

## **Mont Pèlerin – the origins of Franco-German twinning partnerships**

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It's on Mont Pèlerin, in Switzerland, overlooking Lake Geneva, that the first meeting of French and German mayors took place from 9 to 14 June 1948, a meeting from which the first Franco-German partnership would be born two years later.

### **The meeting of the mayors on Mont Pèlerin**

Planned since early 1948 by the Bernese Writers' Association, this meeting of municipal councillors took place at the Hôtel du Parc and gathered nine mayors from major West German cities, the mayor of Berlin – Louise Schroeder, the only woman present – and six French mayors from smaller towns.

### **The goals of the meeting**

The Swiss organisers of the meeting, writer Eugen Wyler (1888-1973) and sociologist Hans Zbinden (1893-1971), wanted to restore societal relations between the two countries that had previously been "enemies". It was an audacious bet, given the mutual hostility of public opinion three years after the end of the war. As mediators, they offered their services on "neutral" ground. They believed that the Helvetic Confederation provided a miniature-scale model of Europe and that municipalities were the first brick of democracy. Building on this basis, they wanted to undertake the rapprochement and the efforts to achieve Franco-German understanding that were indispensable to the construction of Europe. This rapprochement meant a profound democratisation of Franco-German relations. It was sometimes referred to as the "Locarno from the bottom up", in order to distinguish itself from the short-lived rapprochement of the elites following the signing of the Locarno agreements in 1925.

### **The topics of debate**

Well aware that this first meeting was risky, Wyler and Zbinden developed a flexible programme, wherein the discussions would focus on the problems of reconstruction and administration, in order to bring to light the similarities in the challenges facing post-war communes and societies on either side of the Rhine. However, the participants did not stick to the exchange of experiences on concrete topics. The French mayors brought up the matter of the Nazis' crimes committed in France during the occupation. Because their German counterparts showed repentance for German guilt, in spite of their own pasts as resisters and/or victims of the Nazi regime, a dialogue was able to take place.

### **The continuation of the meetings**

Following this first meeting, a liaison office was created in Bern, directed by Wyler, and a decision was made to meet the following year at the Bürgenstock on the shores of Lake Lucerne: 14 French mayors, 12 German mayors and the Austrian mayor of Innsbruck participated. For the first time, concrete forms of cooperation between municipalities were discussed, such as children's and youth exchanges. The German mayors insisted on creating more structure in the contacts between communes. Despite their still-perceptible reservations, the French mayors agreed to move in this direction.

### **The creation of the first twinning partnership**

The following meeting in Stuttgart in June 1950 was an important step. For the first time, French mayors agreed to meet their German counterparts at home, just a few months after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany. This is when the International Union of Mayors (*Union Internationale des Maires*, or UIM) was created with the goal of Franco-

German rapprochement, as well as the first Franco-German twinning partnership between Ludwigsburg and Montbéliard. Like Lucien Tharradin, the mayor of Montbéliard and a survivor of Buchenwald, the initiators of these first acts of reconciliation were often resistants, as they had the political and moral legitimacy needed to reach out to the former "enemy".

### **The rise of Franco-German twinning partnerships**

From modest beginnings, Franco-German twinning partnerships began to increase in number in the late 1950s. There were around a hundred at the time of the signing of the Élysée Treaty in 1963. In 1959, partnerships were also created between East German cities and communist-led French towns for the first time. On the East German side, these partnerships were closely monitored by the political authorities and were not the result of societal initiatives. They remained fewer in number compared with the partnerships between France and West Germany, and the exchanges were asymmetrical: few East Germans were allowed to travel to France.

### **Twinning partnerships today**

Today there are around 2 200 Franco-German twinning partnerships, which make up 12% of European twinings. Since the signing of the Aachen Treaty in 2019 and the creation of the Franco-German Citizen Fund in 2020, twinning partnerships have more means at their disposal and can experiment with new forms of cooperation.

The gamble made by the two Swiss mediators Wyler and Zbinden, who took the risk of organising a first meeting of French and German mayors on Mont Pèlerin, therefore gained a legacy that was un hoped for at the time. Beyond Franco-German relations, twinning had become a symbol of rapprochement and of "reconciliation" for societies emerging from conflict.

### **Further reading**

Defrance, Corine, « Les jumelages franco-allemands : aspect d'une coopération transnationale », *Vingtième Siècle*, n° 99, 2008, p. 189-201.

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Schwelling, Birgit, „Die Rolle Schweizer Intellektueller in der Etablierung deutsch-französischer Gesellschaftsbeziehungen nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg. Eugen Wyler, Hans Zbinden und die Gründung der Internationalen Bürgermeister-Union“, in : Bernhard Altermatt, Gilbert Casarus (dir.), *Die Schweiz in den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen 1963-2013*, Chur / Zurich, 2015, p. 161-178.