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## Sharing One's Experience of Reconciliation?

Thoughts on Europe and Peace

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Translator: Judith Grumbach



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# Sharing One's Experience of Reconciliation?

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- 1 There is something good about writing a speech. At the occasion of the “50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of European Cooperation”<sup>1</sup>, celebrated on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007 – I was then *Chargé d'affaires* in Tunisia – I wanted to capture the essence of the European Union and understand what its establishment meant today. Beforehand, I had to examine thoroughly what Europe had been building for the past fifty years and place that process in a broader chronological context. Indeed, I had to contrast that process with what Europe had deconstructed after the Great War, with the 1919 Treaty of Versailles, which precipitated the continent into the Second World War.
- 2 Doing so allowed me to discover a very specific characteristic of the common construction. That characteristic is even exceptional, in a sense, and all the while, I was confronted with recurring questions, I was truly surprised. Indeed, after the ongoing episodes of carnage and totalitarianism that tore it apart and degenerated into two world wars, how could Europe possibly wrest away from its own past, smeared with blood and violence, and unify the continent in peace? There is no satisfactory answer but the following point is certain: Europe is first and foremost a process of peace and reconciliation, and this reality never ceases to shape it.
- 3 I wish to share this discovery, all the more so since many ingredients involved in the reconciliation are extremely modern and can, in my opinion, be applied to other conflicts. Europe – although it faces harsh criticism and must indeed become more transparent and more concerned with its citizens and their social issues – stands as an exceptional piece of evidence, as a goldmine of meaning and hope that has not yet been fully tapped: in political relations, violence does not always have the last word. Even better, violence can be inverted and the foundations of the conflicts can be turned into foundations for peace. Would this path not be worth (re)discovering, in order for politics

to regain their significance and for Europe to be appreciated for its true essence? At a time when speaking with one voice on the international stage is Europe's "New Frontier", especially since the creation of the European External Action Service, isn't it urgent to rediscover Europe's inspiring force?

- 4 From these thoughts ensues the following question, which permeates my book: Can Europe, which endured centuries of violence, share and pass on its own experience of reconciliation? And I ask this question about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is so strongly connected to Europe's painful history. This conflict, a breeding ground for international tensions, is worthy of attention in and of itself, of course; at the same time, it must be viewed beyond its own borders as a matrix for many other conflicts and therefore many other instances of reconciliation. The following contrapuntal point also permeates my book: Without peace in the Middle-East, Europe is incomplete. While Europe took a giant step forward when bringing peace and unity to the continent, it nevertheless didn't go through with its own history. Carrying the seed of peace in the Middle-East has become a condition to its own completion. That is quite a task.

## A Special Meaning

- 5 For me, building peace and unity in Europe has a special meaning. I come from Lorraine, a border region forever branded by a series of wars and conflicts, and my childhood resonated with what Alfred Grosser called "the German question". I spent my adolescence in the shadow of the Maginot Line, of the "Monuments aux Morts" – monuments to the soldiers who died while fighting for France during World War I –, and of the long lists of names of the deceased, which were evidence of the extent to which the European youth, destroyed by enemy fire, had been wasted. Like many families living in that region, mine was shaped by these wars. It oscillated between two opposite poles. On the one hand, my mother had fallen out of love with Germans and Germany, but her harsh feelings had mellowed with time, when she witnessed the seriousness with which Germans built Europe. Indeed, Germany gave a lot to Europe, accepted a lot and did a lot for it. On the other hand, my father used his years as a prisoner in Poland to learn the jailers' language in order to communicate with them as men, past the jail's bars and the guards' uniforms.
- 6 My maternal grandfather – whose own father had fought against the Prussians in 1870 – was conscripted into the German army during World War I and was sent to the Russian front as a "Malgré nous", since Germany occupied a major part of the Lorraine region between 1870 and 1919. Few came back from this *journey to the end of Hell*, where death lurked and where cold and hunger prevailed. My grandfather survived miraculously and came back to Lorraine from Russia on foot. During World War II, his farm was set on fire, his family was scattered around, and he himself became a refugee in the south of France, his own country. He was called a "German" or even – and more often – a "dirty Boche" because of his German education during the Occupation, and he was accused of "eating the French's bread". Like all of his brothers, my own father was a prisoner of war for five years. He was caught as early as June 1940 in the cellars of Champagne (a cold comfort), where many men hid from the German blitz; he was then sent from stalags to *Arbeitskommando* camps and finally arrived to the Kobierzyn Stalag 369 in Poland. The brutality and the privations were all the harsher since my father was a *refractory* prisoner and refused to work for Germans.

- 7 As for his father, my other grandfather, he was sent to Verdun during World War I, like a million and a half French and Germans. In the eyes of the world, Verdun has become a symbol of human barbarity because of the dreadful fighting that took place there. The often terrible weather, the cold, and the mud only worsened the carnage in the trenches. My grandfather's war memoirs provide many examples of the situation, as in the following two stories, dating back to 1917:

We were going to Verdun supposedly in order to "stabilize" the area of Chaumes that a metropolitan division had just taken back from the enemy [...] I entered the headquarters called "Marie-Louise". Quite a pretty name [...] but it was actually the most awful and revolting headquarters I had commanded during the campaign [...] Inside and all around, one could only smell the odor of the corpses. The changing of the guard takes place in very tough conditions. Everywhere devastation and death reign. Many corpses of Germans and French still lie between the two lines. Death lurks in every corner, in every crack in the ground ripped by the shells; the poison gas crawls along all the ravines, spreading dread and horror, and then climbs up, pours out and slowly crosses the plateaus. I soon learn that my medical officer, Doctor Cachin, and all his health personnel, are being evacuated because they were poisoned by gas as soon as they reached the line. At nightfall, I go visit my front line positions. Their situation seems terribly difficult. The front trenches are hardly established before they are taken down by hails of bullets [...] In addition, the weather is awful. In the cold mud that is poisoned like the air they breathe, threatened by death every minute, my brave marines try to dig a few shelters [...] In their report for the following day, the Germans had boasted that they had caught many of my men. General Blondlat, Commander of the 11<sup>th</sup> C.A. Colonial, arrived at my headquarters on the 9<sup>th</sup>, at around seven o'clock, while I was about to visit the positions that were under my responsibility. We did the round together. At the position held by the Senegalese soldiers, a horrible sight – I will forever remember it: the Germans and my Blacks fiercely fought hand-to-hand in an epic exchange of grenades. About fifty to sixty horribly mutilated corpses, covered with mud and blood, were strewn, entangled, on the ground.<sup>2</sup>

- 8 The life stories of all those preceding me have prompted me to dedicate myself to the promotion of peace in Europe, pulled out of the mud, a place where Germans and French fought so much. That is why, for me, Europe means peace. That is why I understand those who wrote the Treaty on European Union and who wisely chose the promotion of peace as its primary objective (Article 3, §1). Being surrounded since childhood by the « German question » may also explain why I have been working in European institutions, where I feel to be in the right place, for over twenty-five years, to participate in the building of Europe and of its unity.
- 9 My dedication to the promotion of peace took a particular turn immediately after the signature of the Oslo I Accord in September 1993, when my work has led me to associate frequently – to this day – with the Israeli administration and with the then nascent Palestinian one. The fascinating contacts established with Israelis and Palestinians, and, more generally, the discovery in real life of tragic Jewish life stories and of the Palestinian exile; the discovery of that land for which the two sides fight; its sanctity mingled with violence, all left on me the mark that brands like a fire all those who come to discover the region. Its attractiveness and its complexity both heightened my desire for peace.
- 10 During all these years of work, countless discussions on the pursuit of peace arose. And each time, without any exception, the idea that reconciliation between Europeans was easy but that the situation for Palestinians and Israelis, completely different and actually so particular, had no equivalent, was expressed. That is undoubtedly the point of origin of

my book on Europe and peace: Can Europe share and pass on what it has learned when it wrested away from its own past? Is such reconciliation and reunification process specific in its essence, i.e., connected to a specific time, to specific places, and thus to a specific history? Or on the contrary, can the scheme that was then at work serve others? This issue is all the more worthy of attention since it raises the sensitive question of human experience, of *sharing* it and of *passing it on*. For the latter two points to be possible, many conditions must be met on the individual level and certainly even more so in the relations between different groups or different communities.

- 11 From the start, let me make it clear: I am absolutely not *glorifying* Europe. Europe still has a long way to go and, as for what it achieved, in a certain sense, it *had to be done*. Europe owed it to itself and to others. Europe *had* to get out of the abyss in which it had sunk, dragging others with it, during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But does Europe have any authoritative discourse on the matter? Should Europe “dare” to say anything? That is the paradox that lies at the heart of my search, and I have to mention it, without being able to provide any satisfying solution to it. Indeed, what is the relevance of the say of Europe in matters of peace when it bred three of the most violent forms of totalitarianism in human history: colonialism, Nazism, and communism? And yet, Europe bears in itself something bigger than itself, which prompts it to serve as a witness and say, with the uttermost humility yet strongly, that one can *wrest* away from a past drenched in violence and conflicts.

## A Three-Fold Hypothesis

- 12 Healthy foundations are necessary in order to build peace in the Middle-East. Yet, a three-fold perception critically complicates all peace talks. According to this widely shared perception, which stands as an obstacle in the way to peace, violence is irreversible, forgiving is impractical, and individuals aren't able to do anything.
- 13 Violence is thought to be unavoidable. The warring parties are thus unable to give it up and to change their mindset, as if violence was forever etched in the conflict. Each party obviously applies this fatalistic view to the violence initiated by the other party (and not to the violence it initiates itself.) In this case, Europe stands as a scathing denial and a hopeful precedent: it proves that two age-old foes (Erbfeinde) – Germany and France, whose age-old conflict degenerated into two world wars (the worse wars in the history of humanity) – managed to wrest away from their history of violence and build peace.
- 14 Europe must testify that violence can invert itself and become cooperation.
- 15 The impossibility of *for-giveness* between Jews and Arabs – or at least, between Israelis and Palestinians – would necessarily doom all attempts at reconciliation to failure. In the Middle-East, many believe that Germany and France were reconciled because they have similar cultures and religious traditions, in which “forgiveness” holds a very important place (the latter point didn't prevent the two countries from destroying one another over several generations). The path to reconciliation is always complex and necessarily unique; each time, it must be reinvented. There is no model to be borrowed from, as Hannah Arendt emphasized it after completing her work on the three forms of totalitarianism, which led her to be skeptical about political action and to ponder on the limits of human time. For her, *forgiveness* cannot be monopolized by a given culture or school of thought: in a non-religious sense, it can be made available to all. Arendt thus

presents forgiveness as the key to life in society: “[trespassing] needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly. Only through this constant mutual release from what they do can men remain free agents [...] to begin something new.”<sup>3</sup> This process necessarily entails that one renounces their unbridled ambitions in order to pull themselves out of their dream-world and face reality, and that one educates themselves in order to be open to dialogue. Education, as a condition to dialogue, is the only way by which one learns that wrongdoings are generally equally distributed among men and that violence is not necessarily the only mode of communicating with others.

- 16 The inefficacy of third parties or mediators also constitutes a major obstacle to peace. While the US apply double standards and the Arab League lacks influence in the region, Europe is paralyzed by its own past, weighed down by its dark history and the absence of a common foreign policy. This impossibility for Europe to “act” even appears to be a major characteristic of the EU, which is often called a “soft power”. While it exerts real influence by producing legal regulations, Europe seemingly doesn’t count on the political and military levels. In fact, I deeply believe – and I make every effort to demonstrate it in my book on Europe and peace – that this three-fold hypothesis can be refuted and that Europe has a major part to play in the process. For that, two additional conditions must be met.

## Two Additional Conditions

- 17 The first condition is that the European Union’s political stance must be clear and determined. To this end, drawing inspiration from the spirit and the vision of the Venice Declaration of 1980 or of the Berlin Declaration of 1990<sup>4</sup> would constitute a first step in the right direction. The second condition must be expounded at length: Europe cannot limit itself to doing and giving (giving money to help rebuild facilities that were deliberately destroyed, in particular); it must also share what it is, its own “being”, by sharing with the conflicting parties its own experience of peace and reconciliation. This goes beyond “giving” and has to do with “sharing” and “passing on”. Indeed, Europe can offer a crucial ingredient, which neither the Americans nor the Russians can provide, but which is indispensable to the achievement of peace in the Middle-East. It is indispensable to the building of the European Union itself, in order for it not to be precarious anymore and to complete the reconciliation processes that beg to be finalized – especially between Poland and Germany. All of that would give a new impetus and a new legitimacy to the peace and stability in the common space aimed for by the European Union’s Mediterranean policy initiated in Barcelona in 1995 and now reinforced by the major common EU projects for the Mediterranean launched in Paris on July 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008.<sup>5</sup>
- 18 The process by which violence can be inverted calls for these old and always new ingredients, which constitute the conditions for peace once they are brought together, reunited and transformed. Simply put: There is no peace without justice and there is no justice without truth. Nor can there be truth without acknowledging the Other. This interpretation of the building of Europe is by no means a nostalgic view of the past. Nor is it a geological or archeological examination meant to evaluate the sedimentary strata making the history, over fifty or sixty years, of the European Union, in order to glorify it. What matters here is taking a different approach – that of the life sciences – by which we turn our attention to the future, to growth, to sharing and giving.

