

Ludwigsburg – A city of beginnings

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"Ludwigsburg is inspiring", promises a promotional slogan. It is true that after the Second World War, this city located on the Neckar in *Baden-Württemberg* has seen the birth of many important projects.

The founding of the Franco-German Institute (DFI)

Barely three years after the end of the Second World War, the DFI was created under the direction of Fritz Schenk, a specialist in Romance languages and a historian (1906-1985), long before the two countries would make reconciliation a part of their political programme. This initiative was taken by Germans and French people living in this garrison town that was relatively spared by destruction. Marked by the war, having experienced exile and persecution, they wanted to work to guarantee peace in Europe and in the world and put an end to the so-called "hereditary hostility" between France and Germany.

The work of Joseph Rován

A member of the military government, Joseph Rován (1918-2004), himself born in Munich, supported this project. Originally of the Jewish faith, his family had long ago converted to protestantism. After the Nazis seized power, they emigrated to France, where Joseph Rován joined the Résistance during the war. In 1944, he was imprisoned by the Gestapo and survived detainment in the Dachau concentration camp. After the war, he worked to set up meetings for youth and youth organizations in occupied Germany, and as a historian and a journalist, he devoted himself to Franco-German friendship.

Partners of the DFI in France

The first of the Franco-German Institute's partners was the *Comité français d'Échanges avec l'Allemagne nouvelle* ("French Committee for Exchanges with New Germany"), whose activity was largely influenced by Alfred Grosser (*1925) and his mother Lily. Members of a Jewish family from Frankfurt, they had emigrated to France as soon as 1933, including Paul Grosser, Alfred's father. After 1945, Alfred Grosser and Joseph Rován became intellectual mediators of utmost importance between France and Germany.

Partners of the DFI in West Germany

On the German side, the founding members of the Franco-German Institute include the liberal Theodor Heuss (1884-1963), who was the first president of the newly created Federal Republic of Germany in 1949, as well as the social-democrat jurist Carlo Schmid (1896-1979), born in Perpignan to a German father and a French mother. Along with the many other people who shared their ideas, they sought, through this independent centre for research, documentation and expertise, to invite the Germans and the French to "understand each other in the present tense". This place aimed to offer language classes, to promote mutual understanding and to deepen the mutual knowledge of both countries.

The first Franco-German city twinning

The birth of the first Franco-German city twinning in 1950 also contributed to making Ludwigsburg an example for France and the young Federal Republic of Germany. Drawing from historical arguments, the city partnered with Montbéliard, in Franche-Comté: in the past, the dukes of Württemberg had resided in both cities. Montbéliard was part of the Duchy of Württemberg until 1796 and bore the now-forgotten German name Mömpelgard. All of this now seems far away. In the meantime, 2200 German and French cities have built partnerships, and countless citizens of both countries have taken part in these exchanges. Today, this seems natural to us. At the time, it was an incredible novelty.

General de Gaulle's speech addressing the German youth

General de Gaulle's official visit to the Federal Republic in September of 1962 was also very inspiring. Having lived through both world wars, the general's political motivation was to pacify Europe, especially within the context of the Cold War and of the division of the continent between East and West. In July 1962, de Gaulle, a personification of the Résistance, invited Federal Chancellor Konrad Adenauer to France. Not long thereafter, he made an official trip to West Germany. The two visits were followed very closely by the populations on either side of the Rhine. On Fritz Schenk's initiative, on 9 September 1962, the last day of his trip, in the courtyard of Ludwigsburg Palace, De Gaulle addressed a very specific audience: he delivered a "speech to the German youth", evoking the spark in the eyes of the young people present and calling to build close ties between France and Germany.

The legacy of Ludwigsburg

Sixty years later, as part of a festive ceremony, Ludwigsburg commemorated the solemn words of the French president. Many orators took the stage, notably Frank Baasner, director of the Franco-German Institute since 2002. He referred to the manner in which the General's words had been misused and instrumentalised to serve political ends. De Gaulle had not declared in 1962 that he dreamed of a "Europe of homelands", but of a union of European states. This had been exploited by nationalists who were opposed to the European Union. According to Frank Baasner, the French president had not been opposed to evolving towards a closer political association. In any case, it would be erroneous to count De Gaulle among the eurosceptics, even if speaking of European federalism in his time remained nothing more than an inspiring utopia.

Further reading

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