Jean Monnet

1888-1914: the formative years

I was born in Cognac in 1888, into a family of brandy merchants. In the world in which I grew up, one did only one thing, slowly and with concentration: it was the only way to make a good product.

My childhood, as I recall, was serious and disciplined. When I played as a child in the storehouse, I was rich in space. Why should I trouble about my future path, when my natural calling was to follow in my father’s footsteps?

At sixteen, I was already a traveler. I went to London to learn English. I discovered the City, I observed the traditions of the British world of business. As I left for my first trip far from home, my father said to me: "Do not bring books. No one else can think for you. Look out the window, talk to people..." I was on my way to visit our customers in Winnipeg, rough men in a rough climate...

I discovered a people whose preoccupation was not with managing what already existed, but rather with developing it unceasingly.

In 1986, the European Parliament gave the Foundation a mandate to mount an exhibition on the life of Jean Monnet, called the Father of the European Community, at his house in Houjarray, which the parliament had purchased. The exhibition, presented in several forms and languages for information purposes, was financed by the European Community institutions in Strasbourg and Brussels. The Redbook "Bâtir l'Europe" (Building Europe), from which this page is extracted, reprints François Fontaine’s texts and the illustrations from the exhibition, with the approval of the European Parliament.
When war was declared in 1914, I understood that the Allies had not foreseen a common economic structure. I went to the President of the French Council to propose a plan for coordinating the war resources. I was sent to London, where I helped establish a pool of ships and the supply of raw materials, which allowed us in 1917 to avoid the peril of a submarine war.

In 1919, I participated in the foundation of the League of Nations. We wanted to act by persuasion. This proved insufficient. Early on, the states' right of veto paralysed the League of Nations.

In the aftermath of World War I, Europe was in ruins. I did my best to help rebuild it, in Silesia, Austria, Poland, Rumania. I was obliged to return to Cognac, where my aging father was having trouble modernizing his business.

My father's only concern was for quality, whereas we now also had to consider quantity. For a while, I worked for the family firm; but I had acquired a taste for international affairs. I became the manager of a large American bank in San Francisco. Then I went to China to advise Chiang Kai-Shek, who wanted to pull his country into the twentieth century.

In 1929, I met a beautiful young woman, Silvia de Bondini. There grew between us a shared and indestructible love.


Silvia and Jean Monnet
I was in London in 1940 when De Gaulle arrived. Together with Churchill, we tried to keep the French government on the side of the Allies. But the armistice was signed, and I left for the United States to support the Victory Program of President Roosevelt. Tens of thousands of planes and tanks were built. They would serve in the liberation of Europe.

North Africa was freed in 1942, but it was necessary to organise the French forces there who wished to fight along with the Allies. Finally, in 1943, the National Liberation Committee was created in Algiers, and I was given responsibility for armament.
I came back to France in 1945, and found it much weakened by the war. It was necessary to rebuild, and more especially to modernize its production equipment.

This would require a big national effort. It was the first Plan which brought together representatives from industry, syndicates, agriculture - more than one thousand people who established ambitious objectives for France.

When men sit around the same table, to discuss the same problem and find a solution together, their attitude changes, opposition fades. This was the tactic of the Plan. Its motto was: "Modernization or decadence". Its philosophy was: "Modernization is not a material state, but a state of mind."

Our group was small, based on the rue de Martignac. Our part was not to direct the regeneration of France, but rather to set the orientations, the methodologies and the rhythm.

Marjolin, Hirsch and Uri contributed their technical competence, their creative imagination and their enthusiasm. They trained a whole generation of civil servants, company directors, workers' representatives. In 1950, we had overtaken our objectives.
France was barely back on her feet, ready to face the future, before the problem of Europe was already looming.

Between the East and the West the cold war had begun, Germany being the principal stake. Any conflict involving Europe had to be absolutely avoided.

I could see only one solution: we must bind ourselves inextricably to Germany in a common undertaking in which our other neighbours could join. A European-wide territory of prosperity and peace would thus be created.

At the beginning of May, 1950, our plan was ready. I presented it to Robert Schuman, the Foreign Affairs Minister, and he accepted it.

On May 9, 1950, having ensured the support of Chancellor Adenauer, Robert Schuman made a proposal on behalf of the French government to place the entirety of the coal and steel production of both France and Germany under a common High Authority, which would also be open to other European countries.

Immediately, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands responded favourably. These would form the European Community of Coal and Steel (CECA). Its decisions would have the force of law in the six countries.

I went to see Adenauer in Bonn, who said to me: "If this task succeeds, I will not have wasted my life."

A treaty was signed in Paris in 1951. It established, alongside the High Authority, an Assembly of the Six, a Court of Justice and a Council of Ministers.

Text extracted from "Bâtir l'Europe", Redbook, 1987
The High Authority was established in Luxembourg on August 10, 1952. The Assembly, comprised of members of parliament from the six countries, would be based in Strasbourg. The Court ensured the treaty was respected. The Council of Ministers promoted harmony between the politicians of the member States. This was the forerunner of a European Federation.
The CECA: As president of the High Authority, I established, with my colleagues, the first European institution with supranational authority.

We set an example by working in a spirit of cooperation. I developed relationships of trust and friendship with my colleagues, notably with the German Franz Etzel.

Before long, our collaborators from the six countries melded into a single team, without national distinctions, searching for common solutions to common problems.

In 1953, coal and steel circulated freely in Europe, to the great advantage of consumers as well as producers.

Nevertheless, our Anglo-Saxon allies no longer wished to assume the cost of Germany's defense. There was talk of re-establishing a German national army, which would represent a dangerous step backwards.

I suggested, as an alternative, that we create a European army.

Faced with the extreme threat of the Soviet armies, René Pleven proposed the European Community Defense Plan (CED), a treaty between the Six; but, under the Mendès France government, the French parliament rejected it in 1954.

This was a grave crisis for Europe. I resigned from the High Authority and founded the Action Committee for the United States of Europe.
The Action Committee for the United States of Europe pulled together trade union and political forces from the six countries, representing two-thirds of the Community's voters - more than ten million syndicated workers.

The primary goal was to implement the Common Market and Eurotom, as defined in two treaties which we had developed with Spaak, Beyen, Hallstein, Maurice Faure, and others who wished to galvanise the European movement.

The treaties were signed in Rome on 25 March, 1957, and were ratified by the six country parliaments the same year.

The Action Committee then addressed the incorporation of Great Britain into the Community, smoothing out the misunderstandings which had existed on both sides. I met with much good will from Macmillan and Heath.

I went to see Kennedy. His vision of the world was generous. He proposed a partnership between the USA and a united Europe, an association between equals.

Text extracted from "Bâtir l'Europe", Redbook, 1987
The Committee pursued its objectives unceasingly, formulating resolutions which were almost always unanimously supported. Back in their own country, members used their political influence to ensure that these resolutions were implemented.

For twenty years, we struggled to increase the depth and breadth of our European Union.

In Germany, men such as Brandt, Schmidt, Kiesinger; in Italy Pella, Malagodi, Rumor; in Belgium Tindemans; in Luxembourg Pierre Werner; in the Netherlands Roeme; in France Pflimlin, Pinay, Deferre, Maurice Faure; and finally in Great Britain Jenkins, Lord Brown, Douglas-Home, were at my side. Working in isolation has never struck me as effective; I have always believed in collective effort.

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Jean Monnet receives the Doctorate Honoris Causa of Lausanne University, 2 February, 1970.

Text extracted from "Bâtir l'Europe", Redbook, 1987
In 1975, I retired to my house in Houjarray to write my memoirs. I believed that I could still be useful by sharing the lessons of my experience. I take long walks in the woods. I am moved by the landscapes and portraits which Sylvia paints, close by me. Friends come to visit. They ask what they should do. I answer, "Keep going, keep going, there is no future for the people of Europe except in union."

Jean Monnet died in March 1979, at 91 years of age. His funeral took place on 20 March, 1979 at Montfort l'Amaury.

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