The EU Downtown

The EU Downtown

From **Brussels** to a place near **you**
How **local leaders** help citizens
experience the Union

Sean O'Curneen

To Joseph and Juani,
who set me off on life's voyage;

To Victoria, Mariella, and Lucas,
who give the voyage its meaning.

This publication is not published for profit.

The image of the cover pays tribute to the artists who created the site where the European Committee of the Regions - the institutional home of the EU's local communities - is mainly located in Brussels.

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Foreword

'In a world of relentless global news, this book reminds us to look closer. Our neighbourhoods, cities and villages are where life actually happens — where you can read the local paper, meet people for real, and shape the future with others.

Europe built a union that rejected the concept of strong centralised power that resulted in two world wars — it has no fiscal union, no tax authority, no shared defence, most days no common foreign policy. That was deliberate, and it was wise. But a union without a strong centre cannot survive without a strong democratic fabric — from you to Brussels and back. One woven tightly enough to protect you, yet open enough to give you freedom — to move, to build, to belong. That fabric begins at your doorstep.

This book shows exactly how — and why it matters. I recommend it warmly.'

Margrethe Vestager

Prologue

If you are lucky enough to take off from Brussels International Airport on a sunny day and your flight immediately heads east, and you are sitting at a window seat on the right-hand side of the plane, you will get a spectacular view of the city. You will first see the beautiful iconic 100-metre tall Atomium monument with its atom-like spheres glinting in the sun on the northern edge of the city, and then the canal that crosses the city from north to south along the western edge, which was in centuries past a bustling lifeline for the city, later neglected and derelict and which has recently been given new life with chic apartment blocks, a modern shopping mall, and a museum of modern art. Then, the tall historic spire of Brussels City Hall, poking out of the world-heritage Grand-Place in the heart of the city will come into view, and as the city continues to drift by your window, the so-called European quarter on the eastern side of the city will finally grab your attention. The unique star-shaped headquarters of the European Commission, facing the new iconic wood-panelled headquarters of the European Council, both of them

apparently just a stone's throw from the sprawling European Parliament, all three of them clustered around a large park with arches built to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Belgium's independence. Seen from this height one cannot fail to notice, perhaps with some surprise, how small an area of this city is occupied by the collection of EU buildings that generates so much news and passion, allegiances and animosity throughout Europe and all over the world. There isn't a day that goes by for any ordinary European without hearing or reading some reference to 'Brussels'. 'Brussels has decided this', 'Brussels won't approve that'… But who is 'Brussels'? What is meant by the term? What is hidden behind that one word which has come to mean so many different things and conjures up hope for many, fear for some, inspiration or disdain, or is simply an abstract entity of a far-away place?

For 1.2 million people, the word 'Brussels' first and foremost means 'home'. It is a vibrant city with an incredible history and a bright future.

It is both a curse and a blessing to be a capital city. Your name becomes used and abused depending on whether the speaker or writer wants to convey hope or dislike. And this has happened to all capital cities. Brussels has it in double doses, for it is the capital city of Belgium and the de facto capital of the European Union. Although the Amsterdam Treaty confirmed Brussels, Luxembourg and Strasbourg as the seats of the key institutions and all three can claim to have capital status in some measure, it's in Brussels where most political activity takes place because it is the seat of the European Commission, the main Executive power of the Union — its Government; and it is also where the national

leaders hold their regular summits, and where the representatives directly elected by the European people conduct most of their work inside the buildings of the European Parliament.

When thinking about the European Union, most people in the 27 Member States will probably think either of remote, inaccessible buildings in Brussels with foreign sounding names and bureaucratic language that is difficult to understand, or if they think in more positive terms, it will be of a set of inspiring ideals and principles which the Union is meant to represent. Rarely will people think of their street or neighbourhood, their town or the countryside, in other words, the places they call home. Yet the truth is that every corner of the European Union from County Kerry in Ireland to Larnaca in Cyprus, and from Tenerife in Spain to Inari in Finland, is just as much the EU as the institutions where EU decisions are made. As obvious and indisputable as this statement is, it is not yet in the hearts and minds of most European citizens to associate where they live with the European Union in the same way they do when they think of their home in the context of their region or nation.

That is both a paradox and a major problem.

It is a paradox because the Union's 450 million citizens have rights, responsibilities and opportunities for personal growth way beyond their national borders, arising directly from the Union's existence and the actions and decisions taken at European level. Decisions taken at European level give protection to, create opportunities for, and impact on the lives of Europeans in every corner of the Union, whether they be about the health standards of products in

the supermarket, or safety standards of toys in the shops, or the energy efficiency of new homes, or the quality of the water that we drink, or the treatment of animals reared locally for slaughter, or the rights of newcomers arriving from elsewhere in the Union, or the rights of relatives who have moved to other parts of the Union for study or work, or — as the war in Ukraine has reminded the world and the increasing rejection by the second Trump Administration of the post-war security architecture in Europe has confirmed — for the preservation of peace within the Union and the protection of its Member States. And the list goes on.

Furthermore, the EU flag forms part of the daily life of the vast majority of European citizens, appearing on vehicle number plates, driving licenses, or ID cards and passports. But even people who believe the EU has an important place and purpose in this century, often feel it is something distant and remote. Despite the very reality of the EU and its relevance on the ground, there is no doubt that the knowledge gap amongst the vast majority of EU citizens about how the Union relates to them is huge. And this gap even exists among many people active in national and subnational politics, who have in principle much easier access to information about the EU than the average citizen.

This paradox would be no more than a question of academic interest were it not also a major political problem, because the case for the existence and further development of the European Union is even stronger in this twenty-first century than in the previous century, as we will see in this book, but if the EU lacks a strong bond with its citizens, if the citizens do not consider it their own, and if they do not

feel that decisions are taken with their corner of the Union being taken into consideration, then it will rest on very weak foundations and will leave the continent vulnerable to repeating the worst chapters of its troubled history. On the other hand, if citizens come to equate their local neighbourhood with the Union, as well as with its set of values and principles, and they feel they are helping to shape it, then the European Union will be on solid foundations, and Europe will have — not for the first time — shown extraordinary inventiveness, creativity, and resilience, in this case with a system of government on a scale and level of complexity never before attempted in the history of humanity. Most importantly, Europeans will be offered a level of protection and opportunity they have never collectively known before.

Much can be done, and is done, from the EU institutions to instil a sense of belonging to the Union among the citizens, but it is clearly not enough. Indeed, as this book aims to demonstrate, such a feeling of belonging will simply not come about without local political leaders feeling it themselves and wanting to involve their citizens in making the Union their own. With nearly 90,000 municipalities in the Union, the challenge is huge, but equally, the potential for success is enormous and the leaders of the European Union would be wise to recognise it and embrace subnational leaders, and mayors in particular, as indispensable partners in helping Europeans discover the European dimension of their identity.

The simple principle which underlies this book is that it is the personal experiences that human beings live through that shape their views and misunderstandings, their fears and

their hopes, and that the strength and health of a large political community depends on the feelings its citizens have towards it, whether that large community is a shared island or a shared continent. The more the real-life experiences of people reveal their connection to the larger political community, the more easily they will perceive their attachment to it and the more natural they will feel that attachment is. Often, those vital connections are made in the cafés, shops, and streets of our neighbourhoods, be they urban or rural. This means that all those who are responsible for our local communities, in particular local political leaders, play a fundamental part in establishing connections to the larger community and contributing to its strength and overall health. This is especially the case for a community as large as the European Union.

Many mayors are already actively engaged in this exercise. They have seen and understood that their city, or town, or village, is an integral and fundamental part of the European Union, has been transformed for the better in subtle or even visible ways, and through its European links offers its citizens opportunities at a scale that far exceeds their national or linguistic borders. By getting involved, these local leaders are revealing the European dimension which is latent and present in every corner of Europe, be it historical, cultural, economic, social, or educational, and at the same time, they are bringing to the European political level a better understanding of how the Union is functioning on the ground.

This work is not limited to mayors only, for there are political leaders and representatives in all types of subnational authority in the 27 Member States (regions, councils,

provinces, local authorities) who are actively engaging in the same way. This book focuses primarily on the role of the mayor because it is the most widely understood and recognised subnational political figure, because mayors are at the head of the most trusted level of government, and because they make up the largest single group amongst the members of the EU institution that officially represents subnational government, the European Committee of the Regions.

Written in the style of journalistic reportage and at times as a travel guide, this book aims to be captivating and enlightening, sharing a first-hand experience of the European Union, both of its institutions and the European quarter of Brussels, as well as of a selection of its local communities, and it does so from the perspective of the protagonists as well as of the author — who has worked in the European Committee of the Regions since 2004. The book has three parts, the first focusing on the European quarter and the extraordinary story of Brussels and how it came to be the Union's capital, reliving also the gradual emergence of ideas and support for European integration through the World Wars, often in long lost or little known speeches and events. This first part is entirely centred around the poignant and heroic experience of the people living in Brussels through those traumatic times, and the role of the Belgian capital in the early years of European unity.

The second part of the book tells the story of a selection of inspiring liberal and democrat mayors of the Renew Europe political family whom the author has worked with closely, how they are finding different ways to connect their local communities with today's European Union, and the truly unique stories of those places. Part 3 closes the circle

connecting those local communities with Brussels mainly via an entertaining and surprising semi-fictional chapter taking a historic twentieth-century event that occurred at the site of today's EU institutions and connecting the celebrity protagonists of that event to today's European Union so that, through them, the reader experiences the Union in and beyond Brussels.

In its concept and its content, this book emerges from within the European liberal and democrat political family, known as Renew Europe. This family brings together liberals, democrats, centrists and independents, from across the European Union, and it's no surprise that the book is being published by the European Liberal Forum.

At its very essence, liberalism is the political philosophy that believes that everyone should be able to achieve their *full* potential in society*. Seen from that perspective liberals are naturally supportive of European unity because of the opportunities it creates and the protections it provides at a continental level, in particular at a time in history when so many challenges far exceed the capacity of nation states to deliver. This support translates into political action at all

* The term 'liberal', which derives from the Latin for freedom, was first used in a political context in connection with Spain's 1812 Constitution, known as *La Pepa*, at a time when people across Europe were struggling against the arbitrary exercise of power by absolutist monarchies and other tyrants. With the development of political parties, many came to describe themselves as liberal, promoting liberal democracy, and developing liberalism as a political philosophy. Spanning more than two centuries, liberalism has spawned various traditions that differ mainly on where they place their focus. But at its core remains the idea that everyone should have the freedom and the opportunities to develop their full potential. As simple as this sentence sounds, it does lead to debates over definitions, where to place emphasis and focus, or the balance between rights and responsibilities. It is a political philosophy with a rich heritage and in constant evolution!

levels of government, including of course at the local level, and explains why the mayors of the Renew Europe political family are leaders in bringing the European dimension into their local communities.

Of course, mayors and other leaders from other political families are also involved in similar work, many of them achieving excellent results and are also worthy of praise and admiration. Indeed, where it was relevant to the story, I have not hesitated to mention them and give them due credit.

This book is accessible and easy to read, and is of interest to anyone interested in the past, present and future of Europe, and more specifically to people working in European affairs, including EU officials, stakeholders and lobbyists, academics and students, as well as political leaders of any level of government, namely to anyone who needs or wants to understand how the Union becomes a reality in the hearts and minds of European citizens. It is full of thoroughly researched historical context, not shying away from Europe's dark past while also revealing little-known anecdotes and telling the stories of inspiring people. And although it is not an academic book, it can also be useful to students of European politics who will find it thought-provoking.

Ultimately, this book stems from the following thought: if the idea that the European Union is something 'over there', 'far away' or hidden inside an imaginary 'Brussels bubble' is a problem for the Union, then it will only be solved when citizens, businesses, and elected representatives take ownership of the Union and what it represents. And this will happen when the European dimension that is already part of every corner of the Union is revealed and allowed to become

an integral part of local life, and when any place anywhere in the EU recognises and claims for itself that it is just as much 'the EU' as the EU quarter of Brussels itself.

Brussels, August 2026

1

Who Is ‘Brussels’?

CHAPTER 1

The Million and the Quarter

Painted on the side of a mountain, deep inside territory belonging to the European Union, there is a huge flag which is so large it can be distinguished as a feature on the ground all the way from the edge of space.[1] It shows a red star and red crescent on a white background flanked by two parallel red lines. It is clearly not the EU flag, nor that of any of the EU Member States. In fact, it is not even recognised as a legitimate flag by the European Union nor any other state in the world, except one. It is recognised by Türkiye. This enormous flag, the design of which was based on Türkiye's own national flag, was painted on the Kyrenia mountain on the island of Cyprus to proclaim the independence of the so-called Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. For the international community, however, this territory, illegally occupied by Turkish forces in 1974 as a result of unresolved tensions between Greek and Turkish Cypriots following independence from Britain, is now also considered occupied territory belonging to the European Union, following the 2004 accession to the EU of the Republic of Cyprus, whose recognised

jurisdiction covers the whole island.[2] Although it had been hoped that the United Nations could broker a peace deal that would bring about reunification before the island joined the European Union, the effort failed dramatically when the Greek Cypriot voters, fearing an unfavourable deal, rejected the proposal in a referendum just days before EU membership. As a result, the whole island of Cyprus did join the Union, but with EU law immediately suspended in the territory controlled by Turkish forces. The ongoing division has caused much pain and anguish to the relatives and descendants of those who lost their lives or were displaced by the Turkish invasion. But hopes and efforts to achieve reunification never disappeared, and despite the referendum setback, attempts to repair relations continued. Not long after joining the EU, a major breakthrough was achieved on one single street on the island. This street has since become a symbol and an example of how the necessary trust to achieve reunification and reconciliation might come about: by building personal connections between people, from the bottom up.

The huge flag on the Kyrenia mountain is easily visible from the Ledra Museum Observatory on the top floor of the Shacolas Tower in the Cypriot capital Nicosia. Eleven floors below, shoppers and tourists stroll along the pedestrian Ledra Street spending their euros. If they wish, they can make their way 300 metres further north, show their passport to a guard in a police hut, cross into Northern Cyprus and continue shopping — though from that point on, any change they receive for purchases made with euros will be handed back in Turkish lira. Apart from those two administrative inconveniences, it is otherwise all very peaceful and pleasant.

Such normality, however, is what in 2008 would have been considered a dream come true. For decades, the part of Ledra Street which is now the border crossing was a no-man's land with sandbags as barriers, opposing military troops on either side, and a United Nations peacekeeping force in between. It had become a permanent barrier and there was no way for Cypriots to cross from one end of Ledra Street to the other in either direction. Graceful mansions and shops had been abandoned for so long that vegetation had grown through their masonry, and some of them were on the verge of collapse.[3] All of that was about to change in 2007, when the Turkish Cypriot side, followed by the Greek Cypriot authorities, removed the walls cutting across Ledra Street in preparation for a new kind of checkpoint: one that would facilitate rather than impede the free movement of Cypriots.

Celebrating the moves, the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus wrote that 'all Cypriots stand to benefit should the Ledra Street crossing open, since this would restore the heart of the historic and much loved old town, in the process generating a new and much needed energy to the Cyprus dialogue'.[4]

The opening of Ledra Street finally became a reality in April 2008 and was such a successful development that thousands of people now cross the line every day to work, study, shop, or seek medical treatment.[5] For a decade afterwards, the vast majority of people would reach the checkpoint, show their documentation, and move on to the other side without glancing at the small blue sign that stood just opposite the police hut in the middle of what used to be the no man's land. It was a metallic blue plaque about 30 cm wide

by 15 cm high, set in a grey metallic frame that raised it to eye level of the average pedestrian, making it easy to read for anyone interested. Its simple message read: 'Open Ledra Street', and Ledra appeared in three languages — English, Greek, and Turkish. On the top part of the sign, the following words: 'European Union, Committee of the Regions'.

This modest sign, which was removed when repair works were carried out on the street after the COVID pandemic,[6] and which so many people had walked past every day, barely noticing it, was evidence of the importance ascribed to the reopening of Ledra Street at the European level. Its symbolism is such that the sign even established a direct connection between Ledra Street and a particular room on the other side of the European continent, 3,000 kilometres away in Brussels.

Only a few months after Ledra Street was reopened, an unusual ceremony took place in the Brussels headquarters of an EU institution known as the European Committee of the Regions (CoR). The respective leaders of the Greek and Turkish communities of Nicosia had gathered on the fifth floor of the CoR headquarters at the invitation of CoR President Luc van den Brande, himself a former president of the Belgian region of Flanders. They were accompanied by two other EU dignitaries of the highest level: on behalf of the European Commission, Danuta Hübner, commissioner responsible for the EU's Regional Policy; and for the European Parliament, its president, Hans-Gert Pöttering. They had all gathered in order to formally rename the fifth-floor atrium of the CoR in honour of the reopening of Ledra Street, which van den Brande explained was a ceremony intended

to emphasise how local leaders can break down barriers and build peace and stability.[7]

Commissioner Hübner spoke directly to the two Cypriot leaders, applauding their determination to work together and highlighting the importance of people-to-people contacts as a way to bring about the reunification of Cyprus. Addressing the whole gathering, she explained that the ceremony organised by the CoR had an additional dimension to it: 'It is a symbolic act through which the Committee of the Regions also reminds us in a timely fashion how important it is to trust the creative force of our citizens. How important it is to build tomorrow's Europe bottom up.'[8]

An identical plaque to the one at the Ledra Street checkpoint was placed in the CoR atrium and has remained there as an emblem supporting continued efforts towards reunification and reconciliation in Cyprus.

The headquarters of the European Committee of the Regions, where that ceremony took place, is at the very heart of what is commonly known as the EU quarter of Brussels, the district that gathers most of the buildings housing the institutions of the European Union. The CoR shares its headquarters with the European Economic and Social Committee, which represents civil society (employers, trade unions, and NGOs). Just behind these headquarters is the European Parliament. In front of the CoR, across the street, is the Council of the European Union, and just beyond that is the European Commission.

Together, all of these institutions are fundamental to the proper functioning of democracy throughout the European Union and to its very long-term survival. At its most basic

level, democracy is about preventing a single person from holding too much power for too long, hence the separation of powers and the regular holding of elections. In a political community of 450 million people with 24 official languages like the European Union, democratic decision-making is inevitably going to be a complex process, but even so, European democracy is solidly based on the most fundamental principles of democracy: distributing power and letting the people choose who holds it. And this is immediately evident when walking around the EU quarter.

If you step out of the main entrance of the European Committee of the Regions and turn left and then left again, you will eventually walk past a few relics of another wall that once divided a European city for many decades. Donated by the capital city of Germany to the EU capital city, these segments of the Berlin Wall are to be found just beside the entrance to the European Parliament, a sprawling collection of grey glass buildings and towers where the 720 parliamentarians directly elected every five years by EU citizens carry out their day-to-day work drafting, amending, and negotiating the laws of the Union. There are often heated arguments regarding the method by which they are elected and how their connection with European citizens can be strengthened, but it cannot be denied that EU lawmakers are directly elected by the people and can lose their mandate five years later if the voters so wish.

If instead of turning left when you exit the CoR, you turn right, walk past the fascinating and interactive museum House of European History, and then cross the Jean-Rey Square, past the cafés, restaurants, food trucks, and picnic

benches, you will arrive at the back of the Council of the European Union, the institution that represents the 27 national governments. All EU laws that the European Parliament works on must be agreed in their final version together with the national governments via the Council. Here, too, there are many heated debates about the democratic functioning of the Council, but nobody can deny that the 27 national governments hold a democratic mandate from their citizens and that here, too, the citizens can hand national power to someone else at the next national elections.

Carry on up the hill, past the Council, and you arrive at the Schuman Roundabout, where your eye is immediately drawn to the imposing building that is home to the EU's government, the European Commission. The Commission is not a government in the classical sense, and many academics, journalists, diplomats, and politicians struggle to categorise it. But it has a president and commissioners who are the European-level equivalents of a prime minister and government ministers, and a few examples of its tasks include: running the largest multinational single market in the world; providing funding for infrastructure and economic development; preparing the first drafts of all EU laws; negotiating international trade agreements; delivering humanitarian aid; and managing a network of embassies throughout the world, known as delegations. Once again, there are many debates about the manner in which its president and commissioners are selected and appointed but given that it is the directly elected European Parliament that approves them, the democratic legitimacy of the Union's government is in several ways similar to that of many national governments, and thus perfectly valid.

These three EU institutions — Commission, Council, and Parliament — jointly wield almost all the formal power at the European level. As basic democratic principles require, the power is spread, and it is the people, via a combination of European and national elections, who decide who holds it. The CoR, by contrast, has a very different role. Whereas to understand the roles of the other three institutions the first place to turn to is the treaties that govern the EU, in the case of the CoR such an exercise would leave one largely ignorant of its true nature and power, as has happened to many who have gone no further than the aforementioned treaties. This lack of awareness has potentially grave consequences for the longevity of the European Union, as this book intends to demonstrate.

Apostolos Tzitzikostas — the former president of the Greek region of Central Macedonia, current European Commissioner, and president of the European Committee of the Regions between 2020 and 2022 — often spoke about what he called the 'House of European Democracy', explaining that the protective roof of the house is provided by the EU institutions, the strong walls by the national governments, and the solid foundations by the regions and municipalities within the 27 EU Member States.[9] Just as no house can stand in the absence of any of those three features, European democracy needs a strong partnership among all the levels of government: European, national, and subnational. Many have yet to accept this, or even understand it, and in failing to do so they put the long-term unity of Europe in peril.

Of the EU institutions, the CoR has, without a doubt, an unmatched ability to connect the citizens with their Union.

Although the treaties that govern the Union state that the CoR's task is simply to advise the three main legislative institutions as they draft and finalise EU laws, ensuring that the situation on the ground, in the Union's local communities, is properly considered by the legislators, the CoR's power is rooted in the fact that it is the representative at European level of the huge body of democracy that exists and functions at subnational level inside the Union's Member States.

The numbers speak for themselves: more than one million elected representatives in almost 90,000 municipalities and regions, collectively responsible for one half of all public investment carried out in the Union, one third of total public expenditure, and one quarter of all tax collection.[10] European and national leaders may attract much more media and public attention, but these numbers demonstrate that mayors, regional presidents, and other subnational leaders hold enormous power to shape people's lives, to connect their local communities with the Union, and thus to reveal to their citizens that their corner of the Union is just as much 'the EU' as the institutions in Brussels where the decisions are made. As their representative at the European level, the CoR, formally referred to as an 'EU body', has privileged access to this vast network, mainly through its 658 full and alternate members, who organise themselves according to their political colour at the time of their local or regional election. The liberal and democrat Renew Europe political group is the third largest of the six groups in the CoR, consistently representing around 15% of the CoR's membership and coordinating a wider informal network of hundreds of mayors

and regional leaders as well as thousands of local councillors across the Union.

The potential to link the Union with its citizens via the CoR and its political groups is huge, and much remains to be done. However, as we will see in Parts 2 and 3 of this book, the CoR and many local leaders have already taken the lead to provide their citizens with the real-life experiences in their streets and neighbourhoods that reveal the European dimension of their identities, and that demonstrate the strong — but sometimes overlooked — bonds between their local communities and the Union. We will meet inspirational leaders who have transformed their towns and opened up the minds of their citizens to the opportunities beyond their region and their national borders, and discover along the way what they are passionate about as well as some of their incredible achievements, from the Flemish liberal mayor who drove all night crossing borders to witness the fall of the Berlin Wall in person to the mayor who leads the Renew Europe CoR group (and whose travels have been so extensive that he has, effectively, flown around the world several times); to the mayor who came to the attention of the local liberal party and became — after a campaign that few took seriously — the youngest to hold this office in her country; to the liberal mayor of the largest urban community in the EU Arctic area; and more. They are all very different people but have one thing in common: rooted in the political principles of the Renew Europe family, they know that the European Union and the opportunities it offers for the growth and development of individuals and local communities are crucial for the future success of their towns, and they are determined

to make sure their citizens know this, seize the opportunities, and celebrate their European connections.

In learning about these leaders, we will also discover fascinating places and hear amazing little-known stories about the history of Europe and Europeans, some of whom were household names of their time and others whose name has reverberated through the centuries. And one conclusion can already be disclosed: while some places may seem to be more gifted or privileged than others, or may have more historical wealth to build upon and therefore an easier path into the future, the fact is that every one of them has an interesting and unique story to tell. Wherever there are people, there is always something surprising to discover.

This brings us back to our mini tour of the EU quarter, which we had interrupted just outside the headquarters of the European Commission. The Schuman Roundabout, where it is located, had been for years a focal point for civil servants having a picnic lunch, tourists taking selfies, or just as often for protestors holding up banners and chanting political slogans. But as the relationship between the EU institutions and the city of Brussels evolves, so, too, will the function and meaning of the roundabout in coming decades.

The roundabout was named after Robert Schuman, one of the founding fathers of the European Union, a brave politician who suffered imprisonment by the Gestapo and narrowly escaped being deported to a Nazi concentration camp. Determined that Europeans should never have to suffer such horrors again, he launched what became known as the Schuman Declaration of 9 May 1950, setting Europe on the path

to peace and unification through the creation of the Coal and Steel Community.

Looking east from the centre of the Schuman Roundabout, a large park looms into view. This is Cinquantenaire Park, so called because of the huge arches and colonnade that are its central architectural feature, built to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Belgium's independence.

At the entrance of the park is a bust in honour of Robert Schuman. Placed in its own small and beautifully kept garden, it's a life-sized charcoal-grey sculpture on a pedestal, at the base of which are the words:

'Avenir de l'Europe, the Future of Europe'.

If you turn your gaze from the bust and make your way up the path, under the arches, and into the museum of military history just to the left, you can make your way back up to the top of the arches, where there is a viewing platform offering an excellent panorama of the surrounding area. Immediately opposite the military museum through which you entered is the Museum of Art and History. This building held a secret during the Nazi occupation of Brussels that could have cost the curator and employees their lives — a story revealed later in this book.

Easily spotted in the foreground when looking west are the Commission, Council, CoR, and Parliament, delineating the core of the EU quarter. Beyond them are the buildings and streets leading to the historic centre of Brussels, with a small collection of low skyscrapers to the north. Looking north, east, and south one can discern the low skyline of the residential districts of the city.

From this vantage point, it springs to mind that one of the greatest disservices to democracy in Europe comes from those politicians, journalists, academics, and citizens who refer to 'Brussels' as a catch-all term to mean decisions taken at the European level. This terrible habit creates the impression that there is just one person or a small and invisible group of people deciding on matters, when we've seen that there are literally thousands, from all Member States, directly taking part. When people say or write 'Brussels has decided…', 'Brussels rejects…', or 'Brussels proposes…', are they referring to the Parliament, its 720 parliamentarians, and its policy and support staff? Or do they mean the Commission, with its college of 27 commissioners and the policy experts who are proposing new laws? Or do they have in mind the Council and the national ministers with their own support staff in their national ministries? Distilling all of that down to one catch-all term is a travesty of the actual situation, where power at the European level is so carefully distributed. Worse still, it creates a false impression about the functioning of the Union and seriously misinforms the electorate.

Surveying the city from the top of the Cinquantenaire arches, one can see that Brussels is, more than anything else, home to more than one million people, the vast majority of whom have little direct connection with EU institutions. Being a capital city has its challenges, and this is doubly so for Brussels, as capital of Belgium and the official seat of most EU institutions. The Belgian and EU capital is a most unusual city, with two official languages (French and Dutch) and with English so widely spoken now that an increasing number of public administrations are offering it as a language

of communication. It is undergoing a spectacular and rapid transformation: from a city that was in severe decline in the latter half of the twentieth century to the bustling, multilingual capital of the largest supranational community in the world. With more than 180 nationalities residing here and more than 100 languages spoken, today's Brussels is the most cosmopolitan city in Europe by percentage of population and, according to some, the second in the world after Dubai.[11] And this stunning metamorphosis might never have happened: whereas the formation of the European Union was set in motion in response to two world wars, Brussels' becoming the EU's capital city was, in fact, an accident of history. As we will discover in the next chapter, this accident has an astonishing story involving two rebellions, a popular opera, the Nazi occupation, a secret royal wedding, and even Julius Caesar.



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The author in Nicosia, Cyprus, in January 2016 standing next to the Committee of the Regions sign marking the historic opening of Ledra Street in 2008. The author was there to attend the 7th plenary session of the Euro-Mediterranean Regional and Local Assembly (ARLEM).



→
The huge flag painted on the side of a mountain in occupied Cyprus.



←

In this photograph, taken by the author on a snowy morning in January 2024 from the top of The One, a tower housing part of the European Commission in Brussels, the European Committee of the Regions appears in the middle with its logo clearly visible on the glass façade. Behind it is the iconic Paul-Henri Spaak building of the European Parliament, which houses its hemicycle. Out of frame to the left are the European Council buildings and the headquarters of the European Commission, the Berlaymont. This picture gives an idea of how Brussels, as a city, is far vaster than the European quarter that is often referred to in media around the world as 'Brussels'.



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Bust of Robert Schuman at the entrance of Cinquantenaire Park. Note that there's an inscription at the top right corner of the pedestal. Once you have finished reading Chapter 4, come back to this picture for a second look.

CHAPTER 2

The Legacy of Julius

On a small pedestrian street in the historic centre of Brussels there is a sudden change of colour of the pavement. There is a patch of light-grey tiles, a few metres wide and about ten metres long, sandwiched between the tiles that cover the rest of the street, which are of a slightly darker grey. That's not very unusual in any city where construction work and repairs take place all the time. But these tiles hide something special.

On Wednesday, 14 November 2018, a construction worker digging a hole for a special tunnel came across a human skull. The work was halted immediately and archaeologists were called in. Within just a few days, they found the skeletons and coffins of six people who had been buried in the 1500s and 1600s. According to the archaeologists, the skeletons belonged to four men and two women and were very likely Dominican monks and female relatives buried in the cemetery of the Dominican monastery that had previously existed there.[1]

Today, the remains of the cemetery are underneath the workshops of the Belgian Royal Opera House, known by

French-speaking Belgians as La Monnaie, and by Dutch-speaking Belgians as De Munt. The tunnel was being constructed so that the staff of De Munt no longer had to transport costumes and stage props from the workshops to the Opera House at street level, in full sight of the public. With the new tunnel, each new opera would finally be able to keep its secrets until the opening night.

La Monnaie has a beautiful ornate burgundy and gold auditorium with over 1,000 seats, and an elegant 200-year-old neoclassical façade. The auditorium was completely rebuilt following a devastating fire in 1855, but the façade itself dates back to Napoleon — who, shortly after taking control of the new French Republic, visited the territories that France had recently annexed, which included Brussels, and ordered that the century-old opera house be replaced with a new one.[2] A site very near the old opera house had recently become available: following the upheaval of the French Revolution, and as part of the annexation in the 1790s, many of the monasteries in Brussels were abolished and the buildings themselves demolished.[3] This included the Dominican monastery whose cemetery was uncovered by the construction worker in 2018 — the space that was left after the monastery was torn down became the site of the new opera house. The project took several years and by the time the new opera house was inaugurated in 1819, the balance of power in Europe had changed once again: Napoleon was already in his forced exile in the southern Atlantic island of Saint Helena, and Brussels and the surrounding provinces were now known as the Southern Netherlands, forming part of a new United Kingdom of the Netherlands and ruled by William I.

