).

Denis de Rougemont of course had not been able to be present and act as "key-note speaker", but in a letter, dated June 10, 1952, apologised ("J'ai infiniment regretté") for not having met with Guermonprez when being in Paris. He expressed his wish to go on and try to develop a cooperation to which in principle a first step had been made. And he announced that Jacques Eugène from the secretariat of the European Youth Campaign and a participant in the Geneva Meeting would pay a visit to Bergen, together with André Railliet, director of the Centre Saint-Exupéry at Reims, to communicate "the spirit of the meeting" and the decisions made. He was to emphasize how much Guermonprez' participation would be appreciated. De Rougemont ended his letter in saying: "I'm sure that in talking quietly with these gentlemen some misunderstandings that might have existed will easily be cleared up". What these misunderstandings might have been? It is not unlikely that De Rougemont was very well aware that his own, more or less "top-bottom" approach of a European structure for cultural centres and that of Guermonprez

trying to build up a more loosely-knit network of Folkhighschools to strengthen European cooperation indeed were two different concepts and that he sincerely wanted to see if they could be reconciled.

He could not have sent better placed messengers for that purpose than the two gentlemen mentioned above. For Eugène was a friend of Jean Laborey, director of the "Service de voyages" of the Confédération Nationale de la Famille Rurale (CNFR) in France, who had become a close friend of Guermontprez in their intensive cooperation on exchange programmes for the rural population in Europe. As Eugène wrote in a letter to Guermontprez (June 13, 1952): "You know how much I am attached to the case of the Folkhighschools, which I have got to know thanks to you and Jean Laborey and I would be very glad to settle this question with you". "This question" was to examine the possibility of cooperation between the Foyers de Culture and the Folkhighschools.

The envoys were received very hospitably and were charmed by Guermontprez' presentation of the Folkhighschool's case.

REIMS 1952

A new meeting of the Foyers de Culture to be held in Reims in one of these centres there was discussed and a date in October was set to meet Guermontprez' wishes. The European Youth Campaign was to support the meeting financially and prepare the programme - which Eugène then took upon him in accordance with Guermontprez. Participation should be broader than in the previous meetings, which in fact meant that Guermontprez already over the summerholidays was contacting people to secure their presence. Through existing contacts with Britain - made during - and after the second Rural Reconstruction conference in Impington (Cambridgeshire) and in particular with help of Ms. L.S. Haynes assistant-secretary of the National Institute of Adult Education people from this country were nominated. Bob Schouten suggested a number of persons from Germany to be invited. As for the Scandinavian countries however there was some hesitation to invite representatives from the Folkhighschools there. As Guermontprez wrote to Eugène: (letter of September 5, 1952): "It seems to be better to work very quietly on the European cooperation of the Folkhighschools proper. That already proves to be difficult enough. If it will succeed Laborey and I could very well establish a Liaison between the Folkhighschools and the Foyers de Culture".

Guermontprez had every reason indeed to write that it was "already difficult enough" to bring about more cooperation in Europe between the Folkhighschools. In the same time (September 1952) when he was trying to broaden the scope of De Rougemont's plans for European cooperation of the Foyers de culture, he was pursuing his efforts to establish closer links between the Folkhighschools. After the Méridon meeting in May 1952 a small committee had been appointed in order to prepare another Folkhighschool meeting in 1953 in Askov (DK). The European Youth Campaign again had promised its financial support - the problem however was how to get the Scandinavians in.

Apart from formal difficulties (who could pretend to be "representative" for such a very loosely knit "Teachers Union" as e.g. existed in Sweden: a problem with which Hjalmar Bosson had to cope) there was a strong feeling of distrust towards "European movements". This was overtly expressed in a letter (dated 15 September 1952) from Mrs. Arnfred, writing also on behalf of her husband, to Guermontprez; "The Danish Folkhighschool people put more confidence in personal connections such as Mr. Novrup (then inspector of Folkhighschools in Denmark, CS) and others have created in many parts of Europe than in great "Bewegungen as that of "Jugend Europas"...etc." In his usual diplomatic way Guermontprez replied: "We think personal contact also more important than great "Bewegungen", although these are also necessary sometimes and he said to be glad that Poul Engberg (Koebmandshvile) and probably Novrup himself would be present.

Clearly Guermontprez was working along two - as he hoped convergent - lines: on the one hand trying to create an opening in De Rougemont's plans with the Foyers de Culture in order to bring the Folkhighschools in, on the other hand bringing about a Europe-wide cooperation between these Folkhighschools. Yet developments along this line were to be very carefully pursued as Guermontprez had indicated earlier evidently to avoid that the bonds being forged at the Méridon meeting in May with its large Scandinavian participation would be damaged by the somewhat hasty approach with its formal character of a European cooperation in this field as advocated by De Rougemont and the French Foyers de Culture.

