

# **History of the Europroject (1)**

## **"Prehistory": before it really started and how**

When we really want to go back in the history of the Europroject, we have to start in "prehistory".

It all started at the end of the '70s of last century.

The Strabrecht College was founded in 1974 with only the first class (11, 12 years old). Of course, it became more and more "adult" with pupils of 15 till 18, 19 years old. Geldrop had a twinning with Saint-Cyr-l'Ecole, near Versailles in France. Already from the very beginning, Ton van Berkel, the first teacher of French at Strabrecht College, tried to get in contact with the two secondary schools in Saint-Cyr, but in vain, because another school — now not longer existing — from Geldrop had one teacher in the Twinning Committee of the town and had had some exchanges. So every request was rejected. As Strabrecht' pupils grew older (at the end of the '70s), a new request was launched, this time to the Town Council. It obviously arrived at a good, lucky moment, because Ton van Berkel was invited to join the Twinning Committee, because that other teacher had left it. This really opened the way to contacts with Saint-Cyr-l'Ecole and its schools. Very soon, at the beginning of the '80s, the first exchanges with Collège Jean-Racine took place. There always were two exchanges in one year: Strabrecht went to Saint-Cyr and during the same school year, Jean-Racine came to Geldrop, the exchanging groups of a year staying unchanged.

Slowly but surely, the group of teachers involved in the exchanges from both sides became more and more friends. So during the exchange of the end of school year 1987-1988, Ton van Berkel as being responsible (among other things) for the exchanges — and still member, even secretary of the Twinning Committee, so knowing the possibilities for grants —, proposed to try to have a teachers' exchange between the two schools. The idea was favourably received, both in Geldrop and in Saint-Cyr. And so, in November 1988, three cars and twelve teachers from Geldrop took the motorway direction Antwerp and Paris and from there via Versailles to Saint-Cyr-l'Ecole, for a weekend.

And there, it happened. On Saturday evening and night, during a kind of farewell party at one of the French teachers' home, our French colleagues immediately adopted the vague idea of "founding" an international group of schools in several countries that could collaborate together, have exchanges among themselves etc. So there in Saint-Cyr the idea was born. On the way home from Saint-Cyr to Geldrop, it became clear later, in all cars the conversation only was about how to convince our Strabrecht headmaster, Bert Ramakers, of the feasibility of the idea and also to try to make him agree that there would be a meeting of the group in some years. Ludo Mateusen was delegated to be the first to try to persuade the headmaster. And that took less than a day. So, in fact, the birth of what later became the Europroject took place on a Monday in November 1988. And almost all people who went to Saint-Cyr engaged themselves to take a place on the "founding group". Ludo Mateusen became the "promoter", the "president" of that group.

## **The start**

The first thing to do now was find schools that were interested. For us it was clear that those schools had to belong to European Union countries. At that time, they were twelve: Belgium, France, Italy, Netherlands, Luxembourg, West Germany, Denmark, Ireland, United Kingdom, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. In our opinion too, in principle, only one school from each EU-country could enter our international group, so that we would have the widest spread over Western Europe.

Our aims concerning the number of schools, at that time, were rather modest: four, five, maybe six schools. But already in 1989, our project was known by some instances in Brussels and they propagated our plans and sometimes were even active in this domain, especially at European conferences of schools / headmasters. What means that "Brussels" actively pushed some schools into our arms. And that later, Dutch schools were encouraged by mainly the Dutch National Agency to contact and to visit us, in order to know what we did and how we organised it all — this still continued several years after the big conference in 1991.

## **Selection of schools: first period**

The "selection" of the schools, in fact and looking back, was a curious one. It was in two times. We first had the intention to look for schools in only six countries: Belgium, Luxembourg, West

Germany (it was still before the fall of the Iron Curtain and the Berlin Wall), Denmark, France, and Great-Britain.