An opera house seems like an unlikely venue for a rebellion, but that is exactly what happened on 25 August 1830, when a riot broke out following the performance of *La Muette de Portici*, an extremely popular opera in the nineteenth century which was performed in Brussels as part of the celebrations marking King William's birthday and the fifteenth anniversary of his reign.[4] But the people of Brussels were in no mood to honour the king: the Catholics of the Southern Netherlands had always resented William's Protestantism and his repeated refusals to include them in the decision-making of the new kingdom,[5] and it was at the opera house that the tension boiled over. What would follow the opera performed on 25 August 1830 would have repercussions far into the future, setting the scene for Brussels to become capital of the European Union more than two centuries later.

Clues that trouble was brewing were present in the days prior to the king's birthday, with posters appearing on the streets of Brussels calling for revolution on the very day that *La Muette* would be performed at the opera. The authorities had therefore cancelled other celebrations scheduled for the 23rd and 24th but decided to maintain the opera itself, despite its heavy political overtones.[6]

La Muette de Portici, in English 'The Mute Girl of Portici', is a love story set in Naples in 1647 against the backdrop of a revolt to end Spanish rule. For the people of Brussels present on that August evening of 1830, as the opera unfolded before them, the comparisons with their own feelings towards William's rule were inescapable and the atmosphere became febrile. Sure enough, at the end of the second scene of the second act,[7] when the tenor sang 'Amour sacré

de la patrie' (Sacred Love of Country), he then shouted 'To arms!', prompting parts of the audience to rush out onto the street, joining a crowd that had gathered in the meanwhile.[8] Rioting ensued and the next day it spread to other major cities: Antwerp, Liège, Bruges, Ghent, and Leuven. There followed several weeks of high tension, ending in late September with four days of violent clashes between guerrillas and the troops loyal to King William. By 29 September, William had ordered his men to withdraw, leaving a power vacuum in their wake. In the absence of any recognised authority, a group of influential local men gathered at a highly symbolic location in order to establish a provisional government. The site where they assembled is just a short stroll away from the opera house and is where we will head now.

Leaving behind the tiles under which the remains of the Dominican monks were found, there's a narrow pedestrian street heading south-west, named after the old Dominican monastery. At the end of it, there are two of the oldest restaurants in Brussels, from which another narrow pedestrian street eventually leads straight into the most stunning of squares. Entering it, especially early in the morning when there are no tourists about, one is met with a feast for the eyes — it's hard to know where to look first.

You are standing in a rectangular and entirely cobbled market square surrounded by buildings three to four stories tall, many of them narrow, several with gold ornaments, and each one of them a listed monument. They are an opulent blend of baroque and gothic architecture representing mercantile guilds, as well as municipal and ducal power. The origins of the market date back to the twelfth century and

the façades of the buildings seen today date primarily from the seventeenth century. Known as the Grote Markt in Dutch and the Grand-Place in French, this grand square is a UNESCO World Heritage site of 'outstanding universal value', not just for its aesthetics but also because it symbolises the resilience and defiance of a population in the face of the destruction of war.[9] Indeed, in August 1695, 135 years before the opera house riot, during the Nine Years' War — one of the countless wars between Europeans, and which pitted France against several other European powers — troops sent by King Louis XIV of France bombarded and almost completely destroyed the square and surrounding neighbourhoods in just three days. This senseless attack on civilians and cultural heritage was widely condemned around Europe, and it is even said that Napoleon himself a century later declared that it was 'as barbaric as it was useless'.[10] Yet, within five years, the people of Brussels had rebuilt the whole square with stronger buildings and with just as much splendour, if not more.[11]

The only building that somehow managed to partially survive the 1695 bombardment was the gothic City Hall with its tall and slender bell tower, perhaps the best-known landmark of the square, or even of all of Brussels. It is in these municipal headquarters that, in 1830, after the retreat of King William's troops, the provisional government was established and, soon after (on 4 October), declared independence from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. Within days they had drafted a Constitution for the new nation-state which proclaimed Brussels as its capital city.[12] This was one of two crucial decisions that the provisional government made which, unbeknownst to them, would set Brussels on the path

to becoming capital of the European Union many generations later. The other crucial decision they made, as we shall see next, links directly back to Julius Caesar.

A jewel of a square like the Grand-Place doesn't appear out of nowhere. In truth, the Brussels of 1830 already had an extremely illustrious past and the city was no stranger to political power of the highest level. A first hint at this is found on the building just opposite City Hall, on the other side of the square. In French, this building is known as La Maison du Roi, 'the King's House'. Today, this neo-gothic building houses the Museum of the City of Brussels, but it acquired its name in the 1500s when its owner, the 16-year-old Charles of Habsburg, became King Charles I of Spain.[13] This was the same Charles who, a few years later, became Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, ruling over much of the European continent and the Spanish colonies in the Americas.[14] Today, visitors who enter the museum do so under a central archway flanked by two statues, one of them representing Charles V as a reminder of who had once owned the building. But the Maison du Roi was only an administrative building; the high-level political past of Brussels was forged elsewhere, at the edge of the city, and this can best be seen today by going underground.

Leaving the Grote Markt via the north-eastern exit, passing the souvenir shops, cafés, and hotels, make your way around the left side of the small fifteenth-century gothic-style Magdalena Church, itself almost completely destroyed by the 1695 bombardment, and continue up past the little park behind the church, cross the boulevard that runs north-south, and — despite the temptation to follow the tourists

to the wide open-air stairs to the right — head for the short pedestrian underpass below the building in front of you. As soon as you pass through it, turn around and look up. Just above you is a charming carillon clock covering the façade of the building, with a row of 11 bells under the clock and 12 figurines surrounding it, each the size of a young child and representing a historical figure of Belgian history. At five o'clock is Emperor Charles V, while at nine o'clock is one of the heroes of the 1830 independence revolution. If you time it right, you will hear the bells chime a tune at the top of the hour. When you are ready, you can then give in to the temptation of joining the tourists at the wide-open steps, just next to the Royal Library of Belgium, from which you can enjoy a great view of the spire of City Hall in the middle distance.

The final short stretch up the hill will take you past the amazing six-story steel and glass Art Nouveau building on the left hand side that was once an Old England department store, which today houses the Museum of Musical Instruments and at the top of which is a popular place to have a drink or a meal with a wonderful view of the city. And on the right-hand side is the Museum of Magritte, with an impressive collection of more than 200 paintings and personal items of the witty and reflective Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, perhaps most famous for *The Son of Man*, portraying a man in a grey overcoat and bowler hat with a bright green apple hovering in front of his face.

At this point, you are where Charles V spent much of his life and took some of his major decisions, but if he were able to travel in time to join you and contemplate the scene, he would recognise nothing: none of the neoclassical buildings

that surround you, nor the cobbled square, nor the Royal name of the square. However, if you were to guide the bewildered emperor to the building at the far corner of the square, around to the front side and through the entrance of what is known as the BELVUE Museum, and then down the stairs that take you back under the square, suddenly he might begin to glimpse the world that he knew. He might even become your guide. He might recognise and show you the cellars under the main part of his palace, the Palace of Brussels, better known today as the Palace of Coudenberg. He might point out to you the kitchen of the imposing gothic chapel built during his reign. He would certainly draw your attention to the storage rooms of the famous Aula Magna and describe to you, as if he were still there, the banquets and wedding feasts it hosted; the high-level diplomacy that was conducted there; and finally his very own abdication in 1555, in which he split the empire and handed over his immense power to his brother and his son, who would from then on be known, respectively, as Holy Roman Emperor Ferdinand I and King Philip II of Spain.

Charles's bewilderment would no doubt return as you reached the underground stretch of the medieval Isabelle Street that he had so often ridden along, and he might turn to you and wonder out loud why the street is no longer open to the sky and where the rest of his palace had gone. It would then be your turn to pick up the story, and you would have to break the news to him about how, on the night of 3 February 1731, his great-great-great granddaughter,[15] Archduchess Maria Elisabeth of Austria — who resided in the Palace of Brussels as Governor of the Austrian Netherlands — forgot

to extinguish the candles in her private apartments after a long and exhausting day, and how while she slept her room caught fire, quickly spreading and ultimately destroying the whole palace.[16] You would explain to him that the Court had to relocate to the nearby Palace of Nassau and that the ruins of his palace lay abandoned for 40 years, until the political will and the funding were found to redevelop the area into the neoclassical Royal Square that is now seen above ground.

It is well worth visiting the underground ruins of the Palace of Coudenberg — with or without a time-travelling emperor as your guide — because it is truly here that the high-level political past of Brussels began, long before Charles v was born. Indeed, Charles had inherited the palace from the Dukes of Burgundy, who had taken it over from the Dukes of Brabant. It was the latter who had decided in the thirteenth century to locate their political activity in Brussels,[17] only a couple of centuries after the city had been founded (probably as a lonely fort on marshland).[18] Thanks to the palace the Brabants built, the city of Brussels, whose name derives from the old Frankish word *Bruocsella*, meaning 'settlement in the marshes',[19] went in a matter of 500 years from being an uninhabited marshland to being the political centre of the Duchy of Brabant, then of the Duchy of Burgundy, and finally the political home of an emperor who ruled over two continents and an ocean.[20] This was thus the illustrious past that gave Brussels the stunning Grand-Place and the iconic City Hall, where, in September of 1830, the next chapter of this city's history was about to be written.

When a group of influential men gathered inside City Hall to establish a provisional government a few weeks after

the opera rebellion, the people of Brussels and surrounding provinces had belonged to two duchies; had been part of the Spanish Netherlands, then the Austrian Netherlands; had been annexed by France; and were now breaking away from the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. At this significant juncture, there were two major decisions that the provisional government had to make: the first was the name of this new independent country and the second was its capital city. There was never any doubt about either of them in the minds of the members of the provisional government: the capital city would be Brussels, and the country would be called Belgium.[21] Both of these choices would prove to be crucial two centuries later when the time came to find a location for the main institutions of the budding European Union. Selecting Brussels as the capital of the new state called Belgium seemed very natural considering the city's history, but where did the country's new name come from and how could the provisional government be so certain it would be widely accepted by the population, given the territories they had belonged to in the previous thousand years? The answer can be found just around the corner from the ruins of the Coudenberg Palace, retracing our steps back past the Magritte Museum and the Museum of Musical Instruments.

Approaching the Royal Library of Belgium is a very underwhelming experience after having visited the Grote Markt and the Royal Square. The contrast couldn't be greater between, on the one hand, the opulence of the buildings that surround the City Hall, and on the other hand, the blandness of the 1950s building that houses Belgium's national library. But just as one should never judge a book by its cover, the

true value of the Royal Library lies in the treasure that it protects and preserves inside: one of the largest collections of manuscripts in the world, including one of the most prestigious medieval collections, comprising 300 antique manuscripts that had once belonged to the Dukes of Burgundy, second owners of the Palace of Brussels. Over more than a century, the Burgundian collection had reached nearly 1,000 manuscripts, but fires and wartime pillaging reduced it to a third of that.[22]

It's not often that upon entering a 1950s building you discover a sixteenth century chapel inside. Yet that is what happens inside the Royal Library. The chapel once belonged to the Palace of Nassau, where the Court relocated after the Palace of Brussels burnt down in 1731. The Palace of Nassau has since been replaced by the Palace of Charles Lorraine, but its chapel was preserved, with the Royal Library built around it. Today, the chapel serves as part of the museum of the Burgundian manuscripts, which has interactive displays and exquisite masterpieces of colour and precision plunging you into Europe's medieval past.

One manuscript you will not see, because it is kept deep inside the Library's archives, is MS 17937, which came not via the collection of the Dukes of Burgundy but via the collection of a monastery near the Flemish city of Leuven.[23] Bound in a light brown leather, the manuscript was written in the late fifteenth century, and it is a full-text copy of a much older work: the *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* by Julius Caesar.[24] Known in English as the *Commentaries on the Gallic War*, and written around the year 50 B.C., it is Caesar's first-hand account of his nine years fighting to conquer the Celtic

and Germanic peoples of the geographic area the Romans called Gaul. Crucially, its opening lines are:

> All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in ours Gauls, the third. All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws. The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae. Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest'.[25]

Then, in another part of those writings, Caesar orders Lucius Plancus 'to proceed quickly from Belgium to the Carnutes'[26]. The name of Belgium is thus a Roman invention, and following Caesar's descriptions of this part of the world, his successor Emperor Augustus divided up Gaul in 27 B.C. into three territories, one of which he called Gallia Belgica. This territory would exist as a political entity for around five centuries before eventually disappearing and lying dormant for 1,000 years. During that post-Belgica millennium, the city of Brussels was founded and gradually grew in economic and political importance, first under the leadership of the Dukes of Brabant and then of the Dukes of Burgundy, who in the fifteenth century, seeking ancient legitimacy, would revive the terms 'Belgium' and 'Belgica' and use them as synonyms for their whole territory.[27] By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during and after the reign of Charles v, the Northern Netherlands and the Southern Netherlands were referred to in Latin texts and maps as 'Belgium Foederatum' and 'Belgium Regia', respectively.[28] Then, in 1790, shortly before

France annexed these territories, the Southern Netherlands briefly won independence from the Austrian Habsburg Empire and declared themselves the United States of Belgium. Although their independence lasted only 12 months, and the Habsburgs quickly took back control, the events had solidified a new identity amongst the inhabitants of these southern provinces: Belgianness.[29] So when 40 years later, in September 1830, the provisional government met in City Hall, there was never any doubt that Brussels would be the capital city, and that the new country would be called Belgium. And thus, two of the key conditions were set for this city to become the EU's capital more than two centuries later. But these factors only became relevant in the twentieth century, after Europe experienced depths of inhumanity on a scale never before seen, with two world wars and state-organised mass genocide — primarily of Jews but also of Roma,[30] as well as people with disabilities, gay men, Jehovah's Witnesses, and political opponents — leading to widespread revulsion, a post-war cry of 'Never again!', and a concerted effort to make war in Europe an impossibility by bringing European nations together in one common economic and legal community.

Even so, those conditions that favoured Brussels as the Union's capital came into play accidentally. In fact, it was only after four other cities had nearly become capital of the budding European Union, on the one hand, and the Belgian government itself had for many years controversially preferred the Belgian city of Liège, on the other. That Belgium should shun its own capital city in the competition to host the institutions of the emerging European Union was, to a great extent, due to the secret marriage of the Belgian king during World War II.



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The charming carillon clock on the Mont des Arts esplanade of Brussels. The figurine at 5 o'clock represents Charles V.

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A view of the Royal Square of Brussels. The building on the left has an inscription in French and Dutch above the doorway indicating 'The Palace of Charles V'. The actual palace was destroyed by fire in 1731. Underneath today's building one can walk on part of the medieval Isabelle Street that Charles V himself would have strolled along.

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The sixteenth-century chapel around which Belgium's Royal Library was built can just be seen on the other side of the gate. In the distance is the spire of the Brussels City Hall, where Belgium's independence was declared in 1830.




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CHAPTER 3

The Need for a Union

It all started with a personal tragedy that shocked the world. The main headline on the front page of the *New York Times* on 30 August 1935 said it all: 'Young Queen Astrid Killed as King's Car Hits a Tree; Léopold Slightly Injured — Belgian ruler at the wheel, loses control of auto in Switzerland as he glances at map. Three children not told of loss of mother.'[1]

And thus, a young family was destroyed by a moment's distraction, and a young nation became heartbroken by the loss of their queen. King Léopold III had acceded to the throne the year before and had quickly impressed the Belgian population. The same *New York Times* correspondent wrote about the king that 'during the eighteen months since he succeeded his father he has repeatedly shown himself an apt pupil in the art of governing democratically… he has shown a clear judgement of events and men and he has become respected as well as loved.' For the next five years, the

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The independence of Belgium in 1830 was declared in Brussels City Hall. This is a view of its Gothic Hall.

widower king would remain popular, but dark clouds were again gathering over Europe, driven by Adolf Hitler's growing militarism and aggression; when he unleashed his ferocious storm on the whole of Europe, the Belgian people's positive feeling towards Léopold III dramatically and swiftly changed. What he did and failed to do between 1940 and 1944 would ruin the king's reputation forever, and the animosity towards him would reach such an intense and perilous climax just after the war that it would have a direct influence on the discussions about the capital of the European Union.

In the 1930s, any discussion about a capital for the Union was, of course, irrelevant. What was clearly on the horizon as the decade advanced was another devastating war, but the idea of European unity, which had been regularly raised over the previous two centuries,[2] was already firmly on the table. On 15 November 1922, Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi, the multilingual son of an Austrian diplomat, who had been raised in the Czech town of Poběžovice, wrote what today we would call an op-ed calling for a politically, economically, and militarily united Europe. His article 'Pan-Europa — a proposal' was published in the *Vossische Zeitung*, one of the major German newspapers at the time, and two days later in the Vienna-based *Neue Freie Presse*.[3] Support for Coudenhove's proposal was immediate and came from all walks of life, including high-ranking political leaders. The celebrated physicist Albert Einstein wrote about it in April 1925: 'Not only are idealistic thinkers professing it, but also political personalities, as can be gathered from the example of various speeches by the French prime minister. This idea must govern Europe's future, and it will govern it and prepare the way

to the unification of Pan-Europe, if the continent does not want to dig its own grave'.[4] Only a few months earlier, Einstein had been even more explicit in private correspondence: 'One need not rack one's brains about whether the United States of Europe is realistically possible: They *must* be materialised, if Europe wants to uphold its importance somewhat and its abundant human resources' (emphasis original).[5] By 1926, the first Pan-Europa Congress took place in Vienna with 2,000 participants from 24 nations.[6] Coudenhove was elected president and one year later, France's foreign minister and elder statesman Aristide Briand became honorary president. On 5 September 1929, representing France at the General Assembly of the League of Nations in Geneva, Briand gave a now famous speech in which he proposed 'a kind of federal link' between European nations. The League tasked him with drafting a proposal and in May 1930 the French government submitted to the European members of the League of Nations a *Memorandum on the Organisation of a System of European Federal Union*, which included a proposal for a common market and a customs union.[7] With the demise of Briand in 1932 and the arrival to power of Hitler in 1933, the proposal was dead — still, the idea of European unity remained very much alive as the prospect of another catastrophic war in Europe increased, building up during the Spanish civil war as the European powers competed to influence its outcome,[8] and even more so as the Second World War became imminent. In Britain, on the eve of war, the leader of the opposition Clement Attlee declared that 'Europe must federate or perish'.[9] Faced with the immediate emergency of stopping the Nazi rot at the heart of Europe, these ideas would

inevitably stay in the drawer but would begin to re-emerge halfway through the war. Before then, however, Europe would be subjected to hell, and life for many — including in Brussels — would slow down and become a perilous existence of survival, one day at a time.

On 25 May 1940, 15 days after Hitler invaded Belgium, when it became clear that Belgian forces could no longer contain the onslaught and with German forces already in the city of Brussels,[10] the Belgian government advised King Léopold III to flee with them to France and become the symbol of the resistance. The king refused, declaring that, as commander in chief, his place was with the troops — whatever might happen to them – and he ordered a message to be sent out to all the troops telling them to fight on and that he would suffer the same fate that they would.[11] Intense fighting continued for three more days but the Belgian forces were overwhelmed by air and land, and Léopold finally communicated Belgium's unconditional surrender to the Nazi invaders, who immediately confined him to the royal residence in the Laeken district of Brussels, under constant watch by Nazi troops. What for some was a noble act of solidarity with his troops was for others an act of treason. Speaking on Radio Paris, the Belgian prime minister publicly denounced the monarch: 'Ignoring the formal and unanimous advice of the government, the King has just opened separate negotiations and is dealing with the enemy. The Belgian nation will be astonished. But the fault of one man cannot be imputed to the whole Nation.'[12] In fact, soon after Belgium was invaded, Léopold III had reached the conclusion that everything was lost and that much of Europe would be under Nazi rule

for many years to come, whereas the Belgian government was still hopeful that, as with the First World War, the Allies would eventually prevail.[13] The British and French governments and media were incensed and openly discredited the king — though more recent accounts, including one from the respected American author–historian Lynne Olson, argue that King Léopold became a convenient scapegoat for their own mistakes.[14] Either way, the fact is that days after the capitulation, the Belgian parliament-in-exile declared the king a prisoner of war and therefore unable to rule.[15] Among the Belgian population the views were much more divided, and the king still enjoyed substantial popularity considering that he had chosen the noble path of being a prisoner like his troops.[16] For Léopold, however, the irreparable break with his government and the international repudiation he received seriously dented his reputation.

The immediate consequences of the capitulation in May 1940 were, however, far more grave and sinister than a simple matter of damaged royal reputation, for it opened the door to what would become, in many ways, the darkest and cruellest period in the short history of Belgium as a nation-state, and probably the darkest and cruellest in the thousand-year history of its capital city. What happened in the streets of Brussels in the 1940s is perhaps less well known than other events of the Second World War, but it's no less dramatic — and in truth, it isn't possible to fully understand this city's relationship with the European Union, or indeed the European Union itself, without knowing what happened to individuals like the teenager Hélène Zylberszac of the Anderlecht district of Brussels, who managed to jump off the train that was

taking her (and more than one thousand other people) to the Auschwitz extermination camp; or the lawyer Albert Jonnart, who succeeded in hiding the Jewish boy Ralph Mayer until they were denounced and the Gestapo showed up at 5 a.m.; or the eminent professor of mathematics Alfred Errera, who appealed to King Léopold III seeking royal protection after the first anti-Jewish measures were introduced in Belgium; or Baron Jean de Sélys-Longchamps, a Belgian fighter pilot in the British Royal Air Force, who disobeyed his commanding officers and launched one of the most daring solo air attacks of the war, taking revenge on the Gestapo right in the heart of occupied Brussels. Five stories with different outcomes but which together tell one story: that of resistance. Resistance to subjugation and inhumanity, resistance to oppression and tyranny, resistance to the dehumanisation of others, resistance to organised intolerance, to xenophobia, to racism, and to injustice. And in many ways, European integration is itself an act of resistance: against the worst tribal instincts of human beings.

The battles against the Nazi occupiers and their many enablers in Belgium have left scars that are still visible in the streets of Brussels. Reliving these personal struggles and their narrow escapes or tragic ends, even if only briefly, is essential to understand what the Union's founders were aiming to achieve — before the war had yet ended — in their effort to rebuild a continent in a new and bold way that would forever prevent such ruin as it had been brought to in the 1940s.

Already before the capitulation of Belgian forces, Hitler's army commanders in charge of the occupation threatened the population with the 'most severe' punishments for any

hostile acts against the invading army, even if they were carried out by isolated individuals.[17] A campaign of Nazi intimidation had thus begun and would steadily escalate from then on. With full control of the country, the Nazi forces immediately placed King Léopold under house arrest and constant watch at his royal residence, and within weeks Hitler sought to undermine Belgian unity using psychological warfare: he gave orders to free the Flemish prisoners of war while keeping more than 70,000 Walloon troops in prisoner camps in Germany.[18] The plight of these soldiers, all of them sons, brothers, and friends of someone back home, would be a continual source of anxiety for millions of Belgians throughout the war and occupation. The Nazis swiftly stamped their mark in a visible way, especially in Brussels, by taking over various buildings and raising the swastika flag. The military commanders in charge of the occupation took offices in and around the Royal Square, while the Gestapo — the Nazi police — chose premises near the Free University of Brussels, and the Luftwaffe air force confiscated a luxury apartment complex called the Résidence Palace, forcibly evicting the residents and installing its officers there.[19] Today the Résidence Palace plays an important role in European democracy as it hosts the International Press Centre and is at the heart of the European Quarter, just across the street from the European Commission.

Back in 1940, it was from these locations that the Nazis rolled out their sinister plans. On 10 October a chilling meeting took place. With the government in exile and the king under house arrest, the occupier summoned the most senior civil servant and ordered the Belgian administration to begin

registering a whole group of people separately from the rest of the population, banning them from public employment and forcing them to publicly declare their businesses. It didn't matter how law-abiding they might be, or whether they were old or young, female or male; nor did it matter what talents, dreams, or aspirations they might have. It didn't even matter what these people actually believed in. All that mattered to the diabolically obsessed Nazi occupier was the religious identity that had been passed down to these people by their ancestors. They were to be removed from the economy and public affairs simply because they were Jewish.[20]

Like many other European countries at the time, Belgian society was not devoid of antisemitic hatred, but the Belgian state had opened its doors to 25,000 Jews who had fled persecution in Germany and Austria throughout the 1930s and in doing so afforded them the protection of a Belgian constitution that guaranteed fundamental freedoms.[21] These conflicting forces — the antisemitism in some parts of Belgian society versus the values of the constitution reigning over the country — would play out against each other in the coming years in occupied Belgium with, on the one hand, individual and collective acts of heroism saving many innocent lives, but on the other hand, collaboration and indifference by many others, sending thousands to their horrific extermination. The future EU capital city, Brussels, would be at the heart of this conflict taking place inside Nazi-occupied Belgium, and it would bear the resulting scars right up to the present day.

On that Thursday, 10 October 1940, at the same time that the Nazis were instructing the Belgian administration to

initiate the systematic marginalisation of other human beings, Alfred Errera was thinking about the next mathematics lecture he would give his students at the Free University of Brussels, while the lawyer Albert Jonnart was resolving some administrative matters for a few of his clients, the teenagers Ralph Mayer and Hélène Zylberszac were attending their respective schools at opposite ends of Brussels, and Jean de Sélys-Longchamps was retraining with the Royal Air Force (RAF) in England to become one of their foreign fighter pilots in the hope of one day helping to liberate Belgium and his home town of Brussels. All were worried about what the Nazi occupation of Belgium might mean, but none could imagine how dramatically and swiftly their lives would change.

At that same moment, 1,250 km east of Brussels in occupied Poland, hundreds of Polish political prisoners were being held by the Nazis in World War I artillery barracks. The barracks had been designated a concentration camp after a personal inspection in April 1940 by the commander of the Nazi SS, Heinrich Himmler.[22] By the end of November, 40 of those prisoners would be executed by firing squad.[23] As horrendous as that atrocity was, it would soon be utterly dwarfed by the industrial-scale murderous plans the Nazis were rapidly developing for the camp, located in the Polish town of Oświęcim (pronounced 'os-vee-chim'). This town, known in German as Auschwitz, and which would become forever associated with genocide, was in the autumn of 1940 still a place unheard of by the rest of the world — including, of course, the people of Brussels.

Around the same time as the first executions at Auschwitz, and a few weeks after the first anti-Jewish measures were

passed in Belgium, Alfred Errera, the eminent mathematics professor who was also an elected local councillor in the Brussels suburb of Uccle as well as a decorated veteran of the First World War, wrote to King Léopold III. He explained to the king that the anti-Jewish measures were unconstitutional, and he reminded Léopold of how much he, Errera, had contributed to Belgium's security, having designed an effective system to detect enemy artillery during World War I and later teaching regularly at the Military Academy. Making a request that reveals how the concept of national identity had become so shockingly exclusionary at that time, he pleaded with the king to be considered a Belgian rather than a Jew.[24]

A few weeks later, Errera was received in person by the king's chief of staff, but for the vast majority of the Jewish population, the king was so far removed that they would not even think of appealing to him. Many of them feared that failing to sign up to the new register for Jews would give the occupying Nazis an additional excuse to persecute them, and though fearful of what the consequences might be by officially declaring their Jewish identity, they registered in the hope that they would avoid administrative fines, or worse.

And so, on 23 November, the Polish couple Hersz-David Zylberszac and Sara Sliwka, and their Brussels-born children Hélène (13) and Arthur (4), walked into the town hall of the Anderlecht district of Brussels to inform a local official that they were Jewish.[25] This was no mere administrative procedure, and the Zylberszacs must have been feeling a mixture of trepidation and disgust. After two decades living peacefully in Belgium — Hersz-David working as a textile sales

representative, whose children knew no other home than Brussels — and having observed the rise of the Nazis and the increasing violence against Jews in neighbouring Germany, going to the town hall to officially declare their Jewish identity to a public administration in Nazi-occupied Belgium must have been a terrifying step to take. One that they would have thought long and hard about, weighing up the risks of complying against the risks of not doing so.

Days later, on 16 December 1940, on the other side of Brussels, Erich Mayer, client of the lawyer Albert Jonnart, took his wife Edith and son Ralph to their local town hall to do the same.[26] The Mayers were a German family, owners of a successful straw-hat company in Cologne, who realised as soon as Hitler came to power that attitudes towards Jews in Germany would become increasingly hostile and that they would be safer in another country. They had often been on holiday in Belgium, and Erich had good business contacts in Brussels, but it took him several years to move his family from Cologne, the first major opportunity coming in September 1935 when the respected Jesuit College Saint-Michel in Brussels agreed to take on the Mayers' 11-year-old son Ralph as a boarder, agreeing also to keep his Jewish identity a secret.[27] A few more years passed, Hitler's Third Reich continued whipping up antisemitic hatred, and then, before Erich had everything in place to move smoothly to Brussels with his wife, parents, and in-laws, the events of 1938 would force them to flee Germany: in January that year, the city of Cologne expropriated the Mayers' hat company as part of the Nazi policy to expel Jews from the German economy, and months later on the night of 9 to 10 November came the

confirmation that for a whole group of German citizens their country was no longer a safe place to be.[28] That night became known as the *Kristallnacht*, the Night of Broken Glass, during which Nazi activists and sympathisers, acting on the obsessive hatred they had allowed to grow inside themselves with the often frenzied and sometimes pernicious encouragement of the Nazi leadership, attacked and ransacked Jewish businesses, synagogues, homes, and schools, killing hundreds of Germans who had Jewish heritage. It didn't matter that those Jews might have been present in Germany for more generations than some of the attackers; or how they contributed to economic, social, and cultural life; or even that they had fought for Germany in previous wars. An ideology based on the supremacy of one group of people and the hatred of another group of people had taken control of a powerful European nation. Having tried in vain to convince their respective ageing parents to flee with them, Erich and Edith eventually headed by taxi towards the Belgian border — trains being too unsafe — only to be stopped along the way by the Gestapo and forced to walk, 'because German taxis were not meant for Jews'.[29] After seven hours' walking in the November cold, they crossed into Belgium and made their way safely by train to Brussels. Happily reunited with Ralph, who was now 14, they moved in together in an apartment block at number 10 Square Vergote, within walking distance of Ralph's Saint-Michel school and, fatefully, only 500 m away from Erich's lawyer Albert Jonnart.[30] But their newfound peace in Brussels would last only a little more than a year, until the invasion of Belgium, after which each of those 500 m separating their house from the Jonnarts would, gradually

and increasingly, be witness to one of the most dramatic and poignant stories of occupied Brussels. One which is still remembered in today's EU capital city.