## Annex

### Variation on the Declaration of 9<sup>th</sup> May 1950 delivered by Robert Schuman

- 19 *The following is a free interpretation of the founding text of the European Union: the Declaration delivered by Robert Schuman on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1950. This new reading is meant to show what such a Declaration can mean for other parties, other times, other places – in this case, for Israelis and Palestinians. The readers who wish it are invited to offer their own reading of the text to multiply interpretations and generate actual hermeneutics of dialogue and peace.*

### Preliminary Remarks

- 20 It is no longer a question of vain words but of a bold act, a constructive act. [Israel] has acted and the consequences of its action can be immense. We hope they will be. [Israel] has acted primarily for peace and to give peace a real chance.  
For this it is necessary that [the Middle-East] should exist. [A year], almost to the day, after the [signature of the Peace Treaty], [Israel] is accomplishing the first decisive act for [regional] construction and is associating [Palestine] with this. Conditions in [the region] are going to be entirely changed because of it. This transformation will facilitate other action which has been impossible until this day.  
[The Middle-East] will be born from this, a [Middle-East] which is solidly united and constructed around a strong framework. It will be a [Middle-East] where the standard of living will rise by grouping together [economies] and expanding markets, thus encouraging [more competitiveness].  
In this [Middle-East], the [Israelis] and the [Palestinians] will work together for common goals and their progress will be followed by observers from the United Nations. All [the peoples of the Middle-East] without distinction, [...], will gain benefits from their labour of peace.

### Declaration

- 21 [Regional or even w]orld peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it.  
The contribution which an organised and living [peace] can bring to civilisation is indispensable to the maintenance of peaceful relations. In taking upon [themselves] for [the coming] years the role of champion[s] of a united [Middle-East], [and by inviting Lebanon, Jordan, Syria and Egypt to join them as soon as possible, Israelis and Palestinians have] as [their] essential aim the service of peace. A [union with our neighbours] was not achieved and we had war.  
[The region] will not be made all at once, or according to a single plan. It will be built through concrete achievements which first create a de facto solidarity. The coming together of the nations of [the Middle-East] requires the elimination of the age-old opposition of [Israel] and [its Arab neighbours]. Any action taken must in the first place concern [Israel] and [Palestine].  
With this aim in view, the Israeli Government proposes that action be taken immediately

on one limited but decisive point: It proposes that [the Israeli and Palestinian resources of water and energy] as a whole be placed under a common High Authority, within the framework of an organisation open to the participation of the other countries of [the region]. The pooling of [water and energy] should immediately provide for the setting up of common foundations for economic development as a first step in the federation of [the Middle-East], and will change the destinies of those regions which have long been devoted to the manufacture [or traffic] of munitions of war, of which they have been the most constant victims.

The solidarity [...] thus established will make it plain that any war between [Israel] and [Palestine] becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible. The setting up of this powerful productive unit, open to all countries willing to take part and bound ultimately to provide all the member countries with the basic elements of industrial production on the same terms, will lay a true foundation for their economic unification. [...]

In this way, there will be realised simply and speedily that fusion of interest which is indispensable to the establishment of a common economic system; it may be the leaven from which may grow a wider and deeper community between countries long opposed to one another by sanguinary divisions.

By pooling basic [resources] and by instituting a new High Authority, whose decisions will bind [Israel], [Palestine] and other member countries, this proposal will lead to the realisation of the first concrete foundation of a [Middle-Eastern] federation indispensable to the preservation of peace.

To promote the realisation of the objectives defined, the [Israeli] Government is ready to open negotiations on the following bases:

The task with which this common High Authority will be charged will be that of securing in the shortest possible time the modernisation of production [of water and electricity] and the improvement of its quality; the supply of [resources] on identical terms to the [Israeli] and [Palestinian] markets, as well as to the markets of other member countries; [...].

To achieve these objectives, starting from the very different conditions in which the [resources] of member countries is at present situated, it is proposed that certain transitional measures should be instituted, such as the application of a production and investment plan, the establishment of compensating machinery for equating prices, [...]. The movement of [water and energy] between member countries will immediately be freed from all customs duty, [...]. Conditions will gradually be created which will spontaneously provide for the more rational distribution of production at the highest level of productivity. [...]

The essential principles and undertakings defined above will be the subject of a treaty signed between the States [...]. The negotiations required to settle details of applications will be undertaken with the help of an arbitrator appointed by common agreement. He will be entrusted with the task of seeing that the agreements reached conform with the principles laid down, and, in the event of a deadlock, he will decide what solution is to be adopted. The common High Authority entrusted with the management of the scheme will be composed of independent persons appointed by the governments, giving equal representation. A chairman will be chosen by common agreement [by the other member countries]. [...] Appropriate measures will be provided for means of appeal against the decisions of the authority.

A representative of the United Nations will be accredited to the authority, and will be

instructed to make a public report to the United Nations twice yearly, giving an account of the working of the new organisation, particularly as concerns the safeguarding of its objectives.

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## NOTES

1. In the institutions of the European Union, "Europe Day" – also known informally as "Schuman Day" – is celebrated every year on May 9<sup>th</sup>. It commemorates the historical declaration of May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1950, by then French foreign minister Robert Schuman. Introducing "small steps" such as common steel and coal market, this declaration was the starting point of the construction of Europe.

2. Translated by the translator of the present article. Original text: "Nous allions à Verdun soi-disant pour 'stabiliser' le secteur des Chaumes qu'une division métropolitaine venait de reprendre à l'ennemi... Je prends possession du Poste de Commandement, dit 'Marie-Louise'. Bien beau nom... mais, en réalité, le plus moche, le plus infect des Postes de Commandement que j'ai occupés au cours de la campagne... À l'intérieur et tout autour, on ne respirait que des odeurs de cadavres. La relève s'effectue dans des conditions très pénibles. Partout, c'est la désolation et la mort. De nombreux cadavres d'Allemands et de Français gisaient encore entre les deux lignes. La mort rôde de toutes parts, dans tous les plis du terrain déchiré par les obus ; les gaz asphyxiants rampent dans tous les ravins, semant l'angoisse et l'épouvante, puis montent, s'épanchant et passent lentement sur les plateaux. Je ne tarde pas à apprendre que mon médecin-major, le Docteur Cachin, ainsi que tout son personnel sanitaire sont évacués, atteints qu'ils ont été, dès leur entrée en ligne, par les gaz. À la nuit tombante, je vais visiter mes postes de première ligne. La situation me paraît épouvantablement difficile. À peine ébauchées, les tranchées de l'avant sont démantelées par la mitraille... Ajoutez à cela un temps de chien. Dans la boue froide, empoisonnée comme l'air qu'ils respirent, mes braves marsouins s'efforcent de creuser quelques abris, guettés à toute minute par la mort... Dans leur communiqué pour le lendemain, les Allemands s'étaient vantés de m'avoir fait de nombreux prisonniers. Le Général Blondlat, Commandant le 11<sup>e</sup> C.A. Colonial, arrivait le 9, vers 7h, à mon Poste de Commandement, au moment où je me disposais moi-même à visiter mes postes. Nous fîmes ensemble cette reconnaissance. Au poste des Sénégalais, vision d'horreur dont je garderai à jamais le souvenir : il y eut là entre Allemands et mes noirs, un terrible corps à corps, une lutte épique à la grenade. Cinquante à soixante cadavres environ, horriblement mutilés, couverts de sang et de boue, gisaient sur le sol, entremêlés les uns aux autres".

3. Arendt, Hannah, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, 1958: 240.

4. European council, June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1980 (nine members), and March 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999 (fifteen members).

5. These projects include, in particular, the de-pollution of the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean solar plan, maritime and land highways, higher education, sciences, and research.

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