It was obvious that Collège Jean-Racine in Saint-Cyr-l'Ecole was the first to contact, because the idea came up there. Saint-Cyr, the twinning partner of Geldrop, however, had still another secondary school. For us, it was normal that this school was invited too, especially because it was a Lycée, so teaching older pupils (from about 16 on) than the Collège (from about 11 till 16). That this was our first "violation" of what we decided before — only one school from each country — was of minor importance. We made contacts with Lycée Mansart and the school accepted the invitation. The first two schools so joined our group.

Geldrop had still another twinning town, Dendermonde in Belgium, and there too was a secondary school, Heilige-Maagdcollège. They were invited and accepted the invitation.

One of our Strabrecht teachers at that time was of German origin and he had a brother working in Lübbecke, at Wittekind-Gymnasium. This brother sounded the direction of his school and they accepted to be part of the group.

A teacher of Danish at the European School in Brussels knew a Danish school that might be interested, he told Ludo Mateusen. And indeed, they were very enthusiastic when they heard they could join an international group of schools — some years after the big conference, after the elections in Denmark, Tårnby Gymnasium in Kastrup got a new headmaster who was dead against "Europe" and he forced the school to leave the network.

Ludo Mateusen, during an international conference of the European Association of Teachers, met representatives of schools from the European Union and talked about the network we were creating. A Luxembourgian member introduced him to some Luxembourgian schools and he invited two of them to think about joining our network. At our very big surprise, both accepted to work with us. Although it was against our "principles" (if already any very specific), we did not want to disappoint one of them — especially not because it was a "joined request" to enter — and so Lycée Hubert Clément in Esch-sur-Alzette and Lycée Michel-Rodange in Luxembourg City became part of the network.

So, we had already five of the intended six countries in our coming into being network. We only had to find a representative of the British nation. That was not easy at all. English schools, in general (it seems), are not very interested in contacts with schools in small countries. Two times, schools were sounded; two times, there had been a prudent promise; two times, the contact had been broken off.

Then, after the second refuse, there was another conference of the European Association of Teachers and the will of the Strabrecht teachers attending the meeting to complete in any case the number of six countries. If possible, with an English school. But no one seemed very eager to join us. That was not the case with an Italian school. Ludo Mateusen met a new teacher of that school, talked about the network we were creating and she gave as candidate for the vacant place the name of the school she had just entered. Her headmaster, luckily, agreed with this more or less "insolent promise" to join the group. And so, from Imola, Istituto Magistrale Statale Alessandro da Imola joined the group in July 1989.

### **Official "baptism"**

In the meantime, on 22<sup>nd</sup> of April 1989, the project was officially baptised by presenting the first copy of the project brochure to a Dutch member of the European Parliament, accompanied by some ceremonies and speeches, of course.

### **First preparatory conference**

In September 1989, we had the first preparatory conference with these seven schools (of which six from abroad) in Geldrop. About twenty teachers from abroad participated. The goals of the conference were the concretisation of the collaboration between the schools, the preparation of the programme of October 1991 and preparatory activities for that programme.

As at all preparatory meetings — and during the Euroweek in October 1991 —, the vehicular languages were three: English, French, and German. We started with three groups, each

representing one of those three languages. During the final conclusions of each group, each contribution in the discussions in one of those languages was translated (or sometimes summarised) into both other languages, mostly by the help of teachers of Strabrecht College (at that time, every teacher in the Netherlands had had to study those three languages in secondary school).

During their stay, all participants were staying in the house of people of the management, of teachers and of non-teaching staff.

### **Chosen theme: National stereotypes**

The Project got a title or, maybe better, a theme in four languages, representing the Dutch start as well as the languages that were judged to be the most taught and known ones in the European Union: "Onderwijs grenzeloos" / "Enseignement sans frontières" / "Education without frontiers" / "Unterricht ohne Grenzen", but commonly it was called "Europroject" (with some "variants", like "Europrojet" in French and "Europrojekt" in German). Embedded in this theme was everything that implied "nationalism" and / or stereotypic treatment of foreigners.