Just three days after the Mayers showed up at their local authority to declare their Jewish identity as required by the Nazi occupiers, Professor Errera made his way to the Royal Palace. His letter appealing to King Léopold III had been noticed.[31] There is no record of what transpired during the meeting and whether he was helped by the King, but what is known is that by the first day of Hanukkah, the Jewish Festival of Lights, which in that year of 1940 coincided with Christmas Eve, the professor had had to resign as local councillor, and the darkness that had fallen upon Germany was beginning to fall upon Belgium. It was a darkness the likes of which had never before been experienced by humanity, even though it was fuelled by a human trait as old as humanity itself, and it was a darkness that on that Christmas Eve 1940 was about to reveal who amongst the Christian population of Belgium would have the conviction and the courage to fulfil the commandment of Jesus Christ that 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'.

The year 1941 would prove decisive for King Léopold III and would seal the fate of his reign, even though on a personal level he would end the year a happy man. What nobody could imagine as the darkness fell upon Belgium was how events in 1941 would play a major part in the post-war negotiations to decide the capital of the nascent European Union.

Having pleaded throughout 1940 to meet with Adolf Hitler, King Léopold was finally granted his request on 19 November of that year.[32] The king requested that Walloon

prisoners of war be liberated and allowed to return home as was happening with the Flemish troops. But, rather humiliatingly for Léopold, Hitler ignored the request, opting instead (and not surprisingly) to prolong his psychological warfare on Belgians. Thus, 1941 began with Walloon troops still held in captivity in Germany while Flemish soldiers continued to be released, such that by spring there were only Walloon prisoners of war left in Germany, including French-speaking soldiers from Brussels.[33] The agony for the families was only softened by the conviction that their king was doing all he could to bring the troops back, and in the knowledge that even though his house arrest in the Royal Palace was one of luxury compared with the suffering experienced by the prisoners of war, Léopold, too, had been deprived of liberty.

The Belgian resistance had started off timidly but grew stronger as the Nazi repression intensified and the Allied forces showed their determination to fight back. When February 1941 came, it was clear that Professor Errera's meeting with the King's chief of staff the previous December had yielded no results. He was forced to resign his position as a university professor as part of the anti-Jewish measures of the Nazi occupiers.[34] Years later, the reason for King Léopold's inaction would be revealed, but at that time, only the royal secretary was aware of it.

By this phase of the occupation, the free press that Belgians had previously enjoyed were either gone or in the hands of the occupier and were therefore no more than Nazi propaganda sheets, driving many, including the lawyer Albert Jonnart and his family, to secretly and illegally tune into *Radio Londres*, the BBC broadcasts in French from London.[35]

Just as they had done in Germany, the Nazi leaders poisoned parts of Belgian society with their ideology of hatred, and on 14 April, over 100 Nazi sympathisers in the Belgian city of Antwerp set fire to two synagogues and smashed nearly 200 Jewish-owned shop windows.[36] For Erich and Edith Mayer, peacefully settled in Brussels, the haunting memories of their last night in Cologne, the Kristallnacht of November 1938, came rushing back, simultaneously intensifying the feeling that danger was approaching. And this time, with anti-Jewish repression reaching a climax and Belgian borders firmly under Nazi control, fleeing to another country was no longer an option. All they could do was to try to stay as invisible as possible. But that would become increasingly difficult as Hitler's machinery of madness was ratcheted up. In June 1941, far away in Auschwitz, the first mass murders by gas took place, of weak and sick prisoners, to be followed later in the summer by mass gassing of Soviet prisoners of war and the construction of other gas chambers.[37] But this was still largely unknown by the rest of the world.

In July, Erich, Edith, and Ralph Mayer were summoned to their local authority,[38] along with others who had signed up to the Jewish register, to have their ID cards stamped with a 'J', clearly in preparation to deny them public services, or worse. Sure enough, by the end of the year, the Nazi occupiers sent the clearest message yet that the Jewish population was to have no future in Belgium: they banned all Jewish students and pupils from universities and schools.[39] For Ralph Mayer, the ban had no immediate consequence as his identity had been kept secret, but it was a secret that was becoming more and more dangerous to keep. One of those who knew the

secret was his classmate Pierre, son of Erich Mayer's lawyer Albert Jonnart.[40]

In the meantime, the Belgian resistance had been growing and getting stronger, with one group, the Independent Front, particularly active in Brussels, helping those in hiding or supporting the families of arrested resistance fighters, as well as publishing dozens of clandestine newspapers.[41] And as for the more than 70,000 Walloon prisoners of war still in Germany, there had been no progress. Wives and mothers had organised demonstrations calling for their return and were starting to come together in larger pressure groups.[42]

Suddenly, in the midst of all of this bewildering turmoil, cruel repression, and terrifying anxiety, came news from the Royal Palace that would shock half the nation. On Sunday, 7 December, Catholic priests throughout Belgium were instructed to read out at mass a pastoral letter from Cardinal Van Roey informing churchgoers that King Léopold III had remarried; that his new wife was Lilian Baels, daughter of a former government minister from Flanders; and that the religious ceremony had, in fact, taken place three months earlier on 11 September.[43]

Who could begrudge the king the right to remarry after losing his first wife in that tragic car accident in Switzerland? Yet there was a lot in this announcement that many Belgians, especially in Brussels and Wallonia, found wrong: most importantly, that while Léopold III was supposedly showing solidarity with the prisoners of war still held in Germany ('your fate will be my fate' he had said when he wrote to his troops in May 1940 to explain why he wasn't following his government into exile), it turned out that his house arrest

had been no such thing, and was instead an opportunity to start a months-long romance in secret. The couple had even spent a month on a honeymoon in Austria, with Hitler's permission, though this was not disclosed at the time. To make matters worse, the king had not even complied with Belgian law, which required the civil marriage to precede the religious ceremony.[44] After the king's falling out with his government at the time of the Nazi invasion; his questionable desire to meet Hitler in the months that followed; his failure to secure the return of the prisoners of war; and his silence and inaction over the anti-Jewish repression, any benefit of the doubt that many Belgians had still been willing to give him completely vanished once they learnt of his secret marriage, the irregularity of the wedding procedure, and what the marriage revealed of the life he had been leading since the occupation. The monarch's reputation was irreparably damaged amongst millions of Belgians, and the resentment against him would continue to build throughout the remainder of the war and would explode into a full constitutional crisis threatening the stability of Belgium and directly affecting the post-war negotiations for the capital of the emerging European Union. But that was still far off in the future; a future that at that moment seemed unlikely and was one which too many would never get to see.

Exactly one week after the royal marriage had been announced, the 14th of December marked the beginning of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights, which would end on Monday the 22nd. Any Jews wanting to commemorate it would have had very little to celebrate in such ominous times as the end of 1941, and they would have had to do so in hiding.

And as for Belgian Christians, while free to celebrate Christmas, millions of them resented the occupation, the swastikas, the Gestapo's intimidations, the treasonous collaborators and silent sympathisers, the lack of free press, and, of course, their missing troops. The evil that had been forcibly brought onto Belgium was about to get even darker and very rapidly so. But equally, 1942 would see the emergence of some astonishing acts of courage, humanity, and hope.

On 20 January 1942, at a luxury mansion at Wannsee, in the outskirts of Berlin, Nazi leaders of the highest level gathered to implement a decision taken months earlier by Hitler: the so-called 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question' – in other words, the systematic mass extermination of Europe's Jews. The minutes of that meeting reveal that although the Nazis tried to couch their intentions in euphemistic language, the objective was brutally and horrifically clear: 'The aim of [forcing Jews to emigrate had been] to purge German living space of Jews by legal means…'[45] But this objective having failed, 'emigration has now been replaced by evacuation of Jews to the East'. The minutes then proceed to quantify the scale of the planned genocide: 'In connection with this final solution of the Jewish question, roughly eleven million Jews will have to be taken into consideration.' And the document then goes on to outline some chilling specifics of the procedure to follow: 'In the course of the final solution… Jews capable of working will be dispatched… to build roads, and in the process a large number of them will undoubtedly drop out by way of natural reduction.' The degree of cold-blooded callousness in those few words is repugnant — those who could work would be deliberately worked to death, leaving

quite clear what fate awaited those who could not work: 'In the course of the practical implementation of the final solution, Europe will be combed through from West to East… The evacuated Jews will first be taken, group after group, to so-called transit ghettos from where they will be transported further to the East.' And just to ensure that Jews would be eradicated from Europe, the Nazis addressed the matter of those who were half Jewish and who, depending on the criteria, would be spared deportation: 'Extensive use must be made of sterilisation, because once the Mischling [person having one Jewish parent] faces evacuation or sterilisation, he will prefer to be sterilised. [To make things easier, it is] suggested forced sterilisation be embarked upon.' On that 20 January, the world was oblivious to the horror that was in preparation. For most, the war was still just about expelling the occupiers and recovering freedom for their country, and that included the Belgians training with the Royal Air Force in Britain.

Only a few days after the Wannsee Conference, the Belgian pilot flying with Britain's Royal Air Force, the 29-year-old Baron Jean de Sélys-Longchamps, sat down at his desk to write a letter. He had been an RAF pilot for a year and had already impressed his commanding officers with his skill in the air. The letter he was about to write required a different kind of skill. It was addressed to the uncle of a fellow Belgian pilot, Jean Offenberg, and he wrote: 'I do not know if you know your nephew well. Jean was the greatest, the most magnificent of us[…] I cannot explain to you all Jean meant to us. He was a symbol of integrity, a permanent example, an inexhaustible hope in the future, in our future, in the future of our country, in our King and all that we hold dear.'[46]

Also Belgian, Jean Offenberg had been training another pilot in the air on 22 January over Digby airfield, not far from Nottingham. For two hours the two Spitfires practised in the sky, and eventually, the 25-year-old Offenberg called over the radio to his pupil: 'One more figure and we'll call it a day — you are doing well'. A third pilot, already in the air, decided to join the manoeuvres but ended up colliding with Offenberg, and both planes plummeted to the ground, killing the pilots instantly. Listening clandestinely in Brussels to a BBC radio broadcast two days after the accident, Offenberg's mother collapsed upon hearing the news and lost her sight from the shock.[47]

Offenberg himself had once written in his diary after the death of another fellow pilot that it was one of the most painful losses of his life, considering as he did the other pilot to be his family in England, being that they were far away from their real families.[48] For Jean de Sélys, writing that letter to Offenberg's uncle would have undoubtedly brought back memories of his own family suffering the Nazi occupation in Belgium, and of his travails in reaching England after Belgium's capitulation, escaping through France and Dunkirk to England, returning to France to help set up a Belgian flying squadron, being arrested and escaping again, and eventually arriving in England via Spain and joining the RAF.[49] Older than most other pilots, and battle-hardened, he was in no way deterred by the senseless and tragic accident that had killed Offenberg. If anything, his determination to help liberate Belgium, assist the Allies in winning the war, and be reunited with his parents and siblings in Brussels only further increased throughout 1942. What de Selys did not know

at the time of writing those words to Offenberg's uncle was that he himself was exactly a year away from accomplishing the most astonishing feat over the skies of Brussels of the whole war.

In Belgium, the resistance was getting stronger and more organised with each month that passed, and it increasingly targeted those who collaborated with the occupier. On 10 March 1942, more than 600 Belgian collaborators left the Brussels Grand-Place and marched through the city centre on their way to fight for the Nazis on the Eastern European Front. As they entered Anspach Boulevard near the stock exchange, an explosion ripped through the crowds that had gathered, injuring ten people, four of them seriously.[50] Further up the street, at Rogier Square, sticks of dynamite were discovered in a rubbish bin. Earlier that day, the office of one of Belgium's leading collaborators had been attacked in the same way. Similar assaults were carried out elsewhere in Belgium, targeting infrastructure and other collaborators. And so, faced with a growing resistance movement, the Nazi occupiers ratcheted up the repression throughout 1942, ordering mass arrests.[51]

In the meantime, the Nazis took their next major step to cornering the Jews in Belgium. On 27 May, they introduced their policy of publicly marking out all Jews, instructing them to wear a yellow Star of David bearing a 'J' as an identifying badge on the left-hand side of their chest. Four months after the Final Solution conference in Wannsee, the Nazi occupiers had plans well underway to carry it out in Belgium. They had identified the Dossin military barracks in Mechelen, a city with a well-developed railway network located halfway

between Brussels and Antwerp, the two cities with the largest Jewish populations in Belgium. Key to their plan was to get the deportees to believe that they were being taken to carry out productive work in another part of Europe. And for that they relied on the assistance of the new Association of Jews in Belgium (AJB), set up by the Nazis and run by Belgian Jews with the mission of acting as a liaison between the occupier and the Jewish population. The role played by the AJB throughout the war has since been the subject of much controversy, their leaders being accused of naïveté, at best, and active collaboration, at worst.[52] While it is safe to say that they were unaware of the extermination plan, and that many of their leaders thought they were helping to soften the treatment of Jews, there is also evidence that the president of the association was selfishly indifferent to the treatment of non-Belgian Jews, believing this approach would protect him and his family.[53] Either way, for the Nazis, the AJB was a useful instrument that they manipulated to lull thousands of Jews into a false sense of security, which made it easier for them to deliver the Final Solution in Belgium. A crucial part of this strategy involved protecting the AJB leadership and staff from deportation, and so Jews holding Belgian citizenship were told they would not be summoned 'to go work in the East'. But at the end of the spring of 1942, the Nazi occupiers were still waiting for the go-ahead to begin the deportations. The only clear instruction they had received was to require the Jewish population to wear the yellow star.

Once again, the Zylberszacs — the Polish couple who had been living peacefully in Belgium for two decades, with children born in Brussels — were confronted with the awful

choice between exercising their right to freedom and ignoring the new edict at the risk of being arrested, or complying with the law in the hope of avoiding problems but making themselves targets for discrimination, public humiliations, or worse. A black-and-white photograph, taken in the summer of 1942, shows a 15-year-old girl walking down a busy sunlit street in central Brussels holding the hand of her 6-year-old brother, both smiling for the camera.[54] What would otherwise have been a charming family keepsake is shocking by what stands out as strongly as the presence of the two children: the star sewn onto Hélène Zylberszac's dress, her little brother Arthur having been spared the ignominy because of his age. The Zylberszacs had evidently opted to comply, thus trying to avoid giving the authorities any reason to sanction them.

Around the same time, they received some reassuring news: a court in Brussels confirmed that on her 16th birthday, Hélène would become a Belgian citizen. Just half a year more and she would be exempt from deportation to the East.[55]

While previous anti-Jewish measures had been met with circumspection or indifference by most non-Jewish Belgians, the new decree imposing the yellow star represented a form of public 'finger-pointing' that caused many to declare their indignation and solidarity with the Jewish population.[56]

Queen Elizabeth, mother of King Léopold III and personal friend of the Jewish physicist Albert Einstein,[57] who had, contrary to her son, already intervened personally to help a number of Jews, was photographed wearing a brooch resembling a star and she challenged the Nazis to execute her if they didn't like her sign of solidarity.[58]

The acting mayor of Brussels refused to distribute the yellow stars to the Jewish population on the grounds that it was an attack on human dignity. This forced the Nazis to turn to the AJB to distribute them in the capital.[59]

One of the most important clandestine newspapers, *La Libre Belgique* (The Free Belgium), reacted with a lengthy and scathing editorial against the Nazis' 'monstrous brutality' and called on all Belgians to go out of their way to offer a friendly greeting to any Jew they crossed on the street wearing the badge.[60]

As welcome as that show of solidarity was from a leading resistance newspaper, at that moment in time the editorialist, like most of the rest of the world, had never heard of a place called Auschwitz nor of the 'Final Solution' that the Nazis had been planning, and was naïvely unaware that much more than friendly greetings would be needed to help the Jews.

If Erich and Edith Mayer had hoped their son Ralph could finish the school year with his secret intact, their hopes were now dashed. Ralph couldn't show up at school wearing the yellow badge: with Jewish pupils having been banned from the educational system months earlier, doing so would put himself and the school's headmaster in danger for the secret they had been keeping.

Thus, within days, in June 1942, Erich was calling at the home of his lawyer, Albert Jonnart, just 500 m from his own home on Square Vergote. The Mayer family needed help from someone they could trust, and their lawyer, an elected member of the local municipal council, was one such person. As he made his way to Albert's house, Erich must have been going over one more time in his head what he was going

to say and how, because what he was about to request was highly dangerous for all those involved.

How does one begin asking someone else to put their life, and the lives of their whole family, at risk for one's sake? Imagine yourself, the reader, entering the home of someone you know reasonably well, who isn't a relative and has a different religious identity, and explaining that your family's freedom — and perhaps also their very existence – is in grave danger, and asking that person to help you, at the risk of bringing that same danger into their own home. It seems like an impossible task, but if the world around you had lost its soul, fallen into the hands of people stoking fear and hatred of minorities, and you were a member of that minority and had suffered harassment, humiliations, and a growing fear for your life over several years, and you had nowhere else to turn to protect your loved ones, then perhaps it wouldn't be such a difficult thing to ask. The fact is that Erich asked Albert if he would agree to hide his son Ralph, classmate of Albert's son Pierre, in their family home until safer times returned.[61] And though it seemed like a far-off prospect, it was no longer unreasonable to assume that the Nazis would eventually be defeated; the United States had just entered the war, and as *La Libre Belgique* had reported six months earlier in January 1942,[62] the Americans would be bringing colossal resources to the cause of defeating Hitler and the Third Reich.

If making such a request is almost unimaginable for those of us who have only known free societies, then being on the receiving end of such a request and accepting it is no less difficult to imagine. But how can one refuse a desperate plea for help from an acquaintance who is possibly in mortal

danger, even if that means taking on some of the danger? For people of principle such as Albert Jonnart and his wife Simone, whose morals were buttressed by their Christian beliefs, there was no possibility of refusing, and after discussing together the practicalities, they communicated their agreement to Erich and Edith, prepared a room in the attic, and the now 18-year-old Ralph came to live with them in secret, never to leave the house unless, very exceptionally, to visit his parents. Their own son Pierre Jonnart would help Ralph continue to study, sharing his school notes and assisting him with homework.[63]

In July, a senior Gestapo official arrived in Brussels to give the order to deport 10,000 Jews from Belgium without delay, and the AJB began sending out thousands of letters immediately summoning Jews to the Mechelen barracks to go 'work in the East', giving reassurances that the Nazi occupier had promised it was indeed to go work and that ignoring the summons could have grave consequences for them and their families.[64] But very quickly reports started to emerge of the scenes of distress and mistreatment at the Dossin Barracks — stripping of the internees, lack of food and water, parents separated from children – and panic started to set in amongst the Jewish population.[65]

Ralph's disappearance didn't go unnoticed and within weeks Erich Mayer was summoned to the Gestapo headquarters to explain his son's whereabouts. The Mayers were now firmly on the Gestapo radar and with the news coming from Mechelen and then from the city of Antwerp in mid-August that nearly 1,000 Jews, including children and the elderly, had been violently rounded up and taken away,[66]

the sense of alarm reached its peak. The inevitable conclusion was clear to Erich and Edith: they had no choice but to also go into hiding, and by the end of August they agreed with their neighbour at number 8 Square Vergote to move in and occupy the upper floor of the house, which allowed them to stay in the vicinity of Ralph. But ignoring a Gestapo summons would immediately put them on the wanted list, and the Nazis and their Belgian collaborators would begin searching for them.[67] Yet their instinct had been the right one: on 3 September, just days after they had gone into hiding, the Nazis advanced on the Jews of Brussels, rounding up nearly 600.[68]

On the other side of Brussels, the Zylberszacs began to seriously worry. Having secured Hélène's situation — she would become Belgian within months — and with their own situation secure through their connections with the AJB,[69] their focus was now fixed on little Arthur, who had neither of those protections. In October, Hélène accompanied her mother and little brother Arthur to a village outside of Brussels where family friends had agreed to hide the boy.

News about what was happening in Brussels was leaking out via the resistance and reaching Britain. Baron Jean de Sélys, flying with the RAF, received word that his father, a Belgian aristocrat and military officer, had been tortured by the Gestapo.[70] Imagining what his father must have suffered, he hatched a plan to take revenge and proposed it to the RAF high command, who thought it was too risky and refused to authorise it.

And then, as the war was just entering its fourth year, came the first major breakthrough on the battlefield. British

troops fighting at El Alamein in Egypt, commanded by Field Marshal Montgomery, inflicted on the Nazis the first serious defeat on land since the start of the war. On 4 November, church bells in Britain were allowed to ring for the first time since having been banned in May 1940, to be used only in case of a land invasion.[71] Prime Minister Winston Churchill described it as 'a glorious and decisive victory'.[72] Sensing that the Allies might be finally gaining the upper hand, Churchill allowed himself to think about the future, and just days after the victory he wrote to his foreign secretary, Anthony Eden: 'Hard as it is to say now, I look forward to a United States of Europe in which the barriers between the nations will be greatly minimised and unrestricted travel will be possible'.[73] With these words, it was clear that the Allies were not only fighting to restore freedom in Europe but also to expand it further, and to make European wars an impossibility.

That, however, was still a long way off, and by now the Nazis in Belgium were rounding up Jews or arresting them individually, filling up the railroad convoys at the Dossin Barracks with around 1,000 deportees at a time. As 1943 approached, Albert Jonnart and his family confronted a new year of watching every word they uttered so as to avoid disclosing their dangerous secret: that the non-Belgian Jewish boy, Ralph Mayer, was hiding in their house while his parents, Erich and Edith, hid in a house just 500 metres away. The eminent Belgian-Jewish professor, Alfred Errera, was also facing increasing danger, having decided to join the resistance, while Baron Jean de Sélys was intent on flying over from England and taking revenge on the Gestapo. For the young Hélène Zylberszac, 1943 was the year she would turn

16 and gain the protection of Belgian citizenship. They had all made it this far three years into the Nazi occupation of Belgium. But for some of them, 1943 would be the year when the chaos of war, the betrayal of the collaborators, or the murderous Nazi machinery would catch up with them.

The exact details of what happened are unknown, but on the Saturday of 16 January, Hélène Zylberszac was arrested. Had she been at home on her own? Had she been walking down the street dutifully wearing the yellow star? Nobody knows. Either way, that same day she found herself taken to Mechelen and being marched off the back of a truck and into the Dossin Barracks. There, she would spend three difficult months before being put on Transport XX to Auschwitz — the 20th convoy from Belgium, which has gone down in history as unique amongst all the WWII deportations throughout Europe because of the events that took place the night it left Mechelen.[74]

Four days later in Britain, in the early morning of Wednesday, 20 January, Jean de Sélys and a fellow Belgian pilot, André Bianco, took off on two Hawker Typhoons from Manston air base on the south-eastern tip of England, with instructions to bomb railroad infrastructure around the Belgian city of Ghent. With his Typhoon able to cover the extra distance to Brussels from Ghent in just a few minutes, de Sélys knew this was an opportunity he couldn't miss. Although the RAF High Command had never authorised his revenge mission, de Sélys was determined to fly into the heart of Brussels — alone, if necessary — and punish the Gestapo. Once their mission around Ghent was accomplished and a locomotive had been destroyed, the baron instructed his partner to fly

back to Manston on his own. The Brussels-born de Sélys then dropped low to avoid being detected by radar and pointed his Typhoon towards his hometown, staying alert to defend himself from any anti-aircraft or Luftwaffe attacks.

Within minutes he was at the north-western outskirts of Brussels, having encountered no resistance. The Belgian capital was waking up to a clear and dry morning. Still expecting to be attacked at any second, the baron had little time to carry out his plan. He crossed the city at low altitude, the thunder of the Typhoon's engines causing pedestrians to stop and look up. He headed first to the Royal Palace, just metres away from where the Nazi leadership in Belgium had taken up office, and over the palace he dropped a Belgian flag he had brought with him. He then headed towards his family home, one of the side streets off Rue de La Loi, at the heart of today's European quarter. Flying low over the home, he dropped a second Belgian flag. Little did he know that his father, looking out of the window, watched as this British fighter plane passed over the rooftops of Brussels and wondered who this intrepid and audacious RAF pilot was. Surely, it must have dawned on him that it just might be his own son.

Having accomplished the first two objectives of his plan, and still without any opposition to his flight deep inside occupied Belgium, Jean de Sélys focused on the final and most dangerous part of his personal mission. From his family home, within seconds he was skimming the top of the Cinquantenaire Park arches, an emblematic symbol of Belgian independence. A pedestrian walking through the park on his way to a museum there watched incredulously as this

mysterious RAF plane flew over the arches, immediately turning southward and disappearing beyond the trees and buildings.[75] Moments after, the museum visitor suddenly heard an enormous outburst of gunfire and he was certain the Nazis were shooting down the RAF pilot. It was only later that day that he would learn what had really happened.

Following those three declarations of Belgian defiance — at the Royal Palace, at his family home, and over the Cinquantenaire arches — the baron turned south, down the long Boulevard Saint-Michel. Within seconds he spotted his target: a 12-story residential building at 453 Avenue Louise, near the entrance to the Bois de La Cambre woods. It was the place the hated Gestapo had chosen for their headquarters and where his father and so many other Belgians and Jewish refugees had been and were being tortured. It was 9:05 in the morning and the baron had only a few seconds to accomplish his mission. He slowed down to 200 km/h, climbed to 600 metres, and dived towards the building, keeping the Gestapo HQ in his sights and pressing down firmly on the trigger, his four cannons blazing, each firing 11 shells a second. The windows shattered, the façade broke to bits, and smoke was rapidly enveloping the building. A tram driver on the street had slammed on the brakes and let the passengers out to take cover. All watched in amazement as the Gestapo in Brussels was obliterated. Over in Cinquantenaire Park, the museum visitor could hear the guns firing and imagined the Nazis shooting down the British plane, but it was the Belgian baron who had the upper hand. Staring down his sights, watching the shattered building loom ever larger in front of him, he aimed first at the street level and swept upwards to

the top floors until he was forced to yank hard on the stick and pull up to avoid becoming a victim of his own attack. He just managed to clear the rooftop, and with his mission accomplished he sped away, heading out of Brussels back towards England — not without dropping several smaller Belgian flags as he passed Ghent on his way back to safety.[76]

At 453 Avenue Louise, there was total chaos. The attack had lasted just seconds, but the Hawker Typhoon's powerful guns had fired hundreds of rounds into the building and the extraordinary skill of Jean de Sélys ensured that not a single bullet had hit any neighbouring buildings or the street below. Among the dead Gestapo officers was SS Sturmbammführer Alfred Thomas who had by then overseen the organisation of 19 convoys deporting 18,182 adults and children from Belgium to Auschwitz, of whom 17,815 had already been assassinated or would die in the concentration camps by the end of the war.[77]

That day, and subsequent days, Avenue Louise had much heavier pedestrian traffic than usual, so eager were the people of Brussels to see for themselves how their new hero Baron de Sélys had humiliated the despised Gestapo.

Arriving back at Manston air base, Jean de Sélys delivered his oral flight report in full detail, knowing that there would be consequences for his unauthorised attack.[78] He was immediately demoted, but he had earned the secret admiration of his peers. Later that day he would learn why he had encountered no resistance: by coincidence, the Luftwaffe had chosen that day to launch a large-scale bombing raid on Britain. But that didn't diminish in any way the sheer bravery, the scale of the personal risk he took, the extraordinary

technical skill he displayed, and the significant loss that de Sélys had single-handedly inflicted on the enemy. It was without a doubt one of the most impressive solo attacks since the start of the war, and sure enough, a few months later, on his 30th birthday, the Royal Air Force awarded Jean de Sélys-Longchamps the Distinguished Flying Cross.

If the morale-boosting news of the baron's brazen attack on the Gestapo reached anyone detained in the Dossin Barracks, it would not have been of much consolation. Even though the Nazis needed to keep up the fiction that the deportation was for work in Eastern Europe, and they therefore allowed communication with the outside world, the reality is that the detainees were deprived of any freedom. On 4 February 1943, Hélène Zylberszac sent a postcard to a friend, Bernard, explaining that she did not really know what to tell him, revealing in this way the uncertainty of her future, with 'the days going by one after the other'.[79]

At the time that Hélène wrote those words, Hitler's forces were reeling from their second major military defeat of the war. It was at the hands of Soviet armies following a months-long and vicious battle for the city of Stalingrad. It was one of the deadliest battles of the war, and it weakened Nazi Germany not just because of the losses suffered but also because Hitler had diverted many forces there from other parts of Europe in his effort to beat the Soviets.

Aiming to regain the upper hand in the war and after weeks of discussion, in March, Hitler approved plans to build a launch base in the forest of Éperlecques in northern France for his new weapons the 'flying bombs', the V1 and V2 missiles built to devastate London and southern England and

knock Britain out of the war.[80] The launch site was going to be built using slave labour made up of prisoners of war from around Europe, and the plan was to have it operational by November 1943.[81]

While all of this was happening on the front, the Third Reich's genocidal machinery continued to function relentlessly. The Nazi hatred wasn't only directed at Jews, and they began mass deportations to Auschwitz of one of Europe's most vulnerable and impoverished populations: the Romani people. By the end of the war, the total number murdered at different sites across Europe would reach at least a quarter of a million, and possibly twice that.[82]

At the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen, with every day that passed, Hélène got closer to her 16th birthday, the day she would become eligible for Belgian citizenship and, her parents hoped, would be freed from the Dossin camp. But on 31 March, when Hélène reached that significant birthday, what should have been an important and happy day of celebration with family and friends, full of dreams and aspirations for the future, was instead a day without freedom, full of uncertainty and anxiety about the new life she was supposedly being sent to in the East.

What neither she nor her parents knew was that by this time, the Nazis had begun to renege on their promise to exempt Jews of Belgian citizenship from arrest and deportation. As was made clear by the conclusions of the Wannsee Conference, Hitler and the top Nazi leadership had never had any intention of allowing Jews to survive in Europe, and the Nazi command in Belgium came under increasing pressure to include Jews with Belgian citizenship in the deportations.[83]

What had been no more than a temporary tactical reprieve for the convenience of the Nazi occupying leadership in Belgium, but had been a source of naïve hope for Hélène's parents to protect her, turned out to be of no help to her whatsoever. The first week of April came and went and Hélène remained detained in the Dossin Barracks.

Then, on the morning of 19 April 1943, a locomotive rolled up on the track next to the barracks, pulling a convoy of more than 30 empty train wagons built to transport cattle.[84] By the end of the day, 1,369 adults and 262 children would be cramped inside the wagons, to be taken on a three-day journey. There were no seats, toilets, food, or water, except what little the deportees had managed to bring with them.[85] The windows were small and difficult to reach, and most were criss-crossed by barbed wire. Among the deportees was little Suzanne Kaminsky, a 39-day-old baby, as well as one of the oldest deportees, the 90-year-old Jacob Blom.[86] The convoy would depart at night and was to be guarded by armed soldiers with instructions to shoot to kill if anyone tried to escape. One by one, the detainees were called up — each wearing a sign around their neck with the number they had been given — and ordered onto the train. The Nazis had made up lists of the detainees to be transported that night. Numbers 19, 20, and 21 were a family by the name of Schächter. Then a family named Brand. Number 26 was the young Hélène Zylberszac, recently turned 16. They were all forced into the first wagon.[87]

Imagine being deprived of your own freedom for three months simply because you happened to be born to a particular community, and imagine having all your personal

belongings and ID papers taken from you, being repeatedly lied to, kept under constant armed surveillance, disconnected from your loved ones, and then forced by threatening guards to step into a dark, dirty, smelly wagon to stand — or at best, sit — on the floor for a long journey to an unknown destination. Take a minute to imagine yourself in that predicament.