The Youth Campaign having received a number of names from Guermontprez and Schouten of people to be invited for the Reims conference, once more insisted however to have nominations for Scandinavia too;

"I understand very well" – Jacques Eugène wrote (letter dated 10 Sept. 1952) – "your wish to establish first and foremost the cooperation with the Folkhighschools of these countries, but on the other hand the Scandinavian support which is of no little importance in this matter, would be very much welcomed by the other participants". Eugène of course would have liked to have a meeting in which representatives from all over Europe would take part, and he suggested that if not from the Folkhighschools, then perhaps from youth-centres or evening colleges representatives could be sought. Guermonprez indeed followed up this suggestion and proposed that the directors of two "day-Folkhighschools", in Copenhagen (Borup) and Stockholm (Hammer from Birkagården) be invited.

Meanwhile the invitations for the first General Assembly of the European secretariat of the Cultural Centres (Foyers de Culture) to be held at Reims at the Foyer Saint Exupéry (director A. Railliet) on October 9, 1952 had been sent out.

This formal General Assembly was to be followed by a conference on adult education (éducation populaire) organised by the European Youth Campaign. The Assembly was to adopt the draft constitution, to elect members of the governing body and to decide on a plan of action for '53. The Conference had on its agenda the key-note speech by O.V.L. Guermonprez on: "The Cultural Centres -centres for human, civic and social education" ("Les Foyers de Culture - centres de formation humaine, civique et sociale"). Guermonprez was announced in his capacity of "directeur de la Volkshogeschool et du Centre Européen des Ecoles Supérieures Populaires fixes et itinérantes de Bergen"! This later reference sees to the Agency for European Folkhighschoolwork as it was to be called later. Other speakers were Raymond Berrurier, mayor of Mesnil St. Denis and general secretary of the French committee of the Council of "Communes d'Europe" and as notary public for Méridon a friend of Guermonprez, on "The role of Cultural Centres in community life"; and Denis de Rougemont on "The Foyers de Culture and Europe".

Most participants – understandably – were representatives of French organisations and cultural centres; among them Jean Laborey (CNFR), A. Léger (Délégué Général of the Fédération Française des Maisons des Jeunes et de la Culture"), Lucien Trichaud (idem) and Guy Madiot (idem).

From Britain came MS. Muriel Smith, officer for Community Centres (the London Council of Social

Services); Erik Halvorsen (Højskolernes Sekretariat) and Vilhelm Nielsen (Hilleroed Folkehøjskole) from Denmark; Tore Lundin, director of ABF from Sweden; Odd Norland, State Council for popular education, from Norway. For the Netherlands Oscar Guermonprez and Bob Schouten were present.

In the discussions during the formal General Assembly it became clear that several crucial issues lay hidden in the conceptions with which De Rougemont c.s. had believed that their "European secretariat of Cultural Centres" could be given a flying start. There was the feeling of being hastily overruled with a "ready-made" constitution prepared in the preliminary meetings in Brussels and Geneva (March and May 1952) in which the presence of Belgian and French cultural centres had been predominant. And the formal and legalistic approach was less appreciated by the "Northern" participants in the present conference.

Other points raised – Guermonprez initiating most of the interventions – were the relationship with the International Federation of Settlements and that with the Centre d'Échanges Internationaux. From the point of view of those who wanted to establish a European cooperation of Residential Colleges and Folkhighschools – as Guermonprez c.s. were trying to do – it was quite obvious that a distinction between locally operating centres and residential ones should be made.

Moreover - as Folkhighschools were already organising exchanges themselves (Écoles Supérieures fixes et itinérantes!) leaving the secretariat in the hands of the Centre of International Exchanges, seemed to be little attractive.

And finally the great diversity of institutions which the new organisation had in mind to bring together - however enriching this according to De Rougemont might be - did not appeal to many. Bob Schouten, in his book on the first 25 years of the Bureau gives a vivid eye-witness account of the proceedings.

At the end of the meeting a resolution was put forward, tabled by the representatives from Sweden, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and Great Britain which deserves to be quoted in full.

"The representatives from (etc.) discussed the constitution of the "Communauté de Foyers de Culture" and put forward as personal opinion the following: that it was very important to have a round-table where cultural work in Europe could be discussed and they appreciated

the opportunity which this conference had given for people from different countries to meet together. They considered that such conference furthered the spirit of European cooperation.

They felt however that it was not necessary, or even desirable at this stage to have a rigid organisation, though they wished to stress the need for conferences such as this and study-courses, with a secretariat which would also do research and collect and circulate information.

They thought that at present this might best be done by the European Youth Campaign and the European Centre of Culture at Geneva, perhaps in cooperation with the cultural committee of the European Council, and that in the future, out of these conferences, might grow a special organisation for this work".

(text in manuscript, original French by Guermontprez; English version by Ms. M. Smith)

This resolution is not contained in the formal minutes of the meeting, but it is quite clear that its acceptance meant that a fundamentally different course had to be taken.

The minutes just state that the elected governing committee should study the question and make new proposals. In this committee, with four members from French and Belgian cultural centres, three other seats were reserved for "the countries of the North" (i.e. Netherlands and Scandinavia) and for Germany.

The Conference, the next day following this meeting, under the chairmanship of Jacques Eugène, opened with the speech of Guermontprez. The not published manuscript shows that he essentially, though constantly speaking of "cultural centres", attributed to them the roles which a Folkhighschool in the Grundtvigian philosophy should have.

The discussion that followed his speech and those of the other speakers mentioned, according to Bob Schouten, centred around the question whether a specific adult education secretariat should not be established and if so where it could be independently positioned. Clearly emphasis in this conference, with speeches geared to the subject-matter instead of organisation formalities, had shifted from a discussion about a ready-made European construction for "cultural centres" - whatever those might be - to the much more open question of how to organise a

European cooperation of adult education organisations.

This very much came in line with the questions discussed between the Folkhighschools in Europe in their own meetings in Bergen (51) and Méridon (52).

GENEVA 1953

So who would wonder that Guermontprez took advantage of this situation and wrote a letter (6 November 1952) to Jean Moreau, secretary-general of the European Youth Campaign, to congratulate him with the initiative they had taken to convene the Reims Conference, which he thought had been very sympathetic although the idea of a European Community of Cultural Centres had come in danger because of a too hasty approach. The general interest however in some form of European cooperation - continues the letter - had made the conference accept a resolution requesting that a small committee be set up to prepare a new meeting following up the discussions in Reims. So Guermontprez, again taking the initiative, in this letter recommends - as his personal opinion (!) - some persons who could be invited for this committee: André Railliet, Erik Halvorsen, Muriel Smith (after consultation with the National Institute of Adult Education) and Elisabeth Brinkmann (Heimvolkshochschule Wislode in Germany), "who is already a member of the small committee of the Folkhighschools"(!) and who had published an article on the Méridon Folkhighschool conference in "Jugend Europa", the magazine of the European Youth Campaign.

At the end of the letter he stresses that this "consultative committee" should not be an "organisation official.

Within a fortnight Moreau and Eugène wrote back to thank Guermontprez for his support to the Reims conference and wholeheartedly agreed with his suggestion for a "committee of wise men/women" and in particular with the recommendation of Mrs. Brinkmann. They requested proposals from Guermontprez for dates to convene the committee.

So at the end of 1952 it was evident that Guermontprez - and with him the Folkhighschools in Europe with their already growing cohesion - by subtly manoeuvring, were going to take a dominant position in the European cooperation of adult education institutions.

The European Cultural Centre was quite aware of this position as can be gathered from a letter of Raymond Silva, secretary-general, to Guermonprez (31 Jan.1953) in which he writes:

"We keep hoping that, once the European Community of Cultural Centres has been enlarged in the sense you have advocated, a fruitful cooperation can be established between the "Volkshogescholen" and the European Cultural Centre".

Whether this hope was justified or not would soon become apparent.

Mid-February 1953 some members of the small committee (Guermonprez, Halvorsen, Ms. Smith and Léger) met with De Rougemont and the Youth Campaign staff at Paris. Guermonprez reported on this meeting in a letter dated 24 Febr. 1953 to Lopes Cardozo (International Federation of Settlements, IFS). The committee had made clear that the start of a "Community of Cultural Centres" had been insufficiently prepared and that a new start was necessary. Not only Cultural Centres but the broader field of adult education organisations with a real knowledge of ongoing activities should be involved - this of course in consultation with already existing international organisations, such as the IFS and Unesco. The European Cultural Centre had expressed its willingness to convene a meeting in May 1953 of about 20 representative people most of whom had been on the spot identified, to "openly and freely" discuss what should be done. Yet, Guermonprez wrote "that he could imagine that the outcome could for instance be the desirability of an office or secretariat for documentation and information, with an advisory council representing the whole field of adult education, and possibly small working groups for eg. Folkhighschool work, settlements and social-cultural centres, and evening colleges or adult education centres".

And he added: "The organisation of the European Community of Cultural Centres" in my view can just as well be wound up, and M. Léger, one of the big shots behind this Community, has explicitly assured us that he is fully prepared to let down this Community if something more viable is to replace it. (--) So, on the whole the present situation seems to me to offer better prospects".

A similar report was sent to the members of the small committee, requesting their comments. Mr. Léger indeed gave a comment, which was characteristic for his Federation: he insisted on using the term "Europe"

in the geographical sense only, without reference to any political connotation whatsoever. Guermonprez' answer (30 March '53) is just as characteristic for his diplomatic and yet firm attitude:

"I understand very well your request, which no doubt expresses equally the wish of our friends in Great Britain and the Nordic countries. (...) So I fully agree with your remark as to the political connotation.

However I think that it is rather difficult to use the word "Europe" in a purely geographical sense - in this notion "Europe" there anyway is a certain cultural and spiritual load - probably very difficult to define exactly, yet unmistakably there. But I assume that nor you nor I would deny this particular connotation so far different from the political one."

The prospects for a new start might be better now, but without some further pressure from the Folkhighschools with whom the initiative now was lying, things did not move. So Guermonprez wrote De Rougemont and his staff (30 March 1953) to tell them that the invitations for the planned meeting could be sent out mentioning that the IFS, the European Community of Cultural Centres and the "small committee" appointed at the Reims meeting had been duly consulted. He expressed his anxiety that after the meeting in Paris he had heard no more, and confirmed again his conviction that the conference to be held in Geneva could be very fruitful, on condition however that it should be very well prepared, both as to the selection of participants, as well as to the documentation on existing adult education in Europe - material which should be in the hands of participants at least a fortnight before the conference! This really meant pushing hard with only one month and a half to go.

Participants meanwhile had already been identified and for the most part contacted as appears from a letter to Eugène in which a copy of the letter to De Rougemont had been included. Among them were - apart from the members of the small committee -; Dr. M. van Haegendoren for the Flemish Folkhighschool, J. Laborey (CNFR), G.H.L. Schouten (Folkhighschools Netherlands), W. Ebbighausen (Heimvolkshochschulen Germany).

The British had problems of choice: Hutchinson, just returned from the U.S.A. was unable to come, but F. Milligan and Muriel Smith had sufficient relations with the National Institute as well as with the Settlements.

Obviously the necessity felt by Guermonprez of getting together with people having an overview of the field of adult education in general, instead of having a number of individual centres represented, as had been the case in Reims, was going to be met!

The draft letter of invitation was sent by Raymond Silva to Guermonprez for his approval, and it was confirmed that invitations were to be sent to all those proposed. Bob Schouten with whom Guermonprez constantly had been in touch in finding out who would be the best participants to the conference, was requested to write the report on the Dutch adult education scene. This report gives a still very valuable account of the "state of the art" in the early fifties in this country.

In the beginning of April Laborey warns Guermonprez that he had not yet received the invitation and that he had understood that the Community of Cultural Centres was to meet 8 days before the date fixed for the Geneva conference at the Paris office of the Centre of International Exchanges. He fears that this might cause even more delay in the preparation of the conference and might hamper a good coordination. "The attitude of Geneva" – he writes – "seems to me rather doubtful". A week later Jacques Eugène voices the same uneasiness; "Silva told me that the invitations would go out", and he adds, not without some understatement, "I think this is a bit late".

Finally however, on April 16, the formal invitation with a proposed agenda for a meeting on 18 - 23 May 1953 at the Institut Monnier at Versoix near Geneva (afterwards substituted by the University of Geneva) is sent out, together with a request to draw up an overview of adult education organisations in the respective countries.

The agenda this time was, as intended, a very "open" one: the national reports would be discussed; activities of international organisations would be highlighted; and then after an introduction on the relationship between the concept of "Europe" and adult education, the possible form of cooperation and the organisation of it would be the main topic for discussion.

After the opening of the conference Guermonprez gave some remarks on its history, and the preceding meetings and warned seriously for long talks this time and for coming back over and over again to the same issues or even trying to start from scratch.

"So – what, " he said, "are we going to do now? Of course renew personal contacts, but first and foremost let us unite in trying to follow a rational way to attain the goals we have in mind" (notes in manuscript).

From here on this conference that was to mark the actual foundation of the European Bureau for Adult Education went on as described in detail by Bob Schouten (o.c. p.11 seqq.) After the conference on his way back home in the train, Guermonprez, having reached his goal, scribbles a note to Bob Schouten, requesting him to take up the role of secretary of the "provisional executive committee".

When the Bureau, the next year, was formally established, who else than Oscar Guermonprez was to be the first president, with Bob Schouten as its director.