During a plenary session of the first preparatory conference, Mrs. E. Huls (at that time from Catholic University of Tilburg) and Mr. Louk Hagendoorn (at that time from the Catholic University of Nijmegen, department Psychological laboratory; later he became professor at Utrecht University) presented their plans for a study on national stereotypes (Hagendoorn) and on culturally determined phrasing (Huls).

The questionnaires of the inquiry have been translated by volunteers of Strabrecht College as well as by some external volunteers. They were sent to our partner schools in Belgium, Germany, Italy, France, United Kingdom, Luxembourg, and Denmark. Afterwards, the results have been published in Dutch and English and also used to further university studies. The results, of course, have been used too during the pupils' conference of October 1991, during the discussions on national prejudices.

During the two first preparatory conferences and the headmasters' conference, the two researchers informed the teachers and headmasters on the structure, the set-up, and the results (so far) of the inquiry.

### **Not expected**

Some days after the first preparatory meeting, we received a letter of an English school, Rydens School in Walton-on-Thames. Two teachers of English at Strabrecht went there to meet people of that school. It was a rather poor school, but the visit ended in the promise of the direction of the school that they wanted to participate. They had to leave the network some years after the big conference, because they could no longer pay all expenses linked to the network and the conference (in that time, there were no grants as we know them now).

### **Selection of schools: second part**

Then a kind of second phase started in "collecting" schools, as a big Dutch bank, Rabobank, the branch of Geldrop, Mierlo, Heeze and Nuenen (all villages surrounding Geldrop from which a big part of pupils of Strabrecht were — and still are — originated) promised an important financial support.

Ludo Mateusen has /had a friend from Belgium who was working in the little town of Ramsgrange in Ireland at Ramsgrange Community School. Our invitation to participate in the international group was accepted by the direction of the school.

At that time, we had at Strabrecht College a Portuguese girl who was there within the framework of an international exchange, for a whole school year. When her stay came to an end and she had to return to her school in Leiria, we asked her to sound the teachers and director of her school. And so Escola Secundária de Francisco Rodrigues Lobo joined the group.

In the twinning committee of Geldrop, of which Ton van Berkel was the secretary, the president had a daughter living in Spain. She was a former pupil of Ton, then (and still now) practising as an ophthalmologist in several hospitals in Barcelona and surroundings. She made some inquiries and evoked so big interest for the project that in December 1989, four schools had to draw lots for

their participation in the Europroject. Colegio de Nuestra Señora de la Consolación in Castellón de la Plana was the winner. This school had to leave us, because it belonged to a religious order that some years after the big conference, "discovered" that we were not all catholic schools in the network: the order then forced it to retire.

We now wanted to have a school from the last EU-country we were still missing too: Greece. One of us had a relation working at the department in Athens. Not being able to give us an answer in the short, a Greek teacher at the European school in Luxembourg was contacted by telephone. Four days later, we could send an official invitation for the second preparatory conference in January 1990 to the Second Lyceum of Kalamaria, in Kalamaria, near Thessaloniki.

### **Second preparatory meeting**

So the network had fourteen schools from the twelve countries of the European Union of that time. And at the second preparatory conference of January 1990, all the schools were present, mostly represented by one or two teachers, sometimes too by their headmaster or headmistress. As always, the guests were lodged by members of the teaching and non-teaching staff of Strabrecht.

### **"Activities" during the conferences**

During these preparatory meetings, the whole day long — except half a day of excursions —, the participants discussed together and so prepared a big conference that was decided to be held in October 1991 in Geldrop. During those discussions, the collaboration and the conscience of a collective responsibility grew. Already then, schools started to collaborate more intensively. New initiatives also came to exist, like the Euro-Bulletin, born in September 1989, not only meant to "report" about the progression of the Project and to give practical information, but also to stimulate and to activate the communication between the schools.

### **Colloquium on national prejudices, integration, and education**

On 22 February 1990, a colloquium was held at Strabrecht College on national prejudices, integration, and education. The openings speech was pronounced by professor H. Brugmans, former rector of the European College in Bruges (Belgium) and known as one of the great promoters of a European Union. Then the former ambassador of the former Federal Republic Germany (FRG), Mr. Otto von der Gablentz, gave his opinion on this subject. Other speakers were: professor H. Dyserinck presenting an comparatist-imagologic vision on the phenomenon of national prejudices; the in the Netherlands well-known journalist Henk Hofland and Mr. R. Rock, former principal of the European school in Mol (Belgium). The meeting-debate was chaired by professor Louk Hagendoorn, from Utrecht University, responsible for the inquiry on prejudices.

### **What did we "known" about the participating schools**

In fact, at that moment in the history of the Europroject, we really did not know anything or almost nothing about the participating schools. As shown in the previous paragraphs about the selection, they mostly were chosen through recommendation, "coincidence" or "fortuities", and "familiarity" of only one person with a school. Then the wish and the willingness to be part of an international project / group had made that this network came together, worked together, and prepared a big meeting with pupils, teachers, and headmasters in 1991.

Nevertheless, we judged it necessary that people got to know each other personally. And at all levels: management, teachers, pupils. A means that helped us were grants for teachers from the European Economic Community (EEC).

It all started in November 1989, when the headmaster, Bert Ramakers, and one teacher (Ludo Mateusen) of Strabrecht visited Dendermonde's secondary school. In March 1990, both paid a visit to Lübbecke.

In January 1990, the headmistress and two teachers of our Irish partner visited Strabrecht College; another teacher of the same school visited the Netherlands, France and Luxembourg (Esch) in autumn 1990. They informed themselves thoroughly about the school and the school system at Strabrecht and in the Netherlands, followed and gave lessons. Four teachers of Strabrecht return their visit in spring 1990.

During Easter holidays 1990, two Dutch teachers visited our Danish school (of that time), another Dutch teacher did the same during autumn of the same year. A teacher from the Danish school came to Strabrecht for three weeks and gave lessons in several classes. During his stay, he paid also a visit to our Belgian and Luxembourgian (Luxembourg City) partners.

In April 1990, Ludo Mateusen went to Imola to learn more about our Italian partner and its school.

In the meantime, two classes from Heilige Maagdcollège and a group of pupils from Ramsgrange Community School visited Strabrecht College. A group from Strabrecht went to the school of our English partner. A class from Jean-Racine was hosted by Heilige Maagdcollège for some days.

And it all continued in 1991. The contacts even became more frequent, so that almost every school in the network had already had at least one exchange of a class or group with another school — and a lot of schools with several schools for more than once.

### **Conference of the headmasters and headmistresses**

In November 1990, a conference for headmasters and headmistresses was organised. The themes of that conference were the future of this network of schools and the different forms of school management in a European perspective.

Again, all the schools were represented. The "common language" used was English, what implied that several headmasters / headmistresses either had brought with them as interpreter a teacher of their own school or were helped by a teacher of Strabrecht College.

Everybody was lodged in families of the Strabrecht management or Strabrecht teachers.

One of the results of this conference was that the principals uttered the wish that the schools could continue their collaboration (in the widest sense), so continued to exist as a network, after the big conference in October 1991. That decision then was taken, although not any concrete plan about "how?", "where?", "when" etc. was presented or discussed.

### **Preparatory conference of pupils**

At the same moment as the headmasters' conference, a pupils' conference took place. It was meant as a preparatory conference for the discussion s and the plenary session of the big conference in October 1991. All the schools sent one or some representatives. Fifteen foreign pupils and fifteen Dutch ones, during two days, discussed on the theme "Poor and Rich in Europe". They prepared resolutions that they defended during a plenary session. The vehicular language was English. The pupils were lodged in host families.

### **Final conference for teachers**

In April 1991, there has been a final conference for the teachers (and for headmasters who wanted to participate) of all the schools to take definitive decisions concerning the programme of the Euroweek.