Such a repressive and criminal situation doesn't come about overnight. It is the result of a process lasting years, beginning with political leaders stoking hatred against whole groups of people and their followers giving in to their own hatred, which encourages those leaders to stoke it even more. A gradual isolation of the increasingly hated group from society leads to discrimination, trampling of their human rights, and in the worst cases, genocide. When political leaders start stigmatising whole groups of others is when the alarm bells must start ringing, before it's too late. Failing to see the potential that every human being has, regardless of their origin; allowing oneself to feel threatened by the difference of others; and failing to build inclusive societies, repeatedly succumbing to basic tribalistic instincts, is the biggest failure of humans as a species. We will return to this in Chapter 5 to see how it can be avoided.

Just after 11 p.m. on 19 April, the 20th Transport lurched into motion and slowly left the Dossin Barracks, carrying 1,631 people like cattle to slaughter, with armed men at the front and back, ready to fire on any escapees. It was dark and cramped inside the wagons. Crouched on the floor, some people cried, others huddled together and tried to comfort each other, others just kept quiet. Buckets were provided for those who had to relieve themselves, but there was no

privacy and no way to empty the buckets. The humiliating and inhuman treatment was absolute. And still, not a single one of the passengers could imagine the horrors the Nazis had in store for them at the end of the hellish journey. And none could imagine that three young men of the Brussels resistance were at that moment in position near a wooded area just 20 km north-east of the capital, having cycled up from Brussels earlier that evening, ready to intercept the convoy on its route from Mechelen to the German border.

About 20 minutes after leaving Mechelen, Transport XX slowed down and stopped. From inside the first wagon, Hélène could hear the guards shouting. She heard gunfire. Outside, three men in their early 20s — Youra Livchitz and two of his childhood friends, Jean Franklemon and Robert Maistriau — had placed a red lamp near the track just after a bend, a signal that caused the train driver to stop. Armed with only a small revolver and some tools to break open the wagon doors, Livchitz and Franklemon were forced to flee the gunfire. Maistriau managed to open a door near the back of the train and urged deportees to leave, but only 17 took the chance, the others being too afraid or too old. He ordered the escapees to lie low until the train got going again and the shooting stopped, and then he dispersed them, handing each a 50-franc note to make their way to safety.[88]

That attack on the 20th convoy on the night of 19 April 1943 was an unprecedented — and unrepeated — event in the history of all Nazi deportations in Europe. The brainchild of Youra Livchitz, it had been planned in secret by all three men throughout April and carried out at great personal risk with scarce resources while facing overwhelming lethal power.

The trio's courage and determination and the fact that any deportees managed to escape at all was an extraordinary achievement and a slap in the face of the Gestapo.

But that was only the first of several incidents as Transport XX made its way towards the German border. In the days prior to the departure of the convoy, a number of detainees at the Dossin Barracks had planned to hide cutting tools inside the wagons and managed to do so.[89] Sometime after Livchitz's attack on the convoy, these detainees sprung into action and opened doors from the inside. Several people jumped out while the train was in motion and again the guards fired into the night.[90]

Then, sometime after midnight, the train came to a stop at Tienen, 40 kilometres east of Brussels. The door of the first wagon had been opened and, encouraged by the escapes earlier in the night, Hélène Zylberszac seized her chance. Determined to flee that hell, recover her freedom, and be reunited with her parents and little brother, she leaped off the train and ran away. Others further along the train were doing the same. Hélène ran as fast as she could, with bullets whistling past her.

That night, a total of 231 deportees succeeded in jumping off the train, but not all managed to get far. In the early hours of the morning, a total of 26 corpses were discovered by local police along the route of the convoy,[91] including that of a young unidentified woman in her late teens. A few weeks later, the young man who planned the attack, Youra Livchitz, was betrayed by someone he had confided in (and whom he thought was a friend) and arrested by the Gestapo.[92]

At the same time as these events took place, military strategists in London and Washington were finalising plans to inflict on Nazi Germany its third major defeat in the war: the capture of Sicily, which would open up the Mediterranean shipping lanes to the Allies and threaten the stability of Hitler's main ally, Benito Mussolini's fascist Italy.[93] The invasion had been scheduled for 10 July, and throughout May and June the Allies completed their defeat of the Nazis in North Africa and launched attacks on the infrastructure of small islands south of Sicily to weaken the defences of the German–Italian Axis in preparation for the Allied landing.

The invasion was launched on schedule and would last over a month, bringing with it a bigger political result than expected: the ousting of Mussolini from power on 25 July and thus a major blow to Hitler.

With the tide of the war starting to turn in favour of the Allies, there was hope for those who remained in hiding. The end of the war was still a long way off, and just one mistake could blow their cover and their protection. Although Hitler's troops on the front-line were increasingly on the defensive or in retreat, the Nazi machinery inside Germany and the occupied territories was still at the height of its murderous power: oppressing, hunting down, deporting, enslaving, and assassinating Jews, Roma, disabled people, gay people, and political opponents.

For Ralph Mayer and his parents Erich and Edith, the year they had spent in hiding — just 500 metres from each other — had been relatively uneventful. Ralph had managed to keep up with his studies thanks to his classmate Pierre, the son of Erich Mayer's lawyer Albert Jonnart, whose house he was

hiding in at number 50 Avenue Jean Linden. And Ralph was not confined to his room in the attic, being able to interact with the Jonnart family throughout the house. On occasions, he would even leave the house at night and make his way over to Square Vergote to visit his parents, using the secret code they had when ringing the doorbell, and making sure nobody was looking before entering the house. Those were always nerve-wracking moments for all: for Ralph, who might be seen, stopped, or caught; and for his parents, whose very lives were at risk but who were desperate to see their son. And for the Jonnart family, who would be severely punished by the Gestapo and the Belgian collaborators if they were found to be hiding a Jew.

Albert Jonnart had become an active member of the resistance, working with trusted contacts and using his position as a respected local councillor to provide false ID cards and ration cards to young men trying to avoid being forced to work in Germany in the Nazi war industry.[94]

As avid clandestine listeners of the radio broadcasts in French produced by the BBC in London,[95] the Jonnarts and the Mayers would have known about the Allied invasion of Sicily and would have celebrated that news. They would have gained strength from it to continue hiding and resisting, knowing that if they had managed one year in hiding they could surely manage another.

On 11 July, the day after the Allied invasion of Sicily, the main topic of conversation over Sunday lunch would have been this new development on the war front, with speculation about how much longer the war would last and when the Allies might manage to liberate Belgium. With the thoughts

of returning to a life of freedom on their minds, neither the Jonnarts nor the Mayers could know that within two days the world would come crashing down on them.

Monday came and went as uneventfully as previous Mondays, but in the early hours of Tuesday, 13 July, while the Jonnarts and Mayers slept knowing that another day had successfully gone by, the Gestapo ordered two of their teams to head over to Square Vergote. They had received information that they wanted to investigate in their usual brutal way. At 4:30 a.m. Gestapo cars were making their way through the streets of Brussels, most likely along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, the very same street that Jean de Sélys had flown over on his mission to shoot up the Gestapo headquarters just six months earlier. All was quiet in the Jonnart household when the Gestapo car pulled up outside and its occupants surveyed the scene.

It was 5 a.m. when the Jonnart family were woken up by loud banging on the front door.[96] Albert and Simone knew immediately that this was the moment they had been dreading but also preparing for. They quickly told Pierre to help Ralph escape through the roof as they had so often discussed since Ralph had come to live with them. The banging on the front door continued as they went downstairs to open it. The Gestapo's men shoved their way in, shouting, demanding to see everyone living there, and searching the house. Within minutes they had discovered a bed in the attic that was still warm, but nobody to account for it. Pierre tried to convince them that he was to blame, that it was his idea to hide his friend and that they should spare his father, but it was Albert who was arrested and taken away to the Gestapo headquarters.

Over at number 8 Square Vergote a similar scene ended up with Erich and Edith Mayer being driven away to the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen.[97]

Two hours later, at 7:30 a.m., Pierre Jonnart made his way down Marie José Street to number 1 Square Marie José, where his best friend and classmate Jean Breuer lived. Still in shock, he retold the events to the Breuer family and asked for advice on what to do next. The father, Jacques Breuer, was the director of the nearby Museum of History and Art next to the arches of Cinquantenaire Park. He instructed his son Jean to accompany Pierre back to his house and then to take Ralph to the museum and hide him there.

Walking 20 metres ahead of Ralph to make sure he could warn him if they encountered trouble, Jean managed to get Ralph safely to his father's office in the museum, and later that day brought him food and a mattress.[98]

That night, Simone Jonnart's devastation following the arrest of her husband Albert and of Erich and Edith Mayer was only tempered by the narrow escape of Ralph. The four adults had sworn to each other that they would protect that boy from the Nazis, even if it put their own lives at risk. And in her distress, Simone could find some consolation in the fact that Ralph was still safe, that they had outsmarted the Gestapo at least as far as keeping Ralph from them, and that she and her own children had been spared. For Ralph, the feeling of guilt was acute. After he had returned to the Jonnart home a few hours after escaping and learnt of Albert's arrest, he was distraught and offered to hand himself in, but Simone convinced him that it would serve no purpose and would certainly not obtain Albert's release.[99] But it was clear

that they had to hide him somewhere else, for the fact was that someone somewhere had uncovered their secret and reported them. Had someone spotted Ralph emerging from their house and followed him to Square Vergote? Or had he been spotted coming back? Or, had someone first discovered where the Mayers were hiding, seen Ralph visit them, and then followed him to the Jonnarts'? That night at the Jonnart family home, the sense of betrayal and disgust, added to the pain, would have been the most profound. And without delay, Simone would have to turn her attention to Albert, to try to get him released.

Ever since Hitler had come to power in Germany, Erich Mayer had tried to keep one step ahead of the Nazis to ensure the safety of his family. A whole decade watching the signs, considering options, trying to overcome cross-border hurdles to build a new life in Belgium, escaping to Brussels after the Kristallnacht in Cologne, and then progressively feeling how the Nazi occupation of Belgium slowly crushed their freedom until each day spent alive and healthy was in itself an achievement. Now, as he and his wife Edith were taken to the Dossin Barracks, questions were also swirling in his mind. Where had their plans gone wrong? Had they been too trusting? Who had discovered them? And most importantly, how was Ralph, and would they ever be reunited with him? The short and comforting 500 m that had separated them for a year, seeming manageably safe in a dangerous world, had overnight been violently stretched to 30 km, with no possible communication between them.

For Erich and Edith, the brutal, degrading treatment they were experiencing on that 13 July 1943 would have

compounded the gut-wrenching horror they were no doubt feeling since their arrest at the thought that they might never see their son again. And for Ralph, nights at the museum would be haunted by the agonising worry for his parents; the gnawing guilt of feeling that he was the reason his friend Pierre had had his own father taken away; and the grisly fear of what new threat or betrayal might be thrown at him by this war of inhumanity.

Albert Jonnart found himself taken to the Saint-Gilles Prison, a nineteenth-century star-shaped penitentiary six kilometres from his home in the southern part of Brussels, where the Nazis kept political prisoners before executing them or transferring them to forced labour camps. Albert had no idea what they had in store for him, but he had experienced World War I on the front lines, and as a battle-hardened and decorated veteran, he was under no illusions and knew that he would be considered the enemy and treated as such. Therefore, he had to find a way out for the sake of his beloved and brave Simone and for their no less courageous children.

Hope is the last thing ever lost, and all of them — the Mayers, the Jonnarts, and now the Breuers — remained hopeful that they just might evade the worst of the Nazi machine, especially since in this summer of 1943, tangible signs of change were regularly rumbling across the Brussels sky, as wave after wave of British and American bombers flew over the Belgian capital on their way to hitting the Nazi regime in its own homeland and destroying its industrial sites.[100] Although the people of Brussels had been aware of the news reports coming from the various fronts, it was the sight of

the Allied bombers flying overhead that proved to them that the tide of the war had turned against the hated Nazi occupier and that liberation was coming.

But the Nazis were still in control and still on their murderous mission, their machinery relentlessly persecuting, rounding up, and deporting. On 31 July, Transport XXI arrived at the Dossin Barracks in Mechelen. Like the previous convoy, it was made up of cattle wagons. More than 1,500 Jews were forced onto it,[101] again without food or water and with only buckets for people to relieve themselves. Ralph's parents Erich and Edith were marched onto that overcrowded seatless train, and their infernal, humiliating journey covering the 1,250 km to Auschwitz lasted three days, with the unbreathable stench of the overflowing buckets, the sick of those who couldn't bear the smell or the fear, and eventually even the death of the weakest filling the air as the hours passed inside the closed, unventilated wagons.[102] On the morning of 2 August, the doors of the wagons were opened and the relief that came from breathing fresh air was quickly replaced by the fear of seeing the armed Nazi guards waiting for them and the grim, unwelcoming Auschwitz camp in the background.[103] With some of the deportees having perished during the atrocious journey, Erich would have been under no illusions about the place the Nazis were taking them to. All the suspicions and fears he had harboured throughout the 1930s as the Nazis took control of Germany and its society were being confirmed now, together with the realisation that all of his efforts to keep his family safe had failed. If only they could know where Ralph was, that he was safe and not on that train!

It doesn't take long to describe what happened next, but the scale of the barbaric horror – that was not only imagined by the Nazi regime, but designed, discussed, planned, built, and carried out, over and over again, for nearly three years, to millions of people, without any remorse — is mind-boggling and overwhelming. The next paragraph had to be written and it must be read, even by those who might already have an idea of what happened at Auschwitz. Above all, it must never be forgotten.

With thoughts of their son on their minds, Edith and Erich Mayer and 1,500 other innocent people of all ages were marched into the hell that was Auschwitz, with the guards and supervisors falsely promising them a meal and a job after a 'disinfection shower' that they were reassuringly told was to prevent epidemics in the camp.[104] Those who had not been selected for the dehumanising and life-threatening slave labour because they were too young, too old, too weak — or just because — were forced to undress and were steered naked into these 'showers' only to discover to their horror that the heavy doors were being bolted behind them and then masked faces appeared through the ceiling to release poisonous gas into the chamber. The screams of panic and pain — from the children, the elderly, the women and men whom Nazi leaders and 'doctors' had decided would be erased from this planet — lasted two to three minutes, eventually fading into weak groans, until after a few more minutes the silence of death took over. The chamber was then ventilated and only then were the so-called 'Sonderkommando' prisoners (some of the camp's slaves) sent in to drag the hundreds and hundreds of corpses outside; cut off their hair and pull out

any gold teeth that the Nazis would then reuse or sell; and burn the bodies in the crematoria, or in open-air pyres if the former were at full capacity.[105]

Every sentence of the previous paragraph describes unspeakable, unimaginable evil. And yet each one of those malevolent acts was thought up, voiced, and carried out, repeatedly and systematically. Many months later, as the Soviet army advanced towards Auschwitz, the Nazis tried to burn all records and files of what they had been doing there. Of the records that did survive, there is no mention of the date or the manner of Erich and Edith's death, but it is known that they arrived alive and it is also known that two thirds of the deportees of Transport XXI, more than 1,000 people, were assassinated in the gas chambers the very day of their arrival on 2 August 1943. Chances are high that Ralph's parents were no longer of this world after that day.[106]

The world of 1943 was one in which, throughout history, only a handful of countries had ever attempted to give any legal protection to anything resembling a concept of human rights. And it was a world in which the idea that most nations would sign up to a universal declaration committing them to safeguard the right of every person to live — and to be free, secure, and respected — was unheard of and still some years away.

In those early days of August 1943, over in Brussels, Ralph was in his new hiding place in the museum, distraught at having lost contact with his parents and at the arrest of his protector Albert Jonnart. Simone Jonnart continued her efforts to free her husband from prison, while the parents of Hélène Zylberszac, still with no news of her whereabouts but with

their son Arthur remaining safely in hiding, were preparing to move to a home on the outskirts of Brussels where they would be under protection as employees of the Association of Jews of Belgium.[107] The mathematics professor Alfred Errera — who had sought the help of King Léopold in vain and who had had to resign his university post and role as local councillor — was now active in the resistance, and the king himself and his new wife were enjoying the sweet antics of their first child, the one-year-old Prince Alexander.

On 5 August, in the North African city of Algiers, a French diplomat and trusted advisor to the US and British governments sat down to write some reflections on post-war Europe. Jean Monnet had been negotiating with the Americans throughout 1943 to have them recognise General Charles de Gaulle as the leader of the French government-in-exile,[108] and having accomplished that mission — and seeing how the Allies were gaining the upper hand — he turned his mind to how the continent of Europe might prevent such devastation from ever happening again. The man of whom US President John F. Kennedy would years later say, 'Under your inspiration, Europe has moved closer to unity in less than twenty years than it had done before in a thousand',[109] wrote these reflections in August 1943, when most of Europe was still under Hitler's control:

> The present course of the war [...] may lead to the imminent defeat of the enemy and the liberation of Europe. We must be ready for that moment; [...]
>
> We must consequently act before the enemy collapses. We must act now [...]

> We need to attain the following goals: the re-establishment or establishment of a democratic regime in Europe, and the economic and political organisation of a "European entity". Achieving these two goals is essential to creating the conditions that will make peace in Europe a normal state of affairs. There will not be peace in Europe if it remains possible for regimes to be set up in which the right of opposition is not respected and in which free elections are not held […]
>
> There will be no peace in Europe if the States are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty, with all that that entails in terms of prestige politics and economic protectionism […]
>
> The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the prosperity that modern conditions make possible and consequently necessary. They need larger markets […]
>
> Prosperity for the States of Europe and the social developments that must go with it will only be possible if they form a federation or a 'European entity' that makes them into a common economic unit.[110]

There was absolutely nothing inevitable about the ideas contained in these reflections and reading them from well inside the twenty-first century it almost seems as if Monnet was simply stating the obvious and describing an easy path forward. However, reading his document in full (see the preceding endnote) reveals how fraught and precarious the situation was and the full extent of the fears that Monnet harboured for the future of Europe, even in the event

that the Allies succeeded in liberating the continent from the Nazi tyranny.

While some were trying to stay alive in Nazi-occupied territories; or, like Monnet, were at a distance from the battlefront, planning how to win and secure peace; others, like the Belgian RAF pilot Jean de Sélys-Longchamps were engaging in lethal combat, pushing the Nazis back inch by inch to put an end to Hitler's murderous regime.

On 15 August, ten days after Monnet sat in the Algerian capital to write down his reflections on the future of Europe, Jean de Sélys — now flying as an RAF hero following his astonishing solo assault on the Gestapo headquarters in Brussels and having been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on his 30th birthday — was on an attack mission over the Belgian coastal town of Ostend,[111] where enemy ships were stationed, just a 15-minute flight from his home base at Manston in the English county of Kent.

This time he was on a nighttime flight, protected by the sky's dark cloak. With his determination to help liberate his native Belgium undiminished since the start of the war, and with the experience of all his previous flights in combat mode, he took on this mission as he had for every previous one: with his family in occupied Brussels on his mind. The Belgian coastline he knew so well soon revealed itself emerging out of the darkness, and without hesitation he initiated his attack, plunging towards his target. Despite the night sky, German anti-aircraft gunners in Ostend managed to spot him and fired repeatedly at the Hawker Typhoon. No stranger to enemy fire, having flown for more than two years for the RAF, and being the experienced and skilled pilot that he

was, the baron immediately recognised the moment his plane was hit. The sound and vibrations shuddering through his Typhoon would have been unmistakable, and he understood that he had to scramble back to Manston before he was hit again or before any damage brought him down into the sea. Setting a westerly course back to base, all he had to do was to keep his plane in the air for just another 15 minutes, land it safely, and have it repaired.

The crossing over the southern part of the North Sea where it meets the Dover Strait was managed successfully and the baron soon caught sight of the familiar shape of Manston airfield. He radioed in his situation and lined up with the landing strip, preparing to bring his Hawker Typhoon and himself back to safety. It was then that he knew he was in serious trouble, as he discovered the landing gear had been badly damaged by the flak. This was going to be an emergency landing requiring all of his skill.

He could see the lights of the nearby village of Minster, like a beacon guiding him to touch down on the land where freedom still reigned, where he had found his purpose as part of this almighty struggle to free the continent of Europe from the deepest and darkest kind of human madness.

But he had no time for contemplation; the landing strip was rising towards him at a fast pace, and with the uncertainty of how his damaged Typhoon would make contact with the ground, he kept his mind focused on those last crucial seconds of this flight.

From all the times the baron had touched down on an airfield, he knew exactly what a smooth first contact felt like. But when the contact came this time, it was unlike any he

had experienced before. He instantly knew that his plane had failed him, and in the split second after touching the ground, the weakened metallic structure, unable to withstand the impact, broke apart with the baron trapped inside the cockpit at the very centre of a full collision between the force of gravity, the plane's momentum, and the inertia of the ground. What had begun as an attack mission on Ostend on the night of 15 August was by now, in the early hours of the 16th, a major accident at RAF Manston involving one of its heroes.[112]

When the rescue team arrived at the crash site and were able to reach the cockpit, they found a lifeless Jean de Sélys-Longchamps.[113] The man who had earlier that year given hope to so many by showing that the Gestapo were not all-powerful, and who had done so in the most spectacularly daring and skilful fashion — the man who was the hero of Brussels — had become the latest victim of Hitler's Third Reich.

Manston air base and the whole of south-eastern England, including London, were very much in the sights of the Third Reich, and the missile launch base in the Éperlecques forest in northern France would prove a game changer in its favour. That is why, after Britain received intelligence about its existence and discovered during the summer the connection with the German V1 and V2 missile programme, the Allied command ordered its immediate destruction. On 27 August, 185 B-17 Flying Fortresses of the U.S. Air Force launched a two-week bombing raid over Éperlecques, during which more than 400 planes dropped 2,300 bombs on the site. The attacks severely damaged the launch base but did not completely destroy it. The Allies would have to bomb it at regular intervals throughout 1944.[114]

As 1943 progressed, the defeat of the Third Reich was discussed with increasing confidence by Allied leaders. On 17 October, a lunch took place in Algiers, involving General De Gaulle and Jean Monnet, amongst others. Monnet presented his plans for Europe after the war and he spoke of a Europe united as a single economic entity with free trade and with the coal and steel industries (which had fuelled the war machinery) placed under international authority. But De Gaulle was sceptical: 'After a war such as this, it is hard to see French and Germans belonging together to an Economic Union.'[115]

It was clear that the steps leading to the successful establishment of what is today the European Union were going to need the full powers of persuasion and the tenacity of people like Jean Monnet.

Just over a month later, the 'Big Three' Allied leaders — the USA's Franklin Roosevelt, Britain's Winston Churchill, and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin — met in Iran to plan the final blow to Hitler's Nazi Germany. The Tehran Conference was the first time all three had come together and their meeting was a sign of their optimism about the impending victory. It was at this conference that they set the secret date for the Allied invasion of France: it would be launched around the end of May or early June 1944.[116]

The Belgian government-in-exile also took measures to plan how to restore the democratic order as soon as the Allies had liberated Belgium. In a secret mission, the brother-in-law of Prime Minister Pierlot was parachuted into occupied Belgium to hand a letter to the king via the country's cardinal, who had direct access to Léopold III. In the letter, the Belgian government advised that the monarch should immediately

and solemnly declare upon regaining his freedom and constitutional powers that 'Belgium had never ceased to be at war with Germany, despite the occupation, and would continue to be so until its defeat; that all collaboration with the enemy would be punished, that the constitutional order would be re-established, and that Belgium would participate alongside the Allies to rebuild the world economically and politically.' Crucially, the letter also recommended that the king remove from his entourage a certain number of individuals 'who by their behaviour, and doubting the Allied victory, had led to believe that they would be accommodating with [Nazi] domination and ideology'.[117] With this letter, Belgium's political leaders, whose relationships with King Léopold were already very strained, were making clear to him that he could not expect to regain his constitutional role without addressing the doubts that had set in as a result of his refusal to go into exile; his unilateral decision to capitulate to Hitler; his efforts to meet the Nazi leader in person; and his comfortable life in the palace leading to a secret and constitutionally irregular marriage, despite his having promised to share the fate of his troops.

The Nazi regime still believed it was possible to regain control of the war, and it was around the time of the Tehran Conference that they launched a major effort to complete the missile launch base in the Éperlecques forest in northern France, after it had been severely damaged by US and British bombers weeks earlier. Hitler's engineers had found a solution to protect the site from future bombings, and they sent out orders for extra slave labour to be sent urgently to Éperlecques for the construction work. Albert Jonnart was

by this time serving a six-month prison sentence for having helped Ralph Mayer to hide, and he was due to be released on 9 February. But in late November, to the distress of Simone Jonnart and the rest of the family, he was transferred to Éperlecques as one of the political prisoners making up the forced labour.[118]

The Gestapo would have been all too happy to send Albert Jonnart to Éperlecques. Such a punishment would help send a strong message to any others who might consider hiding Jews, as they had no intention of letting up on their persecution. Towards the end of 1943, the Gestapo began to actively look for the mathematics professor Alfred Errera who, having been spurned by the King in 1940 and lost his position in society, had joined the resistance. One day in the autumn of 1943, he observed Gestapo men approaching his front door and he had just enough time to escape through the garden and go into hiding.[119] In January 1944, the Gestapo raided his home and despite not finding the professor, they found plenty to plunder: his collection of more than 2,000 books, many of which were transferred to the Tanzenberg monastery in Germany.[120] But it was the professor that the Gestapo really wanted and their search for him would continue.

With the Nazis on the back foot, King Léopold began to reflect on his future situation and on the future of Belgium after liberation. On 20 January 1944, he wrote a long and detailed confidential letter with his views on what should happen in a post-war Belgium. Imprisoned as he was in his palace, the letter had to remain secret and hidden until he could get it safely to the Belgian prime-minister-in-exile. Whether he realised it or not, whether he intended it to be

or not, the content of the letter was so politically explosive it would eventually lead to a constitutional crisis so profound that, years later, it would directly impact the negotiations to choose a capital for the emerging European Union. For the time being, however, his views would remain known only to himself and to his chief of staff, as Belgium continued to be firmly in the grip of Hitler's genocidal regime.

The Nazis may have been losing on the front line, but the Gestapo was very much in control in occupied territories and actively hunting down resistance fighters, interrogating them violently and torturing them to extract valuable information. Even though he was Jewish, the young Youra Livchitz, who had engineered the plan to free deportees from Transport XX on its way to Auschwitz, was kept in Brussels. He had detailed knowledge of the resistance networks that the Gestapo wanted to obtain, and they held him for months at the Saint-Gilles prison, the same one where Albert Jonnart had been kept initially. And when they no longer needed him, the Nazis made sure other resistance fighters knew what was in store for them if caught: Youra was allowed to write a letter to his mother, and on 17 February 1944 he was taken from his jail cell and transferred to the national military shooting range on the other side of Brussels, just a ten-minute stroll away from Square Vergote, where the Mayers had lived. A firing squad was waiting for him, and as the 26-year-old stood there facing his executioners, the words he had written to his mother just hours before no doubt echoed in his mind: 'I am leaving this prison cell to calmly go to the other side of life. […] Dear mother, do not cry too much thinking of your little one. […] Have confidence and courage in life, as time

erases many things. Think of us as having died at the front, think of all the families and all the mothers who have suffered from this war, a war that we all thought would end much sooner. Your loving son, Youra.'[121] The squad fired, and Youra, the hero, was cruelly sent to the other side of life.

At the same time, just a few streets away, the Jonnart family was growing increasingly worried about Albert, whose health had deteriorated quickly after arriving at Éperlecques. The many weeks throughout December, January, and February of relentless and exhausting heavy labour, knee-deep in mud; the deprivation of food; the cold of winter; the humidity of the site; the lack of sleep; and the fear of dying in an Allied bombing raid weakened him terribly, and by early March he was transferred to a military hospital in a nearby village.[122] The local representative of the Red Cross, the abbot Wannyn, was allowed to visit Albert and on 10 March he wrote to Albert's wife Simone with good news: 'Your husband is very well taken care of and he is much better. I hope that in a few days he will be discharged from the hospital and will be able to return home with you, because after his convalescence he will be immediately released.'[123] The sense of relief in the Jonnart household upon receiving word of Albert's return was immense. The dark cloud that had been hanging over them since that awful day of 13 July 1943 might just have finally been lifting, and they could begin to look tentatively to a future together, rebuilding their life as a family in a liberated Belgium, now that the Allies were going from strength to strength.

Much has been said and written since the war about what the Allies actually knew and could have done to stop the

genocide, and whether — as some military commanders strongly believed — the best way to save those being persecuted was to destroy the Nazis by winning the war, or whether the genocidal infrastructure could have, and should have, been attacked earlier on. The fact is that what the Nazis had designed and built to exterminate the human beings they hated was beyond the imagination of most sane people and had to be seen to be comprehended and believed.[124] Nevertheless, by early 1944, the reports reaching Allied leaders that Nazis were exterminating Europe's Jewish population had become more persistent, and on 21 March, President Roosevelt issued a statement to address the matter publicly:

> In one of the blackest crimes of all history… the wholesale systematic murder of the Jews of Europe goes on unabated every hour… All who knowingly take part in the deportation of Jews to their death in Poland… are equally guilty with the executioner. All who share the guilt will share the punishment. Hitler is committing these crimes against humanity in the name of the German people. I ask every German and every man everywhere under Nazi domination to… hide these pursued victims… and do what he can to save them from the Nazi hangman.[125]

One such man — who had already taken action long before the US president wrote those words — was Albert Jonnart, and at that very moment, at the Jonnart family home, Simone continued making preparations for her husband's return. As she was not fully aware of his condition, she would have had to be ready to provide for different kinds of

treatment and, in any case, he would be very weak and in need of much physical and psychological attention. A few days later, a letter arrived from northern France and Simone hoped she might finally learn the date of Albert's return. Opening the letter with trepidation, she saw that it was from Abbott Wannyn and dated 24 March, but to her horror, she discovered that it contained very different news. It told her that for most of the time that she and her children had been celebrating and preparing for Albert's return, he was already gone. This shocking letter explained that upon paying a visit to the hospital on 23 March to see Albert, Abbott Wannyn learnt that Simone's husband had suddenly passed away on 15 March. Adding to the shock and pain was the absence of any explanation as to the cause of such a dramatic change in his health.[126] The cloud that had begun to lift in previous days now came crashing down on Simone, enveloping her in a suffocating darkness. But the woman who had not hesitated to join her husband in defying the Gestapo; the woman who had harboured a young Jewish boy to protect his life, dignity, and future; and the mother of three young adults — who still had to survive the war and build their own futures — found strength in the depths of the darkness to pull through. The news of Albert's death was unbearable for Ralph. Hiding in the museum, wondering day and night where his parents were, whether he would ever see them again; planning how he might thank the Jonnarts and the Breuers if he managed to survive this war, and what positive future — if any — he might have ahead of him, the loss of Albert filled him with an oppressive guilt. Against all prudence, he made his way out of the museum, through the park, and down the street to

the Jonnart family home. Upon seeing Simone he collapsed to his knees, begging her forgiveness. Simone gently placed her hands on Ralph's head and urged him to stand. She made it clear to him that under no circumstances was he to feel that Albert's death was his fault.[127] She and her husband had knowingly and willingly taken on the risk and the only culprits of the woes that had befallen them all were the Nazis and their collaborators.

Those same Nazis and collaborators were still on the hunt for Professor Errera, forcing him to regularly seek a new hiding place, and towards the end of April, he moved to the rural village of Neufvilles, over an hour's drive south-west from Brussels, where the couple who ran the local school, Fernand Minor and Denise Bastien, lived with their three children and a Belgian intelligence officer who had parachuted into Belgium to contact the resistance. Fernand had already hatched an escape plan in case the Gestapo showed up which involved fleeing through the rooftops, but Alfred was a portly 58-year-old intellectual, not an athletic man, so they decided that, if needed, he would hide in a small mezzanine attic. And to ensure the number of warm beds matched the number of people officially living there, one of the boys would share his bed with Alfred.[128] Sure enough, within a matter of weeks, Alfred would find himself rushing to the little attic in an effort to evade capture.

The spring of 1944 was key in the preparations for the Allied invasion of France, the operation that the Big Three had set in motion at the Tehran Conference to deliver the final blow to the Third Reich. Crucial to the success of the operation was a series of ingenious steps to confuse and deceive

Hitler's military command about the exact location of the landings, which Allied military commanders had decided would happen at the beaches of Normandy. One such ploy, called Operation Fortitude South, led the Nazis into thinking that the landings would happen further east near the Belgian border, while Fortitude North let it be known that Norway was to be invaded so as to attack Germany from the north. These were highly elaborate operations involving real and fake troops, pretend weaponry, actual chains of command, spies and double agents, planted communications, real and lethal bombing raids of French and Belgian cities,[129] and almost theatrical high-level diplomacy and politics to ensure that Hitler stationed the bulk of his forces in the wrong places, reducing the resistance the Allies would encounter both when landing in Normandy on D-Day and during the subsequent weeks as they liberated France.[130] But the Allies would only know for sure whether the deceptions had worked once the invasion had begun.

As the month of May advanced and D-Day approached, relations between President Roosevelt, Prime Minister Churchill, and General de Gaulle, as well as amongst the Allied military commanders, became more strained.[131] Disagreements over tactics, the pressure to succeed, and the fear and potential cost of failure weighed heavily on all of them. At stake were not only the lives of millions of troops and civilians but the future of a whole continent, and the tension would only continue to rise right up to the day of the invasion. The burden of the decision to launch the attack fell on the shoulders of Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower, who on 3 June informed the three leaders

that there would be a 24-hour delay and the invasion would be launched on 6 June instead of the 5th.[132] For Roosevelt, Churchill, and de Gaulle there was little to do but wait.

Then, on 4 June, came news that Allied troops moving up the Italian coast had liberated that symbol of symbols, the capital city Rome. The US president took to the radio the following day to address the nation:

> The first of the Axis capitals is now in our hands […] Rome has been liberated by the armed forces of many nations. The American and British armies — who bore the chief burdens of battle — found at their sides our own North American neighbours, the gallant Canadians. The fighting New Zealanders from the far South Pacific, the courageous French and the French Moroccans, the South Africans, the Poles and the East Indians — all of them fought with us on the bloody approaches to the city of Rome.
>
> The Italians, too, forswearing a partnership in the Axis which they never desired, have sent their troops to join us […] Ever since before the days of the Caesars, Rome has stood as a symbol of authority. Rome was the Republic. Rome was the Empire […But since landing in Italy a year ago,] our troops have found starvation, malnutrition, disease, a deteriorating education and lowered public health — all by-products of the Fascist misrule.
>
> The task of the Allies has been stupendous. We have had to start at the very bottom, assisting local governments to reform on democratic lines. We have had to give them bread [and have had to] make it possible for the

> Italians to raise and use their own local crops. We have to help them cleanse their schools of Fascist trappings […] We want and expect the help of the future Italy toward lasting peace. All the other nations opposed to Fascism and Nazism ought to help to give Italy a chance.[133]

With this speech, on the eve of the Normandy landings, President Roosevelt had sketched out the course that a liberated Europe would follow: freedom and democracy, peace and development. And as he spoke, nearly three million Allied troops, together with 4,000 ships (making up the largest armada in history) and 12,000 planes, all awaited in southern England the order to begin the fight that would place Europe on that path.

That same day, 5 June, despite weather forecasts that were less than ideal, General Eisenhower had reached the conclusion that any further delay could jeopardise the whole endeavour and therefore the outcome of the war. The general who would later be twice elected president of the United States put his signature to one of the most consequential military orders in history. It was read out hours later to the 175,000 men that made up the initial expeditionary force:

> Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen of the Allied Expeditionary Force! You are about to embark upon the Great Crusade, toward which we have striven these many months. The eyes of the world are upon you […] [Y]ou will bring about the destruction of the German war machine, the elimination of Nazi tyranny over the oppressed peoples of Europe, and security for ourselves in a free world […] I have

> full confidence in your courage, devotion to duty and skill in battle. We will accept nothing less than full Victory![134]

That night, Churchill was sombre and apprehensive and is said to have commented to his wife Clementine: 'Do you realise that by the time you wake up in the morning twenty thousand men may have been killed?'[135]

Crucial to achieving victory was to let the French population know that the invasion had the backing of the legitimate French leadership. Speaking over the radio from London on 6 June, General de Gaulle relayed that all-important message:

> The Supreme Battle has commenced! […] An enormous combat force has started to cross over from the coasts of old England. It was not so long ago that the tide of [Nazi] oppression was halted at the doors of this last bastion of Western Europe. And behold, today it is from her shores that the fight for freedom is launched. Although submerged for the past four years, France has not been destroyed nor vanquished and she stands ready to play her part. For the sons of France, wherever they may be, the simple and sacred duty is to fight with whatever means are at their disposal [to] destroy the enemy, the enemy that smothers and defiles our nation.[136]

Addressing the House of Commons later that day, a visibly relieved Winston Churchill briefed Britain's elected representatives on the events:

There are already hopes that actual tactical surprise has been attained, and we hope to furnish the enemy with a succession of surprises during the course of the fighting. The battle that has now begun will grow constantly in scale and in intensity for many weeks to come, and I shall not attempt to speculate upon its course. This I may say, however. Complete unity prevails throughout the Allied Armies. There is a brotherhood in arms between us and our friends of the United States. There is complete confidence in the supreme commander, General Eisenhower, and his lieutenants, and also in the commander of the Expeditionary Force, General Montgomery […] I can state to the House that this operation is proceeding in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. Many dangers and difficulties which at this time last night appeared extremely formidable are behind us. The passage of the sea has been made with far less loss than we apprehended […] The outstanding feature has been the landings of the airborne troops, which were on a scale far larger than anything that has been seen so far in the world. These landings took place with extremely little loss and with great accuracy. Particular anxiety attached to them, because […] [a] very great degree of risk had to be taken in respect of the weather.

But General Eisenhower's courage is equal to all the necessary decisions that have to be taken in these extremely difficult and uncontrollable matters. The airborne troops are well established, and the landings and the follow-ups are all proceeding with much less loss — very much less — than we expected.[137]

Despite the weeks and months of behind-the-scenes disputes, when the moment of truth arrived, the three political leaders showed their greatness and delivered what was needed of them: they set aside their differences, focused on the enormous task in hand, and displayed a solid front of unity.

For Hitler, the time had come to take some hostages in case the Allied push forced him to negotiate, and on the same day as the Normandy landings, he ordered the deportation of the Belgian royal family to the Hirschstein fortress near Dresden.[138]

For the people of Brussels, news of the Allied invasion came via a speech of the exiled Belgian prime minister, Hubert Pierlot, speaking on *Radio Londres* on the morning of the landings, and the excitement afterwards was palpable in the city even amongst children on their way to school.[139] Two days later, the Secret Army of the Belgian resistance received a coded message that triggered a wave of sabotage to hamper the Nazi forces in Belgium: 116 railway bridges were collapsed, 285 locomotives rendered useless, 235 aerial telephone lines knocked down, and 18 canal locks destroyed.[140]

It was during those days that Simone received a letter from the nurse who had looked after Albert Jonnart in his final hours. By coincidence a Belgian, the nurse explained that Albert 'was very weak during his last night and he could only speak slowly. He didn't want to be alone, and when I would head for the door, he would ask me where I was going. I wanted to stay with him until the end. In the morning, just before passing away, he again asked me to remember him to his wife and children'.[141] How painful it must have been for Simone to read that letter knowing that Allied troops were

already on French soil beginning the liberation that she and Albert had hoped for during four long years.

Under pressure in the east by the Soviet advance, in the south by the Allied advance through Italy, and now in the west with the Normandy landings, the Nazi war machine went into overdrive and searched for all the manual labour they could find in the occupied territories, with men aged 18 to 50 ordered to work in Germany.[142] Many refused and went into hiding, and the German army and Gestapo would regularly carry out raids searching for any who hadn't obeyed the order.

At 3 a.m. on 8 July, Fernand and Denise, the school managers in the village of Neufvilles, were woken up by loud banging on the back door. It could only mean trouble. Sure enough, it was their neighbour who had spotted Gestapo officers closing off the streets in preparation for a raid. He had climbed over the garden wall separating their properties to alert Fernand and Denise of the impending danger. Without delay the escape plans were put into motion.[143] There was a long, uncomfortable wait for everyone: for the three men in their respective hiding places, wondering whether they were living their last minutes of freedom (or whether even worse was in store), and for Fernand and Denise, wondering what fate awaited them and whether the children would be able to keep the secret in front of the Gestapo. Finally, at 5 a.m., there was again loud banging on the back door, but this time it was not the friendly neighbour but three Gestapo men who proceeded to search the house. Hiding in his little attic, the academic Alfred Errera could hear them getting closer as they opened doors and closets. He held his

breath as their footsteps drew ever nearer. For the four years since the Nazis had invaded Belgium, Alfred had managed to stay a few steps ahead of them, and now with the Allies steadily making progress through northern France heading towards Belgium he couldn't believe he was about to get caught. Time seemed to slow down, and stop.

But time didn't stop. After they had marched through the whole house, the Gestapo men left, having found nothing. Alfred and his hosts would live another day and, with luck, many years to come.[144]

As Churchill had said, nobody knew whether the Normandy landings would be successful nor how fast the Allies might win. It had taken one year to reach Rome after the invasion of Sicily, and the Soviets had taken almost as long to push the German troops entirely out of Russia after the battle of Stalingrad.[145] Yet the Nazi regime, which Hitler had announced would last 1,000 years, was in fact collapsing fast. Paris was liberated by 25 August, and a week later so too was Éperlecques, only five months after Albert Jonnart had died there. The Allies were now at the Belgian border and moving swiftly forward.

But the Third Reich wasn't collapsing fast enough. The extermination camps were still fully operational: enslaving and murdering Jews, Roma, political prisoners, gay people.

In the dying days of August 1944, a small group of the Auschwitz Sonderkommando, those inmates forced to retrieve the hundreds of corpses from the gas chambers, planned a secret and extremely dangerous mission that would surely result in their execution if they were caught. In communication with the Polish resistance, they managed to smuggle

some film and a camera into Auschwitz. On the designated day, late in August, they took up their positions. This is how Sonderkommando member Alter Fajnzylberg recounted the mission in later years:

> From the very beginning, several prisoners from our Sonderkommando were in on my secret: Szlomo Dragon, his brother Josek Dragon, and Alex, a Greek Jew whose surname I do not remember… Some of us were to guard the person taking the pictures. In other words, we were to keep a careful watch for the approach of anyone who did not know the secret, and above all for any SS men moving about in the area… We all gathered at the western entrance leading from the outside to the gas-chamber of Crematorium V… Alex, the Greek Jew, quickly took out his camera, pointed it towards a heap of burning bodies, and pressed the shutter… Another picture was taken from the other side of the building, where women and men were undressing among the trees. They were from a transport that was to be murdered in the gas-chamber of Crematorium V.[146]

In all, four photographs were taken and smuggled out of the camp in a tube of toothpaste with a handwritten note dated 4 September, which read: 'These photos show one of the stakes at which bodies were burned, when the crematoria could not manage to burn all the bodies. The bodies in the foreground are waiting to be thrown into the fire. Another picture shows one of the places in the forest, where people are undressing before "showering" — as they were

told — [in] the gas-chambers.' One of the photos shows only the tops of trees, a snapshot that reveals the nervousness and haste with which the pictures had to be taken, without time to aim and frame the scene.

The following day, on 5 September, a young, gifted girl arrived at Auschwitz on a death convoy from Amsterdam along with 1,000 other Jews. Upon arrival she, her sister, and her mother were separated from her father. They had spent two years in hiding in the Dutch capital, only to be found by the Gestapo after an anonymous tip-off. Spared from immediate assassination in the gas chambers, the young girl and her sister would work as slaves for the Nazi war machinery. The girl's name was Anne Frank.[147]

Over in Belgium, the people of Brussels were jubilant. The advance of the Allies through northern France had happened so fast that they crossed into Belgium on 2 September near the city of Tournai without even needing the planned drop of airborne forces on the Franco-Belgian border.[148] But the final days of Nazi occupation had not been peaceful. The Belgian Nazi collaborators executed 28 renowned civilians in revenge for the imminent defeat.[149] The Nazi regime's troops scrambled to save themselves, stealing any functioning vehicle they could lay their hands on, firing during their flight back to Germany on citizens daring to display the Belgian and Allied flags of freedom. Yet they found the time to set fire to the huge Palace of Justice, where the thousands of documents of their years of repression had suddenly become a huge liability for the Nazis should they fall into the hands of the Allies. The thick smoke billowed across the sky of Brussels and the enormous golden dome of the palace

collapsed, crashing through the floors below and destroying the occupier's communications equipment, which they had used to scramble the signal of the BBC's *Radio Londres*. But the people of Brussels knew what was in the Palace of Justice and hundreds gathered to form a long chain that would retrieve as many compromising documents and files as possible for use in subsequent war crimes trials.[150]

On the morning of 3 September, British troops were still almost 150 kilometres away from Brussels, but the order had been given to enter the city that day and the tanks charged forward. By 5:30 p.m. the first two groups, led by Welsh Guards officers John Dent and Bertie Carson, rolled in via the southern district of Uccle. As requested by *Radio Londres*, throughout the day civilians stayed indoors and the streets were deserted.[151] Suddenly, when the Dent–Carson group reached the top of Avenue Louise, very near the headquarters of the Gestapo oppressors, crowds appeared 'as if out of nowhere' and surrounded the British troops, hugging and kissing them, cheering and offering flowers and wine.[152] The scenes of joy lasted a quarter of an hour, but Brussels was still at war, and the reminder came all of a sudden with an explosion at the back of one of the tanks, throwing people to the ground and badly injuring one of the soldiers. Shocked that there were still enemies amongst them intent on killing to the very last minute, the crowds dispersed as quickly as they had appeared, and the British troops went on the move again to take control of the city.

Not far from there, in Cinquantenaire Park, still hiding in the museum, Ralph would have heard a fierce gun battle taking place outside between fleeing Nazi troops and Belgian

resistance fighters, which ended with several Nazis dead.[153] Those moments must have given Ralph conflicting feelings: excitement at the thought of finally being free coupled with fear at the thought that the gun battle in the park might spread into the museum and put him in danger; the determination to go search for his parents as soon as he could safely leave the museum; and, of course, the empty feeling of not knowing whether he would ever see them again.

In a matter of days, the whole of Brussels had been liberated by British and American troops, including a brigade of Belgian soldiers fighting with the Allies. On 7 September, Britain's Field Marshal Montgomery paid a visit to the newly released mayor of the city, and though the visit was unannounced, word of mouth spread quickly and a large crowd gathered in the Grand-Place to cheer him.[154] The following day, the Belgian government returned from its exile in London and immediately restored the lawful democracy.[155] The mathematics professor, Alfred Errera, who had twice been just seconds away from being arrested by the Gestapo, was reinstated as local councillor in his district of Uccle, and then appointed acting mayor while the mayor temporarily took up the position of provincial governor of Brabant.[156] It was a fitting tribute to put him in charge of the municipality after the persecution he endured during the occupation.

While liberation brought with it immediate political freedom, the deep, traumatic wounds of more than 1,500 days of brutal, genocidal occupation continued to tear through Belgian society. On 10 September, one week after liberation, the newspaper *La Patrie* published on its front cover photographs of three victims of Nazi crimes. The pictures showed

three people, a man and two women, each lying in a narrow wooden coffin.[157] One of the women was clearly very young. Wrapped in what appears to be an overcoat, there are no visible signs of injury, and if it weren't for the coffin, she would simply seem to be sleeping. Whether her parents had bought the newspaper upon spotting her picture or whether a friend had brought it to their attention is not known, but the fact is that it was in this shocking manner that the Zylberszacs, now reunited with their son Arthur, discovered that their teenage daughter Hélène had been deported to Auschwitz on the XX Transport, had managed to jump from the train and run for her life, but had tragically not managed to dodge the bullets fired at her by the Gestapo guards. Her corpse had been found the following morning near the track by local Belgian police who were now, a year and a half later, able to appeal to the public in an effort to identify her.

While the grieving Zylberszacs contacted the police to have their daughter's remains transferred to Brussels, the Allies pushed northwards to liberate the Netherlands and eastwards towards Germany to strike the final blow to Hitler and his Nazis. Young men in newly liberated Belgium were invited to join the effort, and three who didn't hesitate to do so were Ralph Mayer and the two boys who had saved his life: Pierre Jonnart and Jean Breuer.[158] Ralph was recruited as an interpreter in the U.S. Army, while Jean joined the parachutists that would liberate the Netherlands, and much to the distress of the recently widowed Simone Jonnart, her son Pierre joined the 9th U.S. Army that headed straight towards the German border. Brussels and Belgium may have been liberated, but a war isn't over until the guns fall silent and the

prisoners of war return home. For hundreds of thousands of families, mainly in Wallonia, there were still relatives and friends held as prisoners in Germany that needed to be freed.

One of the prisoners was King Léopold III and his family, who had been taken hostage by Hitler and transferred to Germany as soon as the Normandy landings had begun. This rendered him incapable of exercising his official duties, and on 20 September the Belgian parliament elected Léopold's brother Charles as prince-regent.[159] Publicly, Prime Minister Hubert Pierlot was committed to the immediate return of King Léopold to his constitutional role as soon as he was liberated, but privately he and the British government were having doubts that this would be desirable after all. On the evening of 9 September, the prime minister had received a sealed envelope, handed to him in person by two senior magistrates at the specific request of King Léopold.[160] Its contents were to be shared only with Foreign Minister Paul-Henri Spaak, and a second copy was on its way to Prime Minister Churchill via Field Marshal Montgomery. The envelope held the letter that the king had drafted on 20 January with his views on post-war Belgium. Churchill reacted with astonishment upon reading it and declared about Léopold: 'he has learnt nothing'. For Pierlot, it was clear that if this letter became public it would be extremely damaging for the monarch.

Although the letter contained a number of reasonable and well-meaning suggestions for the economic and social well-being of the future Belgian society, it was at the same time extremely inept and explosively confrontational.[161] It was inept for its total absence of any recognition of the Belgian resistance during the occupation, little acknowledgement of

the suffering of the families of prisoners of war, no mention of the persecution of Jews or of political prisoners, nor any reference to the enormous effort by the Allies to liberate Europe — including the country over which he reigned. Added to that, the overall tone of the letter was entitled and patronising. But it was the last two points which had the effect of throwing a bomb into Belgium's democratic system and of alienating the Allies: in his seventh point, he demanded that all those political leaders who had criticised his decision to stay in Belgium after the Nazi invasion should apologise publicly, 'completely and solemnly', without which they should be banned from holding any position of authority in the liberated Belgium; while in his eighth point, he declared that any international agreements signed by the government-in-exile were invalid if they lacked his signature. This last point put into question key wartime commitments towards the Allies and support for new international structures such as the planned United Nations.[162] Neither the Belgian government nor the Allied leaders could tolerate that Léopold III should pretend to have greater legitimacy in a liberated Belgium than those who had led the effort to free the country and its people. Not surprisingly, over the coming months, the existence of the letter and its contents would gradually leak out and come to the attention of an increasing number of political leaders.[163] Many of them would have a similar reaction of dismay, further strengthening the opposition to the king leading up to the great constitutional clash that would erupt in public shortly after the end of the war, and which would put Belgium on a dangerous path of civil strife and even, as some feared, civil war.

The remaining months of the Second World War in Europe were far from easy. The Allied push into the Netherlands stalled and made slow and patchy progress, while on 16 December, Hitler ordered a last attempt to retake Belgium and its strategic port of Antwerp, with a major counteroffensive in the south, controlled by the U.S. 1st Army,[164] aiming to reach Antwerp via Brussels. The Allies were taken completely by surprise but reacted quickly and decisively, keeping Hitler's forces contained to southern Belgium. For the people of Brussels, celebrating their first Christmas and Hanukkah in freedom since the occupation, the Nazi counteroffensive unfolding little more than an hour's drive south must have filled them with trepidation, fearing that a second occupation might have been imminent. But eventually and with great difficulty the Allies prevailed, and what has become known as the Battle of the Bulge (or in Belgium, Battle of the Ardennes, after the mountain range in Wallonia) lasted through to the end of January 1945 and was one of the bloodiest battles of the war, resulting in the deaths of 10,000 German soldiers, 8,500 American GIs, several hundred British and commonwealth troops, 2,500 Belgian civilians, and 500 from Luxembourg.[165] British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described it as 'undoubtedly the greatest American battle of the war'.[166]

Over in the East, the Soviet army was overwhelming Hitler's forces. On 21 January 1945, General Eisenhower's naval aide, Harry C. Butcher, wrote in a diary he was keeping for the general: 'The vastness of the Russian offensive in the East and the speed with which it has progressed has materially altered the overall situation […] The depth of the advance is

such that, without a doubt, a number of German divisions have been cut off and face annihilation or surrender. And, at the moment, there is no sign that the advance is being halted or even contained in any one sector by the enemy. The Russian penetration into SILESIA is itself a sufficient token that the enemy is bewildered.'[167]

Having reached the Polish region of Silesia, Soviet troops were only days away from discovering the site that, in time, would come to be synonymous with Nazi horrors. Sure enough, on 27 January, a group of Soviet scouts stumbled into the Auschwitz–Birkenau camp, not knowing what it was nor what they would find. They were shocked by the barely surviving emaciated human bodies they encountered in their thousands, the piles of ash that had once been human beings, the excrement-filled barracks in which people were living, and 600 corpses of prisoners who had been shot by the fleeing Nazis or who had died of exhaustion.[168] Trying to keep control of the extermination camp to the end, the Nazis had fought hard, and in the battle to liberate the town of Oświęcim, and therefore the Auschwitz extermination camps, more than 200 Soviet soldiers were killed.[169]

One of the survivors of Auschwitz was Otto Frank, the father of the young girl Anne, who had been in hiding in Amsterdam for most of the war, until she and her family were denounced and deported in September 1944. Anne and her sister had been transferred a few weeks after their arrival at Auschwitz to the Bergen–Belsen concentration camp deep inside Northern Germany to be used as forced labour for the Nazi war industry.[170] Immediately after the liberation of Auschwitz in January 1945, Otto was nursed by the Polish

Red Cross and he recovered enough by early March to travel back home, via a long and indirect route in order to avoid the war front. He was the sole survivor of his family: his wife Edith had died at Auschwitz,[171] and his daughters Anne and Margot had died of typhus in the appalling conditions at Bergen–Belsen.[172] He didn't yet know it, but when he arrived in Amsterdam he would be forced to relive their whole ordeal again, this time through the eyes of his daughter Anne, who — unbeknownst to him — had kept a diary of their life in hiding. Reading the diary and discovering her in a new light, he would eventually take a difficult decision that would echo around the world and which still resonates today.

By the time Otto began his journey back home, the Soviets were well inside Germany and approaching Berlin fast. The Allies on the Western Front had finally managed to cross over the Rhine and began advancing through Western Germany. As the 9th U.S. Army progressed, they came across camps with prisoners of war, and — as fate would have it — Pierre Jonnart found his cousin in one of them. He was taken aback by how this young man of a similar age as him was so skinny and toothless after years of imprisonment in the camp. The cousin's desperation was such that he cried and begged Pierre to take him with him, but there was nothing the young Jonnart could do for him with the war still raging. Years later, Pierre would describe that moment as one of the worst of his life.[173]

On 12 April, in north-eastern Netherlands, Jean Breuer, the boy who had safely led Ralph Mayer to the museum after the Gestapo arrested Albert Jonnart, was part of an assault unit fighting to take control of a canal near the German

border. Nazi troops on the other side of the canal were defending their position fiercely. Nearby, a farm was in flames. The night before, just before setting off on the flight that would parachute him and his squadron into the area, Jean had written to his parents reassuring them that he was happy, that he believed the life he was leading was full of meaning. The battle raged all day. At about 5 p.m., Jean suddenly clutched his stomach. He looked down and saw blood pouring out of a bullet wound. Despite the enemy fire, his friends in arms managed to evacuate him to the hospital, but Jean Breuer never recovered. On 14 April 1945, with the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany less than four weeks away, he died of his wounds.[174]

A war really isn't over until the guns fall silent.

Despite the liberation of Belgium, thousands of Nazi V1 and V2 'flying bombs' rained down on the main Belgian cities inflicting huge damage and casualties: Antwerp was targeted because of its strategic importance as a major port, and Liège because the Allies had installed their main logistical base there to support the liberation of Germany. To a much lesser degree but still with lethal consequences, Brussels was also targeted. On one of these occasions — 10 November 1944 — a V1 missile landed on a house very near Collège Saint-Michel, the school where Ralph, Pierre, and Jean had studied, killing the occupants of the house and causing significant damage to the school, forcing its closure for a week.[175] Between the end of the Nazi occupation of Belgium in September 1944 and spring 1945, when the Allies finally managed to advance into Germany, a total of 5,300 such flying bombs landed on these cities, causing the destruction

of nearly 10,000 houses and the deaths of more than 5,000 people.[176]

But finally, the guns did fall silent in Europe.

In the afternoon of 7 May 1945, news spread that the Nazi High Command had signed an unconditional surrender just two hours away in the French city of Reims. People started to pour out onto the streets of Brussels, and on the first official day of peacetime, 8 May, church bells rang out across the day, crowds filled the squares, parades and concerts were improvised, and dignitaries paid tribute to the fallen soldiers and resistance fighters.[177] Hope was in the air and nine months later, and all throughout 1946, maternity wards all over Belgium experienced a boom in the number of babies born. For the first time since 1939 people felt truly optimistic about the future.[178]



↑
One of the three large banners at Boortmeerbeek, the site where the 20th convoy headed for Auschwitz was intercepted by Youra Livchitz, Robert Maistriau, and Jean Franklemon, who are pictured at the top. The other pictures are of those who managed to escape as a result.



→
A close-up of one of the other banners, showing Hélène Zylberszac on the bottom row in the middle.



↑
The grave of Youra Livchitz near the site where he was executed in Brussels.



↑
The monument at Avenue Louise in Brussels paying tribute to Jean de Sélys-Longchamps and his heroic solo attack on the Gestapo headquarters (the building in the background).

↘
The *Blockhaus* launch site for V2 'flying bombs' that the Nazis built outside Saint-Omer, France, and where Albert Jonnart died after being forced to carry out slave labour. Today it is a memorial site that can be visited.



CHAPTER 4

It Cannot Be Brussels!

Just over 100 km north-west of Brussels, outside the town of Ostend on the Belgian coast, there's an old basket-weaver's cottage. It is a simple dwelling, built in 1865, with small windows, thick brick walls, and low wooden-beamed ceilings. The kitchen is large enough to eat in, and from the cosy sitting-room a wooden L-shaped staircase leads to an upper floor where sleeping quarters are found under the sloping roof. It is a comfortable home for a single person, or a couple, or a small family. Looking out of the main entrance, there's no view to speak of, hidden as the house is by the dunes that provide shelter from the coastal wind. But there's a reward for venturing up the gentle slope to the top of the dune: a breathtaking view east, north, and west of the North Sea in the distance, and at the foot of the dune, the vast, sandy beaches that stretch across, connecting Belgium to France and the Netherlands.

This is a place of simple comfort and rugged natural beauty, far from the opulence of royal palaces. It was here that Prince-Regent Charles of Belgium chose to retire after

he ably and successfully played his crucial part in helping to stabilise the country following his brother King Léopold's grave wartime mistakes.

It was a fitting place for a man who had never been destined to occupy the throne, not being the first-born, and who had never wanted it either, having as he did a vocation and passion for the arts rather than the affairs of government. Bruised by the attacks he suffered during the regency and estranged from key members of the royal family, he rejected the government's offer of a palace with a generous annual salary and found peace and inspiration in this basket-weaver's cottage just metres from the windswept beaches of the Belgian coast, where he lived and painted until his death in 1983.

For a man who is credited by some with having saved the Belgian monarchy and helping the country through one of the most dangerous crises in its history, there are surprisingly few monuments dedicated to him. This cottage where he lived out his last three decades is one of the rare exceptions, and today it is a small museum where much has been preserved as a tribute to the prince-regent and his life.

Walking into the light-yellow cottage through the front door and peering into the cosy sitting room, one is immediately struck by the decorations covering almost every available space on the walls, shelves, and furniture. There are paintings, photographs, drawings, medallions, plates, sculptures, books, artefacts. There are golf clubs propped up against the stairs; paint-brushes, wooden palettes, and tubes of paint scattered on a desk; a typewriter next to a tray for serving drinks; a well-used comfortable chair in a corner next to a large fireplace; and several stacks of books within

reach of the reader. Only a well-trained eye would detect that some of these objects have a royal connection — nothing that he displayed indicated that the person who lived there was not only of royal extraction but in fact was once Belgium's head of state. Except, perhaps, one thing. Or, to be more precise, three things: hanging on the wall at the foot of the staircase leading to the upper floor, there are three rectangular frames, barely noticeable amongst all the other objects placed around them. Each frame displays a sheet of fifty thumb-sized postal stamps, and each stamp carries an outline of the prince-regent's face. Here is proof that the man who lived in this cottage was once important enough to have official postal stamps issued with his portrait on them. And while these frames might be considered a small – and sole – token to the prince's vanity, they are, on the contrary, another illustration of his modesty. For the fact is that any seasoned stamp collector will be hard-pressed to find a single one of these stamps: they never made it to public circulation, Charles having forbidden their production and ordered the destruction of all samples, keeping only a few for his personal memorabilia. Only a few others survived and very rarely make it onto the collectors' market.[1]

When Charles came to retire in the basket-weaver's cottage, Belgium and the continent of Europe were entering a momentous new era. It was the summer of 1950. Of the six leaders who had shaped the Second World War in Europe, only Joseph Stalin remained in power, doing so by means of extreme oppression and ruthlessness. Just over five years had passed since that month of April 1945 when, in the dying days of the war in Europe, US President Franklin Roosevelt had

died of natural causes, dictator Benito Mussolini had been executed by Italian partisans, and the man who unleashed hell on the continent, Adolf Hitler, had committed suicide. Three months later, in July 1945, Winston Churchill had been voted out of office, while General Charles de Gaulle had resigned in early 1946 as leader of the provisional French government.

It was also five years since the world had witnessed in horror the new heights of destructive power that military weaponry had reached with the dropping of two atomic bombs by the United States on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One survivor of the Hiroshima bombing, medical doctor Michihiko Hachiya, could think of no words to accurately describe what he had seen: 'Nothing remained except a few buildings of reinforced concrete […] I had to revise my meaning of the word destruction or choose some other word to describe what I saw. Devastation may be a better word, but really, I know of no word or words to describe the view.'[2] Several hundred thousand people, the vast majority of them civilians, died – either pulverised instantly or after weeks and months of agony. Many wondered what would have happened if Nazi Germany had succeeded in producing the bomb first. US President Harry Truman referred to this in a radio address from the White House on 9 August 1945: 'I realize the tragic significance of the atomic bomb. Its production and its use were not lightly undertaken by this Government. But we knew that our enemies were on the search for it. We know now how close they were to finding it. And we knew the disaster which would come to this nation, to all peaceful nations, to all civilization, if they had found it first. That is why we felt compelled to undertake the long

and uncertain and costly labor of discovery and production. We won the race of discovery against the Germans.'

Truman went on to explain his decision to drop it on Japan and the plans to control future use:

> Having found the bomb we have used it […] We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans […] The atomic bomb is too dangerous to be loose in a lawless world. That is why Great Britain and the United States, who have the secret of its production, do not intend to reveal the secret until means have been found to control the bomb so as to protect ourselves and the rest of the world from the danger of total destruction. [3]

Many also wondered whether the atomic bombs should have ever been dropped. President Truman had, in fact, consulted a committee of experts who had deliberated on all the different scenarios, including dropping a bomb on an unpopulated island to frighten Japan's leaders into surrendering, but this option was discarded.[4] The reason was the significant risk that — the technology being very new — the bomb used might malfunction and not explode, and there was also the very real possibility that Japan's leaders, having been warned in advance, would refuse to simply go along and watch, perhaps instead attempting to thwart the demonstration by moving prisoners of war to the area.

By the summer of 1950, when Belgium's Prince Charles — no longer Regent — moved to the basket-weaver's cottage, the Soviet Union had become the world's second nuclear

power, after carrying out its first atomic bomb test in 1949. Although the US and Britain had worked well with the USSR to end the Nazi tyranny in Europe, relations began to sour even before the end of the war as Stalin's true intentions became increasingly evident. At Yalta, the last conference gathering Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin, there had been an agreement to allow each liberated country to determine its own destiny via representative democracy and free elections, but by the following conference — involving Churchill, Stalin, and the new US President, Harry Truman, and held in Potsdam just outside Berlin in July 1945 — Stalin was backtracking to the point of declaring that 'any freely elected government in these countries will be an anti-Soviet government and we cannot allow that.' The American ambassador to Moscow, William Harriman, wrote at the time: 'What disturbs me most is this: when a country starts to extend its influence beyond its own borders by means of force, under the pretext of safeguarding its security, it is very difficult to see how we can draw a line where it must stop. If we concede that the Soviet Union has the right to invade its immediate neighbours in order to safeguard its security, why should it not invade the next neighbouring state in due course? Where does it all end?'[5]

In his memoirs, President Truman would later write that he found it unbelievable that a meeting that was taking place just a few kilometres away from Berlin, the centre of Nazi power, now ravaged by war, there could be a government leader seriously undermining efforts to establish a real peace. As much as the US and Britain were anxious to draw the Soviet Union into the war against Japan, the behaviour of the

Soviets in the countries they now controlled convinced Truman that collaboration towards peace was impossible, adding in his memoirs: 'What was happening in Germany, in Bulgaria, in Romania, in Hungary, and in Poland was so revealing as to make clear that I could under no pretext involve them [in the affairs of post-war Japan]... Force is the only thing the Soviets understand, [and they] were already making plans to conquer the world.'[6]

Observing how Central and Eastern European nations were increasingly smothered by Soviet dominance lent greater urgency to the creation of a structure that would steer the free nations of Europe away from destructive rivalries and towards permanent collaboration instead. During a speech at the University of Zurich in September 1946, former Prime Minister Winston Churchill finally made public the radical idea he had privately shared with his foreign secretary already back in 1942 at the height of the war, and he was ready to elaborate further on it: 'The structure of the United States of Europe will be such as to make the material strength of a single State less important. Small nations will count as much as large ones and gain their honour by a contribution to the common cause… But I must give you warning, time may be short. At present there is a breathing space. The cannons have ceased firing. The fighting has stopped. But the dangers have not stopped. If we are to form a United States of Europe, or whatever name it may take, we must begin now. In these present days we dwell strangely and precariously under the shield, and I even say protection, of the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb is still only in the hands of a nation [the United States] which, we know, will never use it except in the

cause of right and freedom, but it may well be that in a few years this awful agency of destruction will be widespread and that the catastrophe following from its use by several warring nations will not only bring to an end all that we call civilisation but may possibly disintegrate the globe itself.'[7]

However, Churchill was no longer in power and most political leaders in Western Europe were focused on the social and economic reconstruction of their individual nations, with the imminent prospect of a massive programme of economic aid by the United States that became known as the Marshall Plan. But thoughts of securing permanent peace and security were never far away, and, in March 1948, the city of Brussels played host to a crucial event which represented a foundational step towards the European Union and NATO, the two pillars that today underpin security and prosperity in Europe.

In the buildup to that event, in March 1947, just six months after Churchill's Zurich speech, Britain and France had signed the Treaty of Dunkirk committing each other to mutual assistance in case of a future attack by Germany, but the increasing belligerence of the Soviet Union quickly rendered the treaty insufficient and even redundant. By January 1948, just days after three countries — Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg — had launched a pioneering new customs union they called the Benelux, Britain proposed to sign pacts of mutual military assistance with these three countries, like the one signed with France. Under the leadership of the new Belgian prime minister, Paul-Henri Spaak, the Benelux countries welcomed the invitation but insisted on one treaty for all five nations, instead of five bilateral ones, thus making

a multilateral affair the automatic and immediate form of mutual assistance in case of attack.[8] This approach paved the way for the famous Article 5 of the NATO Treaty signed a year later, where an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. Discussions between the five went to-and-fro throughout January and most of February, until on 24 February a communist coup in Czechoslovakia, instigated by the USSR, overthrew the government there. This development rattled the whole of Europe, in particular the democratic nations and, recognising the urgent need to successfully finalise the agreement with the Benelux, the British and French shifted the final talks from Paris to Brussels to speed up the process.

On the eve of the talks, on 3 March 1948, Prime Minister Spaak addressed the Belgian Parliament and explained that Britain's proposal went well beyond the purely military, and included cultural and economic collaboration with the Benelux countries, and he added that there was no time to lose:

> It is long overdue, in my view, that Western European nations try to collaborate with each other. We have spoken at length over the last three and a half years about economic collaboration and we have often been told that prosperity is a collective matter, as is security. But it has to be said with regret: not much has been done to make this a reality. And apart from our own Benelux effort, which is still insufficient, the other Western European countries — including Belgium — have all practised individualistic policies [...] And the measures taken by one or the other country have profoundly troubled the economies of the others [...] We are at a very grave moment in the

history of our country, at a time where we shall, perhaps for a long time to come, determine its destiny. [9]

The talks progressed quickly and the new Treaty of Brussels was signed on 17 March.[10] What no-one could have possibly known at that moment was that with this treaty they had given legal status to a number of principles and aspirations which would later become reality and form the backbone of European integration: the treaty outlined the objective of eliminating conflicting economic policies and of developing commercial exchanges, and it spoke about greater collaboration in the area of social security, as well as the promotion of cultural exchanges.[11] European integration as we know it was not yet a concrete project — it was simply a vague aspiration that had been put aside by the pressing needs of the post-war years. But with the Treaty of Brussels, the vague aspirations had at least been officially expressed and agreed upon. The project of building a European Union and giving it a capital city was, nevertheless, just around the corner and it would become an urgent matter within months.

During his speech to the Belgian parliament, Prime Minister Spaak had spoken of the 'very grave moment' in the history of Belgium, and all members of parliament listening to him knew exactly what he was referring to. A clue to what he meant can be found in the first eight words of the Treaty of Brussels, which begins by listing the heads of state of the five signatory nations, starting with 'His Royal Highness the Prince Regent of Belgium'. Few people ever read the text of a treaty, and even fewer bother to read the formal text required by protocol. But behind those eight words there

lay a national trauma that was tearing Belgium apart. The treaty should have begun: 'His Royal Highness the King of Belgium'. It should have referred to Léopold III and not to Prince Charles, Count of Flanders.

The election of Charles as regent by the Belgian Parliament in September 1944 was only ever meant to last the time it took the Allies to liberate his brother, who had been taken hostage by Hitler at the time of the Normandy landings. Instead, despite Léopold's liberation by US troops just hours before the capitulation of Nazi Germany, Charles's regency lasted nearly six years. No sooner had news reached Brussels on 8 May 1945 that Léopold and his family had been liberated by the Allies the day before, than did the Belgian government, at that time under socialist Prime Minister Achille Van Acker, hold an emergency meeting to determine how and when the king should return.

Few had forgotten the king's refusal to follow his government into exile when the Nazis invaded, or the discovery that contrary to what he had promised to his troops, he was living a much less restrained lifestyle than they were — in particular compared to the mainly Walloon soldiers who were held prisoner in Germany — to the point that he had initiated a romance and found a new wife. Nor had they forgotten the irregularity of the marriage, or the final straw that was still fresh and raw in the minds of many political leaders: his inept, insensitive, and explosive letter of 1944. Few had forgotten all of this, although some had forgiven him. Of the three main political families, only the socialists had a very clear majority in favour of a particular outcome, namely King Léopold's abdication.[12] The liberals were for the most

part in favour of the abdication but refrained from openly attacking the king and his wife,[13] while the Christian-democrats publicly called for the immediate return of Léopold but in private were divided into three camps: those who supported the party's public position, those who believed the king should return and begin preparing an abdication in favour of his son Baudoin, and those who wanted an immediate abdication.[14] There was another divide which was palpable to most: the regional one, with Flanders largely in support of the King, and Wallonia and Brussels resentful both of Léopold's behaviour and how much their troops had suffered in captivity.

For Prime Minister Van Acker there were really only three scenarios that could be discussed with the king: his unconditional return, which the prime minister considered a bad solution; abdication, which he thought was risky; and his preferred option, which was a return after first complying with the conditions that the Belgian government-in-exile had sent him at the end of 1943 and which prompted his infamous 1944 letter.[15] On 10 May 1945, a delegation of ministers led by the prince-regent and including the prime minister visited King Léopold, and explained to him that should he choose to return to Belgium without fulfilling the conditions requested of him, the country could split along several divides, heightening tensions between Flanders and Wallonia and triggering widespread strikes, hostile opposition from certain wartime resistance groups, and even revolution.[16] Reluctantly, Léopold III agreed to hold off for some time and reflect on the way forward. Then on 14 June, he informed the prime minister that he would return to Belgium after all and that his return

was imminent: on the 18th in the afternoon. On the 16th, the government ministers met and refused to give political backing to Léopold's unilateral decision, promptly resigning collectively and informing the king that the government was unable to guarantee public order should he proceed with his plans to return. The liberal party issued a statement calling for the king's abdication, and the major Fédération Générale du Travail de Belgique (FGTB) trade union threatened a general strike.[17] Faced with this strong opposition, Léopold stayed away and held further consultations. A month later, he wrote to the prince-regent with a new proposal, still refusing to abdicate but declaring his intention not to return to Belgium until the electorate had been consulted on the matter.[18] The king's decision to stay away until the citizens had spoken bought everyone some precious time, albeit generating a new intractable debate: the manner by which the citizens would be consulted, whether the result would be binding or not, and whether there should be minimum thresholds to achieve for a clear outcome. It was a debate which lasted for the rest of the 1940s, with proposals and counter-proposals but none of them ever securing sufficient support to be carried out. And thus, by 1948, when the Treaty of Brussels was signed, the head of state of Belgium was still Prince-Regent Charles, Count of Flanders.

At the same time as fear was increasing across Europe of a third devastating world war within just half a century, the crisis of Belgium's 'Royal Question' — as it came to be known — was about to worsen, and with lethal consequences. As for Brussels, the fact that a significant treaty had just been signed in the Belgian capital was in no way an

indication of the central role this city would play in the coming years — quite the opposite. The treaty that was signed in Brussels would have almost certainly been signed in Paris had original plans not had to change. The subsequent NATO headquarters were never intended for Brussels, and if Belgium had had its way, the EU's capital would have been the southern Belgian city of Liège.

There was nothing inevitable about the establishment of a transatlantic security pact. Indeed, having paid such a high price in human lives to help liberate Europe from fascism, many in the United States were reluctant to commit further to Europe's security despite the increasing threat of communist oppression. Others, however, especially at the highest level, knew there was no other option but a transatlantic alliance.[19] Three things helped to remove any doubts there may have been on the other side of the Atlantic: the emerging commitment in Western Europe to collective security, as demonstrated by the Treaty of Brussels; the Soviet blockade of West Berlin, which began in June 1948 and which required, over the course of a year, more than 250,000 flights of mainly US and British planes providing essential supplies to the trapped West Berliners; and the recognition by democratic European nations that without the military strength of the United States their freedom in the face of Soviet aggression could not be guaranteed.

In September 1948, only six months after the Treaty of Brussels, Prime Minister Spaak of Belgium, who had repeatedly — and unsuccessfully — sought a bilateral pact of non-aggression with the USSR,[20] delivered an extraordinary speech at the Third Assembly of the new international organisation

called the United Nations.[21] It is worth reproducing several excerpts to illustrate the prevailing mood in Western Europe at the time:

> According to the Soviets, whose argument is not very subtle, when Russia creates alliances with neighbouring countries, when she signs a defence treaty with Poland, or Czechoslovakia or with Yugoslavia or with as many other Eastern European countries, that is peaceful politics. However, when Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands create an alliance with France and Britain, that is warmongering.
>
> […]
>
> Is there anyone in this room, is there anyone in the world, who seriously believes that Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and Belgium wish to launch a war of aggression? Have you forgotten what we are emerging from? Have you forgotten the two ordeals we have been through in the past 25 years? Have you forgotten that even though we emerged triumphant, we were under occupation for four long years? And if we have overcome these two ordeals, there is no guaranteeing that after a third world war, our countries would be able to pick themselves up and march courageously onwards.
>
> […]
>
> Nobody can believe that the Brussels alliance, signed in March this year, is aggressive in any way towards any nation. Everyone knows we have come together to defend ourselves. And the foundation of our policy is fear. The Soviet delegation has no need to search for any

complicated explanations to our policy […] It is fear of you, of your Government, of your politics.

[…]

We are afraid because you often talk of imperialism, [and the truth of these past years is that] there is only one big country that emerged from this war having conquered other territories, and that big country is the USSR. It was during the war and because of the war that you annexed the Baltic states,... took a piece of Finland,... and of Poland…. You have become all-powerful in Warsaw, Prague, Belgrade, Bucharest, Sofia… Your empire extends from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea and to the Mediterranean. You want to be at the banks of the Rhine and you wonder why we are nervous.

[…]

We are nervous because we had placed our full trust in an efficient United Nations Organisation but, because of your policies, we are forced to seek our security in regional pacts instead of within the international and universal framework of this Assembly.

[…]

We are nervous because in each one of the countries here represented, you maintain a fifth column, compared to which Hitler's fifth columns were a bunch of boy-scouts. There is no place in the world, nor Government, in Europe, Africa or Asia, which faced with a difficulty or an obstacle, doesn't find you there to poison it further.

[…]

I am under no illusions. Tomorrow morning, a certain part of the world's press will paint me as the poodle of

> American imperialism or as having sold myself to Wall Street. But I state with conviction that the position taken by the USSR and the communist parties all over the world against the Marshall Plan is the most depressing, the gravest, and the most concerning action they could have taken. The sixteen [recipient] countries of Europe, that have no lessons to take from anyone when it comes to national dignity, have proclaimed that without the Marshall Plan, Europe is lost. [And as General Marshall himself said], 'our Plan is against no country or doctrine, but against famine, poverty, despair and chaos'. Whatever may happen in the future and however the Marshall Plan may develop, these are words that honour the head of American foreign policy and which are in line with a policy for which we are enormously grateful.

It was a powerful address and the words speak for themselves. Having recovered their freedom at enormous human cost, the democratic nations of Europe were not about to — could not afford to — fall into oppressive hands once again, as had happened to many misfortunate countries of Central and Eastern Europe. By the time the Belgian prime minister gave this speech, the Treaty of Brussels signatories had already recognised that without the United States they could not stand up to the Soviet Union, and talks were already underway to form a new transatlantic defence pact.[22] The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, NATO, was thus established on 4 April 1949, including also Canada, Denmark, Iceland, Italy, Norway, and Portugal, with headquarters located at 13 Belgrave Square, London.[23]

But a military alliance was never going to be enough, as the French diplomat, Jean Monnet, had written in August 1943 while in Algiers: 'There will be no peace in Europe if the States are reconstituted on the basis of national sovereignty, with all that that entails in terms of prestige politics and economic protectionism [...] The countries of Europe are too small to guarantee their peoples the prosperity that modern conditions make possible and consequently necessary. They need larger markets [...] Prosperity for the States of Europe and the social developments that must go with it will only be possible if they form a federation or a "European entity" that makes them into a common economic unit.'[24]

There was, in addition, the question of what to do with a split Germany at the very heart of Europe. It was a question that was rapidly climbing the political agenda as the occupying powers prepared to withdraw and hand over German affairs to West and East German governments. In the years following the war, Monnet had held a senior position in the French government, helping the country's economic revival, but his ideas for European integration had remained in the drawer. This was about to change. After the launch of NATO, the foreign ministers of Britain, France, and the United States began to meet regularly to coordinate matters in relation to Germany. By their second meeting in September 1949, West Germany had held its first democratic elections under their new constitution, resulting in the election of Konrad Adenauer as chancellor. US Secretary of State Dean Acheson urged the French foreign minister, Robert Schuman, to propose a policy for Germany at their next meeting, to be held on 11 May 1950 in London.[25] The thinking behind that

request had been expressed years earlier by Winston Churchill in his speech at the University of Zurich: 'I am now going to say something that will astonish you. The first step in the re-creation of the European family must be a partnership between France and Germany […] There can be no revival of Europe without a spiritually great France and a spiritually great Germany.'[26] With this in mind, it was essential that France help to shape the future of the free part of Germany.

Back in Paris, Schuman confided in his chief of staff, who later wrote: 'hardly a week passed without Schuman pressing me: "What about Germany? What do I have to do to meet the responsibility put upon me?" It became an obsession with him.'[27] Schuman consulted widely but found that all suggestions put to him had little chance of success. Jean Monnet was observing all of this, and with only weeks to go before the meeting in London, he seized his opportunity, consulted some legal experts and on 17 April 1950 submitted to Robert Schuman a proposal to pool the production of French and German coal and steel.[28] If successful, this would have the effect of either preventing any future German rearmament or placing it under international control, providing a security guarantee to neighbouring countries. Days went by and Monnet heard nothing in response. Then on 28 April, less than two weeks before Schuman had to present a plan to the US and Britain, Monnet finally heard from Schuman's chief of staff: the French foreign minister was interested and would develop the idea further.[29]

Schuman worked on the plan at his home outside the French city of Metz, near the German border. Apart from the obvious humanistic, political, and economic reasons for

wanting to find a solution to the recurring wars between Germany and France, Schuman's interest had an additional dimension to it: the region of Lorraine, where his family had lived for generations, had forcibly and traumatically changed hands several times between France and Germany in little more than half a century.[30] Strolling through the ample gardens and orchards at the back of his house,[31] he would have reflected on his family's experience, the forced changes of nationality, the suffering of thousands of soldiers and civilians in the fields near and far. It was at that home during those days that he found the necessary inspiration to turn Monnet's idea into a groundbreaking and, most importantly, workable scheme. He sent a secret envoy to Chancellor Adenauer to check whether West Germany would back the plan, and in parallel he primed several French ministers in advance of his announcement. On the morning of 9 May, the French cabinet met and approved Schuman's plan, and that evening he gave a press conference that took the world by surprise. In the words of the British ambassador, by using shock tactics, Schuman ensured that none of those with an interest in the status quo could strangle the plan at birth.[32]

Crucially for the future of European integration, Schuman proposed three essential features: the fusion of the French and German coal and steel markets, an independent High Authority with independence to regulate and act, and an invitation to any democratic European country willing to accept these two principles to join the community.[33]

Predictably, the Schuman Plan was received in certain quarters with scepticism and strong opposition, in particular amongst the coal and steel producers, but it had the merit of

being concrete and manageable, and so within weeks France, West Germany, the Benelux, and Italy gathered for a conference to draft a treaty.

By this time, however, Belgium was in meltdown and the traumatic events there would spill over into the Schuman Plan negotiations. Spaak's government had collapsed just four days after the signing of the NATO treaty in April 1949 — a year before Schuman announced his plan — because the Christian Democrats had demanded a resolution to the Royal Question. Although anxious to return to the throne, King Léopold conceded in an interview to the *New York Times* that spring that, should a solution not be found, he may have to abdicate in favour of his son.[34] Elections were held in June and the Christian Democrats won, but without an absolute majority. The new prime minister, Gaston Eyskens, was determined to resolve the Royal Question once and for all, and to do so in a manner that was acceptable to the three main political families. Otherwise, he feared, the king of Belgium would be seen as the king of just one political party. As far as he was concerned, the solution required the abdication of Léopold III.[35]

Months followed of difficult and harsh debates regarding the organisation of a referendum to consult the Belgian electorate, with increasingly hostile rhetoric from the anti-Léopold camp: on one occasion a Socialist member of parliament shouted that if the king returned he would be shot.[36] Eventually, a non-binding referendum was called for 12 March 1950, after King Léopold had pledged that should there be less than 55% of the votes in favour of his return, he would abdicate and hand over rule to his son.

If the referendum was supposed to provide clarity to the matter, it failed: the results only muddied the waters further. Although 57.7% of citizens voted in favour of the king's return, which was above his self-imposed threshold of 55%, he only obtained a majority in Flanders. The capital city Brussels and the major urban centres of Wallonia had resoundingly voted against his return.[37] This regional division was disquieting and immediately exacerbated tensions: several strikes broke out in Wallonia, especially in the cities of Liège and Charleroi, with thinly veiled threats of secession.[38] Socialist leaders warned that if Léopold returned there would be insurrection.[39] The government collapsed yet again and new elections were held on 4 June 1950, just a couple of weeks before the talks opened in Paris to develop Schuman's Plan into a European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC). This time the Christian Democrats achieved an absolute majority in both chambers of parliament and announced that with their control of parliament they could — and would — end the regency of Prince Charles so that Léopold III could return as king. The date set was 19 July 1950.

As the end of the regency approached, more strikes erupted throughout Wallonia, and during a cross-party meeting, Paul-Henri Spaak predicted that if nothing changed, there would be blood on the 19th. The Socialist leader Buset declared: 'The King and his party will get the show of force they have been provoking'.[40] As announced, the Belgian parliament declared on 19 July the end of the regency, and Buset immediately called for a general strike.[41] The next three weeks were frenetic, dangerous, and had the potential to bring political instability and conflict to the heart of Western Europe.

Two days after the end of the regency, acts of sabotage were carried out in western Belgium near the French border. On 22 July, King Léopold III returned to Belgium and held his first official meetings as restored king, meeting his ministers and the Mayor of Brussels. On 24 July, a general strike began in Liège. The following day the strike spread across Wallonia, and again the Belgian government resigned. On the 27th, discussions in parliament described events in Wallonia as a rebellion, and the next day the acting government discussed the possibility of deploying troops. By now, the strikes had spread north to Brussels and the Flemish city of Ghent. At the weekend, there were calls for the secession of Wallonia.[42] Then on Sunday, 30 July, a demonstration in a Liège suburb got out of hand and policemen shot dead three protestors. Fears of a civil war in Belgium reached their climax.[43] The following day, the acting government recognised that the debate was no longer about the king but about Belgium as a nation.

With the country he had vowed to serve tearing itself apart because of him, and with violence increasing, King Léopold took the decision he had resisted for so long and which was the only honourable way forward: he informed his ministers that he would rather give up the throne than witness a civil war.[44] On 1 August, King Léopold III formally announced to the nation that he would abdicate in favour of his son Baudoin, on the condition that calm would return to the country. Ten days later, parliament enacted the abdication law, and on the 11th, Prince Baudoin was sworn in. A week after, a new government was formed, led by the Christian Democrat Joseph Pholien.[45] A native of Liège, and thus highly

sensitive to the events that had just taken place there, Pholien would play a key role in influencing Belgium's candidacy to host the institutions of the emerging European Coal and Steel Community.

What the negotiators of the ECSC made of the events in Belgium is not clear, but the idea of a civil war erupting in one of their countries at a time when they were beginning a structure to secure peace on the continent must have been very nerve-wracking. Negotiations nevertheless proceeded as planned, and the question of the city that would host the new institution had already arisen by the time of Léopold's abdication, with Luxembourg putting in an early bid.[46] The treaty establishing the ECSC was eventually signed in April 1951, nearly a year after Schuman's declaration, and the new institution was to begin work in August 1952, which meant deciding urgently which city would host the High Authority, whose first president was to be Jean Monnet. As the matter had not been resolved at the signing of the treaty, a meeting of foreign ministers was held in Paris on 24 July 1952. The French capital had, just three months earlier, been designated as the new headquarters of NATO, giving it a pivotal role in the security of Western Europe. Now it was going to host a key meeting to determine the political and economic future of European democracies. Five of the six ministers attending the meeting immediately supported Brussels. Had the Belgian government agreed, the matter would have been settled quickly, but the city authorities of Liège had already been pressuring for months, highlighting that Liège was perfectly placed to host the institutions as it was the centre of the Belgian coal and steel community. Wary of triggering any

new secessionist movements in Wallonia, the Belgian government insisted to the other ministers that the institutions had to go to Liège.[47] The problem for Liège and for the Belgian government was that none of the other five countries supported the Walloon city's candidacy.

That 24 July has become known as *La Nuit Folle* ('The Crazy Night'),[48] during which the assembled ministers (the Six) were forced — through lack of agreement — to consider, then discard, and then reconsider the alternative cities. Having failed to secure consensus on the option of Brussels, the ministers of Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany looked at locating the ECSC headquarters in the French cities of Paris and Strasbourg, the Italian city of Turin, the capital city of Luxembourg, the Dutch city of The Hague, and even — at Schuman's proposal — the German border-town of Sarrebrücken, on condition the Sarre region was given a special European status. Each of these options presented problems and by 3 a.m., tired and irritated, the ministers finally reached what they thought was an acceptable solution: not one, but two cities, Turin and Strasbourg, would host the High Authority of the new European Coal and Steel Community, and a press release was drafted with the announcement.

Upon hearing this, the designated president Jean Monnet — the man who had had the presence of mind, while Europe was being torn to shreds, to not only imagine post-war collaboration between France and Germany, but had also possessed the courage to voice his ideas to General de Gaulle at the height of the war — promptly declared that the ministers could no longer count on him to be the first president

of the Community if such a double-capital solution, which he considered unworkable, was confirmed. Faced with the risk of losing the man who best understood why the ECSC should exist and what it should achieve, the ministers had no choice but to start the discussions all over again.

Having vetoed his own capital Brussels but failed to secure any support for Liège, Belgium's minister proposed that the headquarters should be located in the Italian city of Turin. This was immediately backed by four other countries but blocked by West Germany, which argued that the institutions should be located in a 'neutral' city, and instead proposed The Hague. But the Belgian minister vetoed that proposal (no doubt internal Benelux rivalries played a part), prompting the Dutch minister to walk out, slamming the door behind him. While attempts were made to bring him back to the meeting, West Germany convinced Luxembourg to modify its proposal and offer to host the High Authority only temporarily, instead of permanently, until a final designation was made. Once the ministers gathered again, this proposal was formally made and *La Nuit Folle* finally came to an end: 'the organs of the Community would begin their work on 10 August 1952 in the city of Luxembourg', pending a final decision on the permanent location of the institutions. Little could the ministers imagine that night that the impasse over the permanent location would last another six years and that it would be resolved by the legacy of Julius Caesar.

It wasn't until 1957, when the European Coal and Steel Community evolved into the European Economic Community (EEC) under the Treaty of Rome, and that the High Authority needed certainty about its permanent home before

starting its work on 1 January 1958, that the matter was seriously addressed again. By then, the Royal Question that had nearly split Belgium was sufficiently settled, and the clear message that Liège had zero chances of becoming capital had been understood and accepted in Wallonia, such that the Belgian government, under a new prime minister, finally felt able to agree to Brussels being the host of the institutions of the new Common Market. The problem for Brussels this time was that by now the prize of hosting the institutions of the growing Community was even greater and more attractive, so that the cities of Nice and Milan added their names to the previous list of candidates, while Luxembourg demanded compensation if it was going to lose the High Authority it had been hosting since 1952. Once again, consensus was nowhere in sight. Yet everything was already in place for Brussels to become, within months, the capital of the developing Community.[49]

If Julius Caesar had never written about the Belgae and named this land Belgium; and had the Dukes of Burgundy not felt the need to seek ancient legitimacy for their control of Brussels and revived Caesar's name in their Latin texts; and if the leaders of Southern Netherlands had chosen a different name for their new nation upon achieving independence, the following simple bureaucratic procedure might very well have produced a different outcome for the capital of the EU. In preparation for the launch of the new Economic Community, the ministers had decided that they would take turns chairing the political work, proceeding in alphabetical order according to the names of each country, so when 1 January 1958 came and went without the newly recruited staff of the EEC knowing where they would be working, it was the

country starting with the letter B that had to find a solution for the personnel.[50] A new office building next to Cinquantenaire Park in Brussels had just become available and in February 1958, the government of Belgium — under pressure to urgently house the personnel of the ECSC and the new EEC — stepped in and rented it. From that moment on, with staff regularly arriving and settling in Brussels, the European Quarter of the Belgian capital quickly became a reality. And with that move by the Belgian government, which allowed the Common Market to get off the ground, the status of the city of Brussels as capital of the future European Union was literally set in stone.

Turin might instead have been chosen as capital on that crazy night of 24 July 1952 had West Germany not vetoed it; or perhaps Turin together with Strasbourg had Jean Monnet not declared it an unworkable combination. It might have been The Hague had Belgium not vetoed its Benelux partner, or Luxembourg had The Six decided to make the temporary arrangement permanent. It might never have been Brussels had Julius Caesar not conquered and made reference to the Belgae and Belgium in his diaries (and had the leaders of the Southern Netherlands not harked back to the Latin name of this land each time they fought for and gained independence, successfully and definitively after that opera-induced rebellion in 1830). And it would probably never have been Brussels had the ministers chosen a different method than the alphabet to share out the responsibility of chairing the political work of the European Economic Community.

Contrarily, the capital might have been Brussels from the very beginning had Léopold III been more prudent with his

wartime romance and had waited until the war was over and the Walloon prisoners safely back in Belgium before marrying his new love, or had he refrained from writing that infamous letter to the country's leaders-in-exile, which had sent Belgium down a dangerous path towards civil war. Had the king's behaviour been different during the war, Belgium would not have gone through the crisis that led its governments to veto Brussels as the host of the ECSC High Authority.

The story of Brussels becoming the capital of the European Union is one of accidents, coincidences, disagreements, conflicts, and poor judgement, but also of opportunities and of being in the right place at the right time. In fact, it is no wonder that Brussels was the preferred choice of most countries — even over their own candidate cities — despite Belgium's attempt to divert them towards Liège. Brussels is at the intersection of France and Germany, and of Dutch speakers and French speakers. It has historical ties to Austria, Luxembourg, Spain, and the Netherlands. And during the Nazi occupation, it was in Britain that its leaders sought and found refuge and it was British troops that liberated it from the Nazi tyranny. Brussels is a quintessentially European city, and it is a worthy capital of the Union, understanding as it does the cost of war, occupation, tyranny, and oppression, and the value of peace, freedom, tolerance, and democracy.

It was therefore no surprise that in 1966, when General De Gaulle withdrew France from the NATO military command and NATO leaders had to decide yet again on transferring the headquarters, they selected Brussels, the profoundly European city that was already hosting the budding institutions of the political union, and the city that had given its

name in 1948 to a treaty that had introduced the concept of collective security, later adopted and strengthened by NATO.

It was thus in the city of Brussels that the efforts of democratic Europe would come together to build a new architecture of security and prosperity that would break with the continent's destructive past.

These developments had come too late for Albert Jonnart, Erich and Edith Mayer, Jean Breuer, Hélène Zylberszac, Jean de Sélys-Longchamps, Youra Livchitz, and so many other thousands of residents of Brussels who had lost their lives to the murderous Nazi machine. But the purpose of these political, economic, and military developments was precisely to ensure that never again would anyone in Europe have to endure the fate that they had suffered. Today in Brussels it is possible to visit the street where Albert and Simone lived and hid Ralph. Renamed Avenue Albert Jonnart, a sign at the street entrance tells the story of the Jonnarts, the Mayers, and the Breuers. Not far, to the north of Square Vergote, one can visit the tomb of Youra Livchitz, at the site where he was executed. In the Anderlecht district of Brussels, where Hélène Zylberszac grew up, a memorial to the deported Jews carries her name, and at the site where Transport XX was halted by Livchitz and his friends there are large banners displaying portrait photos of many of the deported, including Hélène. Over on Avenue Louise, the building that the Gestapo had used as headquarters, a large bust of Jean de Sélys wearing his aviator cap pays tribute to him and his brave solo attack on the Gestapo.

At the entrance of Cinquantenaire Park, the bust that honours Robert Schuman carries an additional symbolism

that is little known: the sculptor, Nat Neujean, was born Abraham Nathan Neuman in Antwerp in 1923 to Polish parents who had initially intended to emigrate to the United States. Expelled from the Antwerp Arts Academy after the Nazi occupation of Belgium because he was Jewish, he made his way to Brussels, where he changed his name for his personal safety and joined the resistance, several times narrowly escaping arrest and deportation. His father, three sisters, and one brother were all assassinated in Auschwitz. Nat Neujean stayed in Brussels after the war and became a well-known sculptor in Belgium, portraying the horrors of the Holocaust in many of his art works and dying in 2018. His name can be read on the side of the pedestal that holds Schuman's bust.[51]

These are all important statements that pay tribute to some of the victims of Nazi tyranny and thus they recognise and remember how and why Brussels acquired its status as capital of the Union. They recall the suffering that led to the urgent need — once and for all — for a union of the peoples of Europe.

The immediate post-war years were not just a time of political convulsions and political innovations. They were also a time of reflection on the nature of war and the nature of human beings. The Nuremberg Trials of 1945 had revealed in detail to the world the unimaginable (but very much imagined and enacted!) horrors of the Nazi regime and its facilitators. At the same time, the brutality of communist regimes was starting to be understood.

After reading his daughter's diary, it took Otto Frank over a year to decide whether to publish it and whether to do so in full or in edited versions. The pain for Otto of reading

and re-reading the diary of the daughter he had lost — and the dilemma he faced between keeping his family's privacy and fulfilling his daughter's wish to be published — is hard to imagine. He was put in touch with a Dutch publisher, Jan Romein, who read the diary and wrote a newspaper column titled 'A Child's Voice', in which he wrote: 'When I finished the book, it was night and I was amazed that the lights were still on, that there was bread and tea, that I did not hear the roaring of airplanes or the thumping of soldiers' boots in the street — I had been captivated and taken back to the unreal world that is now almost a year behind us.'[52] This led to a first publication of 3,000 copies of the diary in 1947 with the title 'The Secret Annex'. The first English edition came out in 1952 as 'The Diary of Anne Frank', was adapted as a play in 1955 and performed on Broadway in New York City, and was taken to the big screen in 1959.[53] The voice of Anne Frank has since echoed down the decades in classrooms all over the world as a window onto a dark past and a warning not to take freedom for granted.

In those same years, writers and thinkers produced groundbreaking works. In June 1949, George Orwell published his novel *1984* about life in a totalitarian society where truth is whatever the leader and propagandists decide it will be on the day. He invented terms that have entered popular culture, such as 'doublethink', 'Big Brother', and 'Room 101'. And in 1951, the philosopher Hannah Arendt published *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she reflected on and analysed how so many ordinary individuals could have participated in and enabled the Nazi horrors. She explained that totalitarian regimes are formed and strengthened by deliberately

confusing fiction and reality, using mass media relentlessly to manipulate the way millions of people experience the world. And she argued that when individuals fail to engage critically with their own ideas they end up inside an echo chamber, detaching themselves from the world, and this becomes fertile ground for extremist ideology to take hold.[54]

For decades afterwards, historians pored over the archives trying to piece together the large and small events that took place before and during the war. Near the end of the twentieth century, the mystery of King Léopold III's refusal to help Professor Albert Errera and other Jews who sought his help during the Nazi persecution was solved: historians came across evidence that at the time the Nazis were introducing the first anti-Jewish measures in Belgium at the end of 1940, Léopold privately shared his view with his royal secretary that 'Jews were the cause of all of Belgium's problems'.[55] As if the figure of King Léopold III hadn't been toxic enough, this revelation confirmed what many had suspected during the war: that he was antisemitic and therefore his decision to stay in Belgium under Nazi occupation, his insistence on personally meeting Hitler, his happy life during the occupation, and his extremely insensitive letter to the Belgian leaders-in-exile were to also be viewed from this perspective. The revelation lent weight to words of those who, during the 1950 referendum on his return, had accused Léopold III of fascist tendencies.[56] By this time, however, Léopold had died and was virtually forgotten, and the credentials of Belgium and its capital city as pillars of European democracy and of European integration had been well established. So much so that Brussels was now the capital of a much larger union,

comprising most of Western Europe. The Soviet empire had collapsed and the Central and Eastern European countries that had been denied the democratic path when Stalin reneged on his Yalta Conference commitment were finally free to embark on it. They were knocking on the door of the European Union and of NATO, eager to be part of the prosperity and security structure established after the war.

In this first part of the book, we have relived the events that led to Brussels becoming capital of the European Union and have done so with a full view of the historical context at each relevant step of the way. We have seen how an uninhabited marshland became, in just five centuries, the centre of power of the Duchy of Brabant, then of the wealthy Duchy of Burgundy and its northern territories, and then the political home of Emperor Charles V, who ruled over two continents and an ocean. We have recalled the bombing by Louis XIV's troops that destroyed the magnificent market square, in an act that even Napoleon much later would describe as barbaric, and we have admired the resilience of the people of Brussels who rebuilt the Grand-Place to be even more spectacular. We have seen how the city went through a period as a provincial capital governed from far away as part of the Spanish Netherlands, the Austrian Netherlands, and the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, before becoming the capital of a new nation-state called Belgium. And we have established the direct connection between the name of that nation-state and the Roman Empire.

The history of Brussels, and indeed of Belgium, is richer and more complex. We have jumped over the brutal colonisation of the Congo by King Léopold II, and the long and

difficult occupation of Brussels by Germany in the First World War, and have done so in order to focus on the events that more directly tell the story of how Brussels became capital of the European Union. We have plunged into the Nazi occupation of Brussels and relived some of the harrowing events that occurred during that time as a way to recall why the European Union came into being and to understand the role of Brussels within it, recognising that it is a city with a profoundly European heritage and thus a very worthy capital of the Union.

The European Union, set up to guarantee peace, security, democracy, and prosperity, faces new and enormous threats in the twenty-first century: over the medium and long term, catastrophes resulting from the changing behaviour of our planet's atmosphere (i.e. its climate) and the urgent need to radically overhaul our carbon-based economy to a clean one; an ageing and declining population that needs immigration to sustain the continent's future, coupled with an uphill struggle to convince Europeans that successfully integrating migrants is not only necessary but also possible; and more immediately, a concerted effort to protect its democracy from increasing external and even internal attacks and, once again, Russian imperialism. The last of these not only represents a threat to the Union itself but is driving countries outside of the Union to clamour for EU membership at a time when the foundations of the NATO alliance have suffered perhaps irreparable damage following the second Trump Administration's attempts to take control of Greenland, sovereign territory of NATO ally the Kingdom of Denmark; its lukewarm commitment to NATO's Article 5; and its open rejection

of the international rules-based order in its 2026 National Defense Strategy. In this highly dangerous geopolitical environment, the challenge of admitting more countries into the EU before they are ready to function in a complex single market, as well as in a Union based on developed democratic systems and advanced public administrations, is not to be underestimated.

These threats and challenges are all still about peace, security, prosperity, and democracy, but their scale is beyond what any individual European state can tackle on its own, making the case for the existence and success of the European Union even stronger. Some argue that a treaty change is needed while others maintain that these challenges can be addressed via existing treaties. They might both be right and it is an important debate to be had, which will be resolved by weighing up the risks that both scenarios undoubtedly entail. What nobody should argue is that the Union can succeed, enlarge, and endure simply with better rules. It must have the support of its citizens. They must feel it is their Union. Without an emotional attachment to it like they might have to their local community or nation, the Union will be on weak ground, vulnerable to attacks from within and without. It is not about creating an identity that doesn't exist, it is about revealing an identity that is already there. Every corner of Europe has myriad connections with other parts of Europe, past and present, tangible and intangible, but they are often overlooked, hidden, or forgotten. It is in this task that local leaders are better placed than any other leaders to strengthen the Union's foundations and its connection with European citizens, and many mayors are already actively taking on this responsibility.

The story of Brussels is unique, but the stories of these other places and the people who lead them are no less so, and in the next chapters we will discover why the painting of Beethoven's grandfather meant so much to him and what this has to do with the EU. We will learn how the founder of a major American university was inspired by his education in Europe, we will visit the largest EU city in the Arctic, and we'll climb the highest chimney stack of the continent.

In so doing we will discover how liberal and democrat mayors are connecting the European Union with the ground, and successfully developing key policies of inclusion and integration, expanding democratic participation, keeping alive transatlantic ties, raising the voice of peripheral or less visible local communities, and transforming these places to give them a new future.

It is the fascinating and inspiring stories of some of these mayors and of their amazing towns and communities in Belgium, France, Finland, and Slovenia that we plunge into in Part 2, before returning to Brussels in Part 3 to see how mayors and regional leaders are helping to shape the Union.



↑ →
The simple basket-weaver's cottage on the Belgian coast to which the prince-regent retired was a place of simple comfort far from the opulence of royal palaces.





↑
The only souvenir he kept of his time as prince-regent: the postal stamps with his face, which he stopped from being printed.

2

The EU Downtown

CHAPTER 5

The Day of Symbols

(Mechelen, Belgium – Mayor Bart Somers)

On 29 June 1801, Ludwig van Beethoven wrote from Vienna, where he had settled, to his childhood friend in Bonn, Franz Wegeler. This was a highly significant letter, for it revealed two intimate details about the German composer.[1] He disclosed for the first time to anyone other than his doctors the alarming state of his hearing, which had been deteriorating for three years, and asked that his friend keep the news completely confidential, convinced as he was that public knowledge of his deafness would doom his successful career as a musician. The second noteworthy personal detail in the letter was a simple request: that Wegeler send him the portrait of his grandfather, Lodewijk van Beethoven,[2] which had hung in the Beethoven family home in Bonn. No explanation is given in the letter as to why at this point in time, the 30-year-old musical genius requested this particular painting, which he had last seen nearly a decade before,[3] and which depicted his relative who had died when Ludwig was only three. But Wegeler, being a close friend, had no need for any explanation, for he already knew how attached Beethoven was to his grandfather — he would later write that as a boy

Ludwig 'clung to this grandfather ... with the greatest affection' and that Ludwig's mother had frequently told him stories about the man she had known as her father-in-law, which the boy would then happily share with friends of his youth.[4] So, just as it had in his childhood home,[5] the portrait of his grandfather once again took pride of place in Beethoven's apartment in Vienna, as the young German composer Louis Schlösser observed during his visit in 1822: 'On the wall at the left of the door was the bed, completely covered with music, scores and manuscripts. I can recall only a framed oil painting (it was a portrait of Beethoven's grandfather for whom, as is known, he had a childlike reverence) which was the sole ornament I noticed.'[6]

The beautifully painted portrait shows a rosy-cheeked, soft-skinned, slightly plump man wearing a large-brimmed red and black beret that reveals a broad forehead, and a long thin nose. He is wearing an elegant blue robe decorated with golden tassels, leaning on one elbow as he turns the pages of a booklet of music partitions with the other hand.[7] Instead of focusing on the music, Lodewijk van Beethoven is staring out of the painting at you, with a slightly raised eyebrow in a mysteriously inquisitive gaze, as if asking who you are, or why you have come to him, or perhaps even what you think of the music he is reading.

It is easy to see why, apart from the emotional childhood connection, this portrait meant so much to Ludwig: it had powerful meaning, offering a silent visual explanation of his own purpose in life and the roots of his genius, which he could trace directly back to his grandfather. Indeed, as the portrait illustrates, music was also what drove and defined

Grandfather Lodewijk. By the time he died in 1773, three decades before Ludwig wrote from Vienna asking for the portrait to be sent to him, Grandfather Lodewijk had occupied for over a decade the highest possible office in the field of music at the Court of the archbishop elector of Cologne, who ruled over territories which are today found in Germany's North-Rhine Westphalia and Rhineland-Palatinate. As Kapellmeister,[8] Lodewijk was responsible for directing the choir and the orchestra, supplying new music material and performances, and hiring and managing the musicians.[9] In fact, Ludwig's grandfather had been a well-known and well-respected personality in Bonn — where the Court was based — for as many as 40 years, as a member of the Court choir and as an actor and singer in the theatre.[10]

However, unlike Ludwig and Ludwig's own parents, Grandfather Lodewijk was not originally from Germany at all, and this is where the Beethoven story becomes directly relevant to this book.

Lodewijk was born in 1712 in the Flemish city of Mechelen, which had been since the fifteenth century a major centre of judicial and financial power in the Low Countries,[11] very roughly today's Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The beautiful city of Mechelen is in modern-day Belgium, lying half-way between Brussels and Antwerp. As a child, Lodewijk sang in the chorister school linked to Mechelen's Saint Rumbold's Cathedral, and as a young adolescent learnt to play on the church organ, before leaving at the age of 20 to pursue his career, briefly in Liège and then for the rest of his life in Bonn. Lodewijk's father, the great-grandfather of the genius composer, was a baker and businessman in Mechelen

and was the descendent of van Beethovens living in or near Mechelen as far back as the early 1500s.[12]

So the famous German composer, Ludwig van Beethoven, whose music is today admired the world over, and who for most of his career was based in the Austrian capital Vienna, had strong family roots in the heart of Flanders, in today's Belgium.

Saint Rumbold's Cathedral, where Lodewijk learnt to play the organ, marks the centre of Mechelen still today, and one can walk up to the top of the bell tower attached to the cathedral's west end. There are exactly 538 medieval steps, going round and round, leading upwards towards the sky, with thick stone walls on either side, occasionally punctuated by small windows giving a view of the street below and the pedestrians appearing smaller and smaller. Eventually, one reaches the top of the tower and emerges onto a viewing platform offering a breathtaking vista. Way off in the distance, one can easily make out the distinctive shape of the Atomium, that popular Brussels monument built in 1958 to honour scientific progress, with its huge spheres rising 100 metres above the ground. The Atomium looks tiny from the top of this fifteenth-century tower 17 kilometres away, but its shape is unmistakable, and it is without a doubt, one of the most curious and interesting views of the Atomium there is to see. Looking slightly to the east of Brussels, a few kilometres closer in, planes can be spotted approaching the EU capital's busy international airport. Turning around to look in the opposite direction, the industrial silhouette of the city of Antwerp appears on the horizon at a similar distance to that of Brussels on the other side. And standing at the top

of this medieval cathedral tower, built long before aeroplanes were invented, and which the young Lodewijk would have been very familiar with, it becomes clear that there is no better way to understand Mechelen's place in Flanders and Belgium today than by climbing up to the top of this tower. Indeed, the people of Mechelen often define their city in relation to their proximity to Brussels and Antwerp. Mechelen is, after all, part of the province of Antwerp, many of its citizens work at the Brussels airport, and its large modern events hall markets itself as Brussels North. But Mechelen is also very much a city of its own, unique and pioneering in many ways, building on its extensive heritage — including that of the van Beethovens, of whom the city is visibly proud.

The house where Ludwig's grandfather grew up was, sadly, demolished in the early twentieth century, but the street is named after the van Beethovens and at the entrance of it there are two sculptures: one of Lodewijk, resembling the famous portrait that Ludwig asked to have sent over to him in Vienna, and one of a young Ludwig holding music partitions — grandfather and grandson facing each other.[13] And because the grandfather was himself such an accomplished musician, one could say that not only did Ludwig have roots in Mechelen, but his music did too, even if much of it was composed in Vienna.*

* Although recent DNA tests carried out on locks of Ludwig van Beethoven's hair have cast doubt over the biological connection between him and grandfather Lodewijk, implying that Ludwig or his father might have been illegitimate, the fact remains that as far as Ludwig was concerned, Lodewijk was his grandfather and a source of inspiration throughout his life. The musical connection with Mechelen thus remains valid. See A. D. Marcus (2023), 'DNA from Beethoven's hair unlocks family secret', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 March.

Amongst the most famous of Ludwig van Beethoven's many musical compositions is the Ninth Symphony, whose fourth and final movement is known as the 'Ode to Joy', inspired by and carrying the same name as Friedrich von Schiller's poem about brotherhood. The Ninth Symphony was first performed in Vienna in 1824 to huge acclaim. By then, the composer was completely deaf, and it is said that the audience gave Beethoven five standing ovations and threw hats in the air and waved handkerchiefs so that he could see with his own eyes the level of their appreciation.[14] Indeed, it is no exaggeration to state that the Ninth Symphony is one of the most extraordinary individual achievements in human history, given that Beethoven never heard a single note of it yet knew perfectly in his mind how it all sounded. It is worth finding an hour and twenty minutes to listen to the full symphony, as it is truly an awe-inspiring and rousing experience.

In musical terms alone, the Ninth Symphony has had a lasting impact, but some believe that there was more to the Ninth than just the notes. It was well known that Beethoven was an avid follower of political events in Europe, at times dedicating his compositions to political leaders he admired or even retracting the dedication when disappointed by them.[15] In the book *The Ninth: Beethoven and the World in 1824*, Harvey Sachs states that in 'the exile' of his deafness, Ludwig was searching his subconscious in order to fulfil an artist's duty to help achieve worldwide human harmony.[16] We will never know if Beethoven intended anything other than the music. What we do know is that he could never have imagined back in 1824 that the following century, after

two cataclysmic wars on the continent, not only would nations of Europe be creating a union that would prevent them from ever again destroying each other, but that to symbolise that aspiration they would adopt, in 1985, his 'Ode to Joy' from the Ninth Symphony as the anthem of the Union. We will never know, either, what he would have thought of this, but it is not unreasonable to assume that he would have approved of any serious effort to bring permanent peace to Europe.

Thus, in 2017, almost two centuries after the 'Ode to Joy' was first performed and over three decades after it became the official anthem of the EU, the city of Mechelen didn't have to look far for a place to gather when its mayor invited citizens to celebrate Europe Day (9 May) for the first time. A stage was put up next to the two Beethoven sculptures and the local police band was brought in to play the 'Ode to Joy'. The mayor of Mechelen, Bart Somers, explained: 'It's good that for one day every year we think about the European project, that we think what can be done better, how we can change Europe in a positive way, and how we can make it stronger and as a liberal mayor, I think it is very important to organise on such a day a moment for people to come together around the symbolism of Europe.'[17]

But there is so much more behind that simple statement of his. At its root lies a whole philosophy that has captured the attention of European and national political leaders, other mayors, policymakers, and journalists around the world and helps to understand what Mayor Somers sees in the celebration of Europe Day, and which other mayors can emulate in their own towns and cities.

It all started on the night of 9 November 1989, over a decade before Somers was elected mayor. That night, together with some fellow students in the basement of their student house, he was watching a brand-new all-news channel called CNN when suddenly came the astonishing report that people were climbing the Berlin Wall, cheering and chanting, some of them hammering away to destroy it. Even more astonishingly, the East German border guards who over the years had shot and killed over 100 people trying to flee to West Berlin were simply standing by allowing this to happen.[18] For months the communist regimes of Central and Eastern Europe had been collapsing at a rate that nobody had foreseen and, after decades of repression, the cry for freedom of East Europeans was unstoppable. The Berlin Wall had become over the years one of the symbols of that repression, and the young Somers and his friends realised that history was being made that night – and they also knew they had to be a part of it. A few hours later they found themselves in Berlin at the famous Checkpoint Charlie, surrounded by jubilant crowds welcoming East Germans driving over from East Berlin, and they joined in with the hammering to help bring the wall down. Later that night, when looking for a place to sleep, they found that the platforms of every metro station in West Berlin were taken up by East Berliners too frightened to return to the East, because they expected Soviet tanks to roll in any minute and reinstate the repression. Eventually, Bart Somers and his friends found a spot to lay out their sleeping bags and catch some sleep. The following morning a father and daughter, clearly from East Berlin, walked by and, surprised by the people sleeping on the platform, the daughter

asked, 'Daddy, what is that?', and the father replied 'My darling, that is freedom.' In his book, *Samen Leven*, Somers says that from that day on he knew he would become an advocate for a society based on freedom. Thus began a journey that would lead to his election for the Flemish liberal party VLD (which later became Open VLD and is now called Anders) as mayor of Mechelen in 2001 and the complete transformation of the depressed city, culminating in his receiving the 2016 World Mayor award. This, in turn, placed Mechelen — a city of 85,000 and more than 130 nationalities — in a leading role in Europe.

The Mechelen of 2001 was a place with the highest crime rate in Flanders, and where pride in the city was low.[19] Its splendorous, influential past was a very distant memory. The extreme right was the single most voted party, and relations between the various ethnic communities were very tense.

I have had the privilege of hearing Bart Somers tell his story several times, and there is an expression he has coined which has stuck in my mind for how it accurately captures the problem faced by many cities in Europe today: in 2001, when he became mayor, Mechelen functioned more as an 'archipelago of monocultural islands' than as a city. He explains that a city where different groups of people live side by side but not together is a segregated city, and such a situation feeds the 'us versus them' narrative, which becomes a threat for any society: 'why do those people get a park and we don't', 'why do the police control us but not them', and so on.[20] He knew that he had to create a new narrative that would work for the whole city, so that all citizens would think themselves first and foremost a citizen of Mechelen rather

than of a specific community or neighbourhood. And for that he needed to build trust.

For those worried about crime, he increased security. For newcomers suffering discrimination, he defended their right to be in Mechelen as much as his own right (his family roots in the city go back to the early sixteenth century). For people burdened by the social label put on them, he rejected groupthink and approached every citizen as an individual. For those suffering poverty, he invested in high-quality public infrastructure. For citizens suspicious of other communities, he broke down the ghettos. And for all, he pointed to the future rather than clinging to a nostalgic past. At the heart of his philosophy is the firm belief that every effort made for any one individual contributes to a better coexistence for all citizens of Mechelen.

In a 2017 essay he wrote for a Spanish think tank, 'The Mechelen Model: An Inclusive City' (see endnotes), Mayor Somers elaborated further on each of these points, explaining that he didn't want any neighbourhood where children would grow up thinking 'police officers are the enemy and drug dealers are role models […] where the rule of law has been replaced by the rule of the jungle'. So he invested heavily in police forces and fighting criminality, using a zero tolerance approach in certain areas or during certain times. Some people disliked this, but he argues that 'in the long run, a security policy is also a social policy' because if someone is poor and their car gets stolen the consequences can be dramatic: 'You don't have money to buy a new one right away, you can't get to work, you can't drop your children [off] at school.' Being a true leader, Somers knows that relying

exclusively on a top-down approach ultimately results in failure or stagnation, and that long-term success comes from effectively involving the grassroots and helping them take ownership. So, they created a system whereby local interns would be given responsibility to keep watch over the playground, preventing vandalism and telling younger kids to keep the noise down at night: 'This creates a growing sense of responsibility for these interns and it stimulates them to think about the rules in society. On the other side, the younger children respect them as "playground leader" because it actually is someone's older brother, or the nephew of a friend, etc.'

Protecting and shoring up the rule of law was only one side of the coin, and building trust and a society where everyone felt they belonged and looked out for each other was the other side, requiring zero tolerance of discrimination. Thus, on the occasion of a historical immigration milestone in Flanders, 124 photos of citizens from different nationalities were displayed for one year in the main square of Mechelen to say: 'we're proud of this, they are part of us and our city'. More poignantly, after the 2016 Brussels terrorist attacks, including the attack on Brussels airport just 11 km from Mechelen where many of his citizens work, Mayor Somers went to the local mosque where nearly 1,000 were congregated: 'I told them that for me they were victims twice over. First of all as citizens, like every one of us. But secondly as Muslims, because these terrorists hijacked their religious identity and transformed it into something barbaric. Consequently they now always have to explain that they are not like these terrorists, that they hate them just as much as we do. They're drawn into a corner and have to apologise for

who they are. They shouldn't have to do that, because they are just as much victims as we are. This visit, these festive occasions, and other initiatives are crucial moments in bringing people with different backgrounds and identities together.'

And those moments help to tackle another trap that is so prevalent in Europe today: groupthink, whereby often certain communities either become synonymous with crime or abusers of social benefits or instead are seen as victims who need permanent assistance and understanding. This is one-dimensional thinking that leads to caricatures, argues Somers: 'People have many identities: Flemish, Belgian, European, father, lawyer, liberal and so on. Depending on where we are and who we are talking to, our identities shift. When I'm in Barcelona I'm a Belgian. When I'm in Belgium I'm an inhabitant of Mechelen. We need to see people as individuals, not as groups. If we tag them as belonging to a group, e.g., Muslims, then we are blind to all their different and other identities, e.g. mother, sister, artist, and so on. We succumb to one-dimensional thinking and by doing so we're making caricatures of one another.' To illustrate the point, he explains that there was a Moroccan youth club in Mechelen that did many good things, but which ended up focusing exclusively on what makes Moroccans different from the others in society, and 'if you keep heading down that track it results in playing Moroccan music exclusively, [as if] all Moroccans exclusively love Arabic music. As if I would only love Schlager music. As if Moroccans only eat couscous and as if I only eat mussels and French fries.' Engaging with people as individuals allows us to discover common interests and create bonds of collaboration and friendship.

While all of the above was essential, it still did not address the 'archipelago of monocultural islands'. Bringing people together who have judged each other through stereotypes — or, worse still, have viewed each other with suspicion — is not easy, and here is where leadership is required to establish the right conditions for people to mix and bond: 'We invested a lot in poor neighbourhoods to give them equally fancy parks and playgrounds. Normally when policymakers decide to renew something in a poor neighbourhood they are [talked into using] "vandal-proof' materials", which reinforces the message that the neighbourhood is "being ghettoised". That's why we consciously chose the same high-quality materials, because every citizen deserves the same quality. Indirectly it attracts the middle classes to come back to the city, creating a super-diverse city in all its aspects. These middle-class citizens are actually unpaid social workers. By organising street activities, they bring people together because they have the social capacity to do so.' The Mayor and his team also worked on other measures to prevent entrenching the ghettos, specifically with schools, encouraging greater representation of the city population, in this way breaking down those monocultural islands — whether Flemish white and well-off or migrant working-class — and instead building one single community of citizens of Mechelen.

Underlying this whole strategy was the new narrative for the city: 'Since 1520 my family has lived in Mechelen […] but I'm the first generation that lives in a multicultural super-diverse Mechelen and I don't have more rights than Mustafa, whose family has been here since 1966 […] We all have to integrate into a new reality and it requires efforts from all

of us'. The mayor explains that this applies to everyone in Europe, and he even extended an invitation to Hungary's then prime minister, Viktor Orban, who is a leader of the anti-immigrant movement, to visit Mechelen to see how diversity can be made to work.[21]

The Mechelen model of integration grabbed the attention of Europe and the world after Somers wrote a report for the European Committee of the Regions in 2016.[22] This prompted a fact-finding visit in October that year of the EU's commissioner responsible for security, Julian King;[23] the announcement in February 2017 of the 2016 World Mayor Award; and visits and meetings with other European commissioners, members of the European Parliament, the Danish prime minister, and the US ambassador to Belgium, amongst many other visits, lectures, and media interviews since.[24]

One of the contributions supporting the nomination of Bart Somers for the World Mayor Prize summed it up as follows: '"Connect." That's the key word in the policies of Mayor Somers: connecting people, connecting parties, connecting politicians and officials […] Under the motto "Everyone a Mechelaar" he unifies them all. Mayor Somers […] always focus[es] on the positive, on what unites us rather than what divides us.'[25] Not for nothing is his book, mentioned earlier, called *Samen Leven*. In English, it translates into *Living Together.*

So when together, through our work in the Committee of the Regions, we discussed in early 2017 the idea to celebrate Europe Day,[26] he grabbed at the opportunity as a logical next step in connecting the people of Mechelen to the European part of their identity. Since the early 1990s, Europe

Day is celebrated on 9 May, in commemoration of the declaration that Robert Schuman made on that day in 1950 proposing the creation of the European Coal and Steel Community, the precursor of today's European Union. Observance of the day has been limited and patchy, being observed more in some Member States than in others, and in some places only by official institutions, while in others there are festivities involving the citizens. We felt that this was something that needed to be done more systematically and in which city mayors could make a huge difference.

With only a few weeks to prepare and no budget allocated, Mayor Somers had to act quickly and creatively. He invited his citizens to gather at the Beethoven sculptures to listen to the local police band play the 'Ode to Joy' and to share with one another their experience of what European unity means to them.[27]

What began in 2017 as a small gathering and simple celebration has grown exponentially. It immediately became an annual event officially approved by the city council, with a budget and a planning team, with new activities in subsequent years, such as providing opportunities for citizens to make proposals for a better Europe or inviting guest speakers to debate about the Union with the public. And in 2023 and 2024, it was transformed into a macro-festival coinciding with Belgium's turn to hold the presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2024.

The festival, called Construct Europe, centred around three themes: connection, cooperation, and democratic dialogue. With a dedicated website,[28] it launched two public calls for project ideas in 2022 and 2023, culminating with a first

Week of Europe running between 5 and 12 May 2023. Its programme included a theatre performance giving audiences a humorous account of the history of the Union; a cultural event showcasing literature and music from Spain, which held the rotating presidency of the Council just before Belgium; a live documentary concert reliving pivotal moments in recent European history through the eyes of millennials who were there when they happened; a lecture series focusing on past and present challenges faced by the European Union; and an event remembering the end of World War II on 8 May 1945.[29]

That week in 2023 then became a ten-month festival in 2024, with a large kick-off party on 6 January, focusing on music, dance, circus, heritage, and museums, and an evening show bringing together different art disciplines.[30] The festival then moved for the rest of the year to the streets, museums, cultural centres, and schools. For the latter, 50 schoolteachers were invited to become 'Europe Teachers' throughout the year, with the aim of helping the future generations to keep working for peace and cooperation in Europe.[31]

As Mayor Somers explained when announcing the kick-off party: with this festival 'Mechelen symbolises the European values of connection, diversity and progress.'

At a summit of liberal mayors in Amsterdam in December 2017 at which they jointly called on mayors across Europe to celebrate Europe Day, Mayor Somers said: '[If we celebrate it] in every city in every town of Europe, we will create a movement [that will] mobilise people to stand up for the European project, because the vast majority of Europeans still strongly believe in the added value of Europe […] Europe

[has given] us peace for over 70 years, prosperity, a very strong social network, and it brings people together. It's the place where we can build our future. If we leave the European track we will mean nothing in the world of tomorrow. So, on behalf of [future] generations, we have to stand up now.'[32]

Most cities and towns won't have a connection with the EU anthem or any of its major symbols, or they will have to wait for years before their country holds the presidency of the Council. But celebrating Europe Day is much more than the EU's symbols, it is about revealing existing connections, establishing new ones, and allowing the European dimension of every individual's identity to emerge and flourish. This can be done in a myriad of ways. In other cities, mayors have organised events with Erasmus students, arranged for school exchanges (physically or online), as well as cultural and gastronomical events. They have organised guided tours of the places in their town that have received EU funding or have invited EU civil servants to visit and explain to citizens what they do for the Union and to answer their questions. The list of possibilities is almost endless and any municipality, regardless of its size, can easily find ways to celebrate the day in its own way. As Mechelen has demonstrated, starting small and simple can be effective and can lead to new and bigger initiatives. But celebrating Europe Day doesn't have to be a big event. The important thing is to start, and then to find what is right for each local community over the long term.

If in this chapter we have seen how an annual celebration like Europe Day helps to focus attention on the European dimension of a community's identity, the mayor featured in the next chapter has found a less visible — but

more sustained — way of keeping his community connected with the Union and its fundamental values all throughout the year. To understand his approach, we first have to cross the Atlantic.



↙
The author and Mayor Bart Somers in Washington, DC, in July 2018. They had been invited by the European Liberal Forum to attend a meeting with members of the U.S. Congress.

→
The statue in Mechelen in honour of the young Beethoven and...

↓
...the monument displaying his grandfather's portrait.







When Belgium held the presidency of the Council of the EU in the first half of 2024, Mechelen expanded its usual Europe Day celebrations and began already with a festival in January. The author toured the city as preparations were getting underway.



CHAPTER 6

The Streams of Knowledge

(Saint-Omer, France – Mayor François Decoster)

Standing on the Key Bridge that crosses the Potomac River in Washington, DC, one can clearly observe in the distance the tall, thin, pointed world-famous obelisk known as the Washington Monument, one of the symbols of the United States' capital city built in honour of the first American president. The fact that by now it has not been dwarfed and obscured by huge surrounding skyscrapers and that the capital as a whole still preserves the skyline much as it was over a century ago is because tall buildings are banned in Washington, DC, by the Height of Buildings Act of 1899, which has been renewed and confirmed on several occasions since.[1] There were similar bans in other US cities at the time, but they were gradually repealed by city authorities throughout the twentieth century.[2]

The District of Columbia (the 'DC' in the U.S. capital's name) was initially governed by the U.S. Congress and didn't acquire the right to elect its own mayor until 1973. This means that the Height of Buildings Act is a federal law and cannot be repealed by the city, even if they wanted to. Although the skyline in Washington, DC, is a recurring topic

which triggers heated discussion, the fact is that the Washington Monument is still one of the most prominent and recognisable landmarks of the US capital and instantly grabs one's attention when looking eastwards from Key Bridge. This particular bridge, although unremarkable in its design, is itself part of the surrounding national symbolism: completed in 1923, its full name is, in fact, the Francis Scott Key Bridge in honour of the man who wrote in 1814 'The Star-Spangled Banner', the poem that would eventually become the national anthem of the United States.[3]

The Key Bridge crosses the Potomac River, a body of water discovered, used, and named by the people who inhabited North America before Europeans arrived while on their voyage to discover a new route to India. The Potomac, which means 'river of swans' in the Algonquian Native American language,[4] is sometimes referred to as the Nation's River for the role it has played at many significant moments in American history, including acting as the border separating the Union and Confederate forces during the Civil War. Today, apart from supplying the capital's residents with water, the Potomac is also a major hub of the tourist circuit and, from the Key Bridge, water taxis and city cruises can be seen chugging up and down the river, weaving their way around islands up to and under the bridge.

Turning around to look westwards, the view reveals the imposing gothic towers of Healy Hall, the flagship building of Georgetown University, one of America's prestigious and internationally renowned universities, the oldest Catholic one in the United States, and the alma mater of two former US presidents: Lyndon B. Johnson and Bill Clinton. Standing

on that bridge contemplating the impressive Georgetown University, surrounded by so much American history and symbolism that has come to be so well known and recognised around the world, many would be surprised to learn that this emblematic American university has deep roots in a small town in Europe, and that those roots have recently been revived.

If you had stood at the site of Key Bridge on 1 March 1815, only months after the battle of Baltimore that inspired Francis Scott Key to write 'The Star-Spangled Banner',[5] you would have had a very different experience. To begin with, you would have had to stand on a boat, as there was no bridge at that point back then,[6] and looking eastwards there would have been no Washington Monument, as it was not even an idea yet. If you turned to look in the opposite direction, instead of Georgetown's Healy Hall, you would have seen a much smaller building, known today as Old North, standing almost alone on the hill and which was one of the two original buildings of the university, known in those days as Georgetown College.

That first day of March 1815 was especially significant for the college: President James Madison, widely considered to be the father of the United States Constitution, signed an act granting Georgetown College the status of university with the right to deliver bachelor's degrees.[7] Indeed, since its foundation in 1791, Georgetown College had been functioning as a primary and secondary school for boys as young as eight. In many ways, the whole concept of the college reflected the education that the founder, a Jesuit priest called John Carroll, had himself received. Born in the American

state of Maryland, he was sent to Europe as a boy, where he spent a total of 26 years studying and teaching, and the ideas he brought back to America profoundly shaped his plan for education at Georgetown.[8]

John Carroll was born into a wealthy Maryland family, the second son of Daniel Carroll and Eleanor Darnall. John's father, Daniel, was born in 1696 in what is today County Offaly in Ireland, and he emigrated to Maryland due to the exclusion of Catholics from mainstream society in Ireland under British rule and, specifically, because of the consequences his father suffered for opposing the British.[9] Daniel arrived in Maryland at the age of 21, married into a wealthy family, and prospered as a merchant. Together with Eleanor he had six children, including two boys: John, the founder of Georgetown University, born in 1735; and John's older brother Daniel, born in 1730,[10] who would later become a signatory of the United States Constitution and a personal friend of George Washington.

Maryland in the eighteenth century was a British colony, and Catholics were banned from providing education, so in 1742, Daniel and Eleanor sent their elder son Daniel to study at an English-language Jesuit college in the northernmost tip of France.[11] A few years later, he was joined by his brother John and their cousin Charles Carroll of Carrollton, whose family had also left Ireland for Maryland for similar reasons and who himself would later become a key figure in the early years of the United States, including being one of the signatories of the American Declaration of Independence.[12] At that time, of course, nobody could have known that these three Irish-American boys attending the school in France

would have such remarkable careers as adult men: Charles signing the Declaration of Independence, Daniel signing the United States Constitution, and John founding Georgetown University. The result, however, is that there is a town in France with an extraordinary connection to the founding of the United States of America, and if nobody back then could have guessed what those boys would achieve later in life, no-one could even imagine that two and a half centuries later there would be such a thing as the European Union, and that their stay in that town would be in any way relevant to this twenty-first-century Union.

Sending one's children across the Atlantic for several years in order to receive the desired instruction could not have been an easy decision for any parent, but it was made easier for Daniel and Eleanor by the fact that the precedent had already been set in the family: the father and uncle of their nephew Charles had studied there years before,[13] and both lines of the Carroll family were therefore well acquainted with the European town and its highly respected educational establishment.

One could be forgiven for assuming that John, his brother Daniel, and their cousin Charles were sent to study in Lille, Calais, or Dunkirk, perhaps the three most internationally recognised cities of that part of France. However, the answer will come as a surprise to many: the French town that has this historic link with the foundation of the United States of America is Saint-Omer.

If there were an index that measured surprises per capita, it's quite possible that Saint-Omer would rank amongst the highest in its country, and almost certainly of its region.

For one, this town of 15,000, relatively less well known than other cities of the region, boasts an illustrious history and accomplishments going back many centuries. Saint-Omer was granted the status of a city long before most of its counterparts in Western Europe, nearly 900 years ago.[14] A clue to its important place in history is immediately evident to the first-time visitor well before arriving: its Notre-Dame Cathedral can be seen reaching up into the heavens, high above the town's skyline, signalling to those approaching that this town once held a very special place in the region. Tracing its origins back to the foundation of two seventh-century monasteries in the area, Saint-Omer quickly grew in regional and strategic importance because of its economic and cultural activity, inevitably changing hands several times in the early centuries between France and the Netherlands, becoming permanently French from 1678 onwards. It was as a result of the religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century — and specifically the ban on any Catholic education in Britain after King Henry VIII broke with the Vatican — that the English Jesuit College was founded in 1592 in Saint-Omer, which at the time was in the Spanish-controlled Netherlands. Its position, together with the demand amongst Catholic parents in Britain, soon led to the Saint-Omer Jesuit College becoming the largest Catholic school in the English-speaking world.[15] By 1763, at least 4,000 boys from England, Wales, Ireland, Maryland, and the Caribbean had received instruction there.[16]

Saint-Omer's link with some of the founding fathers of the United States is perhaps the most astonishing of the many connections that make this town's history and heritage unique,

but it is by no means the only surprising one. One such surprising connection links Saint-Omer with what was perhaps the first mass-membership movement of modern times and a precursor to democratic political parties which have become such fundamental features of modern democracies.

In January 1791, a 15-year-old boy from County Kerry, Ireland, and his younger brother arrived to study at the college upon the express wishes of their wealthy uncle, who wanted to secure for his nephews the best possible education available to Catholics, in particular for the elder nephew, who had impressed him with his academic ability. The Saint-Omer college was by then no longer run by Jesuits, who had been forced to close or give up their colleges nearly three decades earlier in 1763, before being expelled from France in 1764;[17] in fact, it was the subsequent universal suppression of the order by Pope Clement XIV in 1773 that forced the American John Carroll, himself a Jesuit, to abandon Europe forever after 26 years and to return to the American colonies.[18] Years later, in January 1791, at the very moment that the two Irish boys arrived from Ireland in Saint-Omer, John Carroll was getting ready to open his own Jesuit school, Georgetown College, in what was by then the United States of America.[19] And while that was happening on the banks of the Potomac River in the young American nation, the 15-year-old from County Kerry settled in Saint-Omer to spend a year and a half studying French, Latin, Greek, English, geography, music, and theatre.[20] His time there left a mark, to the extent that in a letter to the uncle, the principal of Saint-Omer, Gregory Stapleton, predicted that the lad was 'destined to make a remarkable figure in society'.[21]

That Irish boy, Daniel O'Connell, would later go on to fulfil those expectations, founding and leading the Catholic Association, attracting hundreds of thousands of members and organising so-called 'monster meetings',[22] and through this association successfully campaigning non-violently for the emancipation of Catholics in British-controlled Ireland.[23] O'Connell would also support the cause to emancipate Jews in Britain; would become a leading voice in Europe to abolish slavery, even impressing American abolitionists;[24] and would be described, almost on his deathbed, by the French politician the count of Montalembert as 'the man who, in our time, has done the most for the dignity and freedom of the human kind, especially for the political education of the peoples of the West'.[25]

Indeed, Ireland's national hero Daniel O'Connell, known as 'The Liberator', who is honoured in Dublin with a large monument and a major street named after him, was widely respected in Europe and beyond, but nowhere more so — outside of Ireland — than in France. The British historian and politician Thomas Babington Macaulay said in a speech in 1844 in the House of Commons: 'Look over any file of French journals; and you will see what a space he occupies in the eyes of the French people.'[26] Even General Charles de Gaulle himself, over a century later in 1969, insisted on visiting Derrynane House, Daniel O'Connell's childhood home, when he visited Ireland, explaining that his own grandmother had written a biography of O'Connell.[27]

Daniel O'Connell's ties with France went deep: he wrote, spoke, and read French — including major authors like Voltaire — and he insisted his children learn the language,

sending six of them to spend nearly two years in south-western France,[28] and we know that over the years he had strong opinions on political developments in France.[29] We will never know for certain what influence his studies in Saint-Omer had on some of his thoughts and achievements in later life, but we do know that it was in Saint-Omer that he began to master the French language. Had his uncle not recognised his academic potential as a young boy and not insisted that he go to France to receive the best possible education available to Catholics, and had the principal of Saint-Omer not confirmed his uncle's impressions by predicting a brilliant future for Daniel, it is very possible that O'Connell may have followed a very different path, not reaching his potential and leading a much more obscure life instead. It was thus Saint-Omer that provided him with some of the grounding upon which he would later build his remarkable and internationally influential career. It is an illustration of how strongly associated Saint-Omer became with education (from the sixteenth century onwards) that three decades after the Jesuits had left, it was still a place that Catholic families outside of France would turn to when looking to provide the best possible education to their sons.

Given its preeminent place in western Europe for centuries in the fields of education and culture, it is not surprising that Saint-Omer today boasts a spectacular library with many rare and valuable books, such as an original copy of the Gutenberg Bible.[30] Its archives continue to reveal its treasures, so much so that in September 2014, the librarian Rémy Cordonnier fortuitously came across a copy of William Shakespeare's First Folio, a first-print edition of 36 of his

plays in a single publication from 1623, seven years after his death. Used for the dramatic arts that formed part of the Jesuit teaching method, it had been in the library's archives for at least three centuries and long forgotten.[31] How it got there is still the subject of debate and research, but such a prized treasure, together with the copy of the Gutenberg Bible, is further evidence of the very special place that Saint-Omer came to occupy over many centuries.

It was in this town, steeped in all this beautiful and profound heritage, that only a few decades ago, in 1983, a ten-year-old boy approached his school headmaster, somewhat apologetically. The school had organised a charity fund-raising initiative and the boy had decided to do his part. However, he had only managed to raise a few coins and rather sheepishly went to hand the small sum to the headmaster, whose reaction took the young lad by surprise. Thanking him for the effort, the headmaster exclaimed: 'Small streams make big rivers!' Today, nearly four decades later, that remark from his headmaster is one of the underlying principles of Mayor François Decoster's approach to his political action and relationship with the people of Saint-Omer, especially when it comes to connecting them with the European Union. And it also has underpinned his work as one of the leading figures of the European liberal and democrat political family, Renew Europe.

Decoster was born outside of the municipal boundaries, but within the first week of his life moved with his parents to become a resident of Saint-Omer. His headmaster's encouraging reaction spurred him on and led him to continue his involvement in his local community, and as a teenager, he joined a local association that helped Cambodian refugees

in Thailand and orphans in Romania, as well as helping local underprivileged children to play football or to visit the Coupole — a World War II museum and astronomical planetarium just 5 km outside Saint-Omer, inside what was an underground V2 missile launch site, which the Nazis built using slave labour with the purpose of bombing Britain.[32]

Not surprisingly, therefore, the calling of public service came to Decoster very early and by the age of 22 he was on the list of candidates to the local council. His mother, however, had other plans and, worried about a career in politics for her young son, she had a quiet word with the mayor and asked that he make sure that her François would not get elected. So, unaware of his mother's parallel campaign, the young Decoster ended up low down on the list of candidates and just missed out on becoming an elected democratic representative. Although his mother's plan had worked, it did not last for long, because he became the de facto first-in-line to fill any vacancy on the council. Sure enough, two years later, a councillor resigned and François Decoster took office for the first time. It was 1997. Seventeen years later, the people of Saint-Omer would put their trust in him to lead the city.

Those intervening years gave Decoster the opportunity to develop his understanding of local government as well as of the wider world. A passionate European, he studied at the College of Europe in the Belgian city of Bruges, developed a professional career in national public administration, and travelled to all five continents, such that today he says he has been around the world several times.

It is often remarked that some people go into politics to *be* something, while others go into politics to *achieve* something.

Decoster is most definitely among the latter, and becoming mayor gave him the chance to unleash those streams his headmaster had planted in his mind.

Already during his election campaign, he initiated a series of *'balades urbaines'* (neighbourhood walks), which involved himself and his campaign team strolling down neighbourhood streets giving citizens the opportunity to approach him and discuss their needs and ideas for the community. He once explained to me that it was a way to show the citizens of Saint-Omer that he intended to govern *with* them. Indeed, soon after his election, Mayor Decoster introduced an important dimension of participatory democracy in the governance of Saint-Omer by establishing seven Conseils de quartiers, or Neighbourhood Councils, each with a budget of €5,000, each composed of up to 15 volunteer citizens plus an elected member of the municipal council.[33] Their purpose: to allow citizens to participate directly in the governance of their communities and in decisions to improve their neighbourhoods.

A key feature of their work programme is the annual Citizen's Day, in which neighbours are invited to take part in a collective effort to carry out a project decided by the Neighbourhood Council, such as improving a local garden or repairing and restoring street benches. Throughout the year, the Neighbourhood Councils organise exhibitions, celebrations, street and garden decorating, charity initiatives, awareness-raising about the environment, and so on.[34] These are all in addition to the large-scale policy decisions and investments carried out by the municipality and are intended to develop forms of participatory democracy. As Mayor Decoster

has been known to say: 'Governing is a process, it takes time, and it's about teamwork'. His commitment to that philosophy is such that as part of his re-election campaign in March 2026, he announced a new policy of opening up the municipal thematic committees on selected dates to involve citizens alongside members of the city council in the discussions as direct participants and co-designers of decisions.

His appointment to the European Committee of the Regions in 2012 provided new opportunities for Decoster and Saint-Omer; it is no surprise, then, that when he discovered in 2017 the Austrian programme Local Councillors for Europe, he immediately realised the potential this had to connect his town and its residents with the European Union. By May 2018, he had set up an equivalent network in Saint-Omer and surrounding municipalities, which he called Correspondants Europe. The Austrian programme had been founded jointly in 2010 by the Austrian government, the Association of Austrian Municipalities, and the European Commission Representation in Vienna.

The scheme was based on the recognition that mayors and local councillors are often the first point of contact when it comes to questions or concerns that citizens have about the European Union. This may seem surprising, considering the fact that there are other democratically elected representatives who are more directly involved in EU affairs, such as the members of the European Parliament or some members of national parliaments. But the reality is that with over one million elected representatives at the local level who are regularly out and about interacting with their constituents, it is far more likely that Europeans will have a conversation

with (or know how to get in touch with) a local politician than a national or European one. And as anyone who has experienced or witnessed how citizens interact with politicians, the latter must be prepared to receive any type of question, often about matters outside their area of democratic competence — including, of course, the decisions taken at the European level.

If one considers, in addition, that well over half of all EU laws have to be implemented at the subnational level,[35] it is even more incumbent on European and national leaders to develop a partnership with their subnational counterparts, in particular mayors and local councillors, so that they are able to answer citizens' questions, inform them proactively of European decisions and opportunities, and elevate their ideas and suggestions to the EU level.

More than 1,100 local councillors have joined the Austrian initiative so far and they have a variety of ways to close the gap between citizens and the European Union: they maintain regular contact with the EU institutions to receive tailor-made information about current developments in Europe; they can publish European and EU-related articles in local media outlets; set up European and EU-related communal libraries and information desks in local municipalities; organise Europe Day events and panel discussions in local municipalities; organise informational events, discussions, and EU-related school trips; organise municipal study trips to Brussels; develop cross-border municipal networks; and build expertise in the area of European and EU funding structures. In order to carry out this mission competently, they benefit from seminars in Vienna (or online webinars) on current European and

EU topics; study trips to Brussels; regular network meetings; a dedicated website with special briefings; and a special helpline when quick answers are needed.

Mayor Decoster not only recognised the potential this innovative idea had for Saint-Omer but indeed for all the tens of thousands of municipalities across the European Union, and he became the driving force within the European Committee of the Regions for an EU-wide scheme to be set up, making a call for it in his October 2018 CoR report on EU rights and values and hosting a meeting in Saint-Omer in February 2019 to introduce the idea to other CoR colleagues.[36] The European Committee of the Regions launched a first EU-wide call for interested 'EU Councillors' and by mid 2023, well over 2,000 had registered to be part of the scheme. By January 2025, the CoR and the European Commission joined forces to create a bigger and broader network, reaching nearly 4,000 and growing, and with Decoster, by then into his fifth year as president of the liberal and democrat Renew Europe group, appointed unanimously by all political groups as the CoR's representative in the joint steering group with the European Commission. Highlighting the importance of the scheme, Mayor Decoster has said: 'Europe is everywhere in our territories. It supports our companies, our projects, and paradoxically, it's often difficult to see. Europe sometimes suffers from a lack of spokespersons, of being readable and understandable by its citizens. By establishing this network within municipal councils, we reinforce the visibility and awareness of European action in the daily lives of citizens and with a stronger engagement of local representatives [on] European matters we re-establish a coherence and cohesion in

a real political community: the EU.'[37] Or, as Decoster's school headmaster once told him: 'Small streams make big rivers'.

This simple yet profound philosophy, which has shaped Mayor Decoster's municipal leadership, has also placed Saint-Omer at the forefront in another surprising way — and this time, it is of geopolitical significance.

In a powerful and enlightening lecture about the future of relations between the EU and the US, given at the College of Europe in the Belgian city of Bruges on 26 September 2019, David O'Sullivan — the man who had been EU Ambassador to the United States between 2014 and 2019, and one of Ireland's most accomplished EU officials, having previously held an impressive array of top-ranking positions in the EU – offered a sobering but ultimately optimistic assessment of the state of relations between Europe and America. In that lecture,[38] delivered during Donald Trump's first presidency, he said*:

> Unfortunately we now have with this administration across nearly every policy area I can think of, very big disagreements between the views of the current US administration and the European view […] We disagree on just about everything.
>
> The more worrying disagreement of policy, actually — from my perspective — is the very blatant attack on the very idea of the European Union itself by this

* The various paragraphs quoted here can be found respectively on the video at (00:24:07), (00:30:16), (00:34:07), (00:37:42), (00:39:02).

> administration, because this is the first time that we've actually had to deal with an administration which has openly said 'actually we don't think European union is a good idea'.

Ambassador O'Sullivan went on to explain that Europe must prepare itself for a changed relationship with the United States over the long term:

> I think the most important thing for us as Europeans to retain is the following […] President Trump is the symptom as much as he is the cause of the issues we are addressing and I believe that even if we have a new president from another party, some of the issues that President Trump has put out on the table are going to remain on the table and we're going to have to deal with them. We are dealing with a changed United States.

Seven years later, and well into the second Trump administration, the words of Ambassador O'Sullivan were not only prescient, they seem almost mild considering how the relations between the United States and Europe have fractured as a result of American actions, including arbitrary tariffs on trade, belligerent national security and military strategies against Europe, support for europhobic political forces, attacks on European digital laws, and above all military threats against a NATO ally in order to take control of Greenland.

Despite the shattered relationship, it is worth harking back to the 2019 words of Ambassador O'Sullivan when he re-affirmed his belief in the importance of the transatlantic relationship:[39]

> I hope for the United States and Europe that we will re-find each other in due course, because I do believe that we will always have more in common with each other than either of us will ever have with anybody else.

And he concluded with a call for new transatlantic bonds to be developed in a new way:

> We have to reinvent this transatlantic relationship for every generation. One of the big things that is happening in America is the demographic change […] The demographic growth is Asian-American, Hispanic-American, African-American. We have to work on persuading *those* people that *this* transatlantic relationship has meaning for *them* and for *their* America [emphasis original] […] [So] we really need to make a big investment in people-to-people exchanges, and reaching out to those parts of America who do not normally have deep connections to Europe, to explain what Europe is, what we are trying to do, and why ultimately this is in America's own national interest that we should succeed in what we are trying to do here in Europe, but also in building a close transatlantic relationship.

Already before Donald Trump was first elected president, Mayor Decoster had initiated a new programme to rekindle the ties between Saint-Omer and the United States, in particular with Georgetown University, founded by John Carroll, and the John Carroll School of Bel-Air in the state of Maryland.[40] Following his initial visit to the United States in August 2015 to formalise the programme together with the

State of Maryland and with Georgetown University, student exchanges have taken place annually.

In a video produced to illustrate this new programme, two Georgetown students, one of them Asian-American, had this to say: 'For me, it's really representing just how France and the United States can work together […] and influence each other.'

'There's so many little things you just can't learn in a textbook that have been great to experience […] Especially in times like today, it's important to remember different cultures, different perspectives, and it's been great to see this from a different side.'[41]

These testimonies are real-life evidence of what Ambassador O'Sullivan explained: that it is the people-to-people exchanges that make the transatlantic relationship a reality and can give it a new future.

And Mayor Decoster has not stopped there. Elected in July 2021 vice-president in charge of international relations for the Hauts-de-France region, which Saint-Omer belongs to, he has taken the exchanges to the next level: by October 2021, he was leading a delegation to Maryland to develop academic exchanges and partnerships between universities in Maryland and in Hauts-de-France.[42] This led to a visit to France by the governor of Maryland, Larry Hogan, in June 2022 to further cultivate the relationship.[43] And far from being discouraged by the transatlantic rift of the second Trump administration, Decoster announced in January 2026:[44]

> The Hauts-de-France and Maryland partnership looks to the future! As we approach the 250th anniversary of the

United States Declaration of Independence, which was signed by Charles Carroll, who studied in the beautiful town of Saint-Omer, the region of Hauts-de-France reaffirms its deep commitment to its relations with the home state of Charles Carroll, the State of Maryland.

Our ambition is clear: to build a transatlantic dialogue that serves education, innovation, and a shared heritage.

The lesson that François Decoster learnt as a young boy — that small streams make big rivers — has come a long way. It is now showing to local leaders all across the EU, on the one hand, how to help connect citizens with their Union and the Union with its citizens via a network of local councillors specifically aimed at developing that relationship; and on the other hand, demonstrating how the historic transatlantic relationship can be kept alive and operational even in times of turbulent relations between the capitals.

It was on the other side of the Atlantic that we began this chapter, and for the next one we have to leave our planet altogether.





↑

Mayor Decoster in conversation with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen. She has championed the EU Local Councillors network and instructed all European Commissioners to regularly meet with the members of the network when they visit Member States.



↖ ↑

When President Macron awarded Mayor Decoster the Légion d'Honneur in February 2025, the author was invited to attend the ceremony.







↑ ↗
The ceiling (left) of the Italianate theatre inside the old City Hall of Saint-Omer (right).

↑
The incredible library of antique books of Saint-Omer.

CHAPTER 7

Raising the Voice

(Oulu, Finland – 'Mayor' Mirja Vehkaperä)*

Floating high above the Earth's atmosphere, Samantha Cristoforetti quickly reached for the camera to capture the extraordinary light coming through the observation window. The sight that was unfolding in front of her eyes as the International Space Station swung around over our planet's North Pole was a rare one and she knew she had to share her privileged view with humanity down below.

What she saw at first was a bright green glow lighting up the gentle arc of the Earth's Arctic region in the middle distance below her, and to the left, the green glow spreading out in rippling streams of green light reaching towards her across the Arctic. Then, within seconds, the whole Arctic was alight with swirls and curtains of scintillating green lights, as if covered by a gigantic shimmering green fire. The whole spectacle barely lasted half a minute, but the former

* In Finland, the term 'mayor' is used to describe the city administrator, while the political leader carries the title of Chair of the City Board. For the purposes of this book and in keeping with the other chapters, Mirja Vehkaperä will be referred to as Mayor Vehkaperä, with apologies to any Finnish readers!

Italian fighter-pilot, now European astronaut, would later describe the experience as a sublimely beautiful flight through an Aurora Borealis.[1]

One of the most beautiful — and elusive — natural phenomena a person can witness in their lifetime, the aurorae (known in the northern hemisphere as Borealis or Northern Lights, and in the southern hemisphere as Australis or Southern Lights), have been for most of the history of humanity a mystery and a source of awe and mythology. Today, we know what triggers them and the scientific truth about them is no less wondrous.

Thanks to dogged and intrepid scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we know that the aurorae are another manifestation of the incredibly intricate relationship between the star that gives us life, the Sun, and the planet we live on, the Earth. In a poetic sense, aurorae can be thought of as the gigantic Sun playfully reaching out and lighting up the Earth's atmosphere for our entertainment. In reality, the aurorae are the most visible sign that the Earth is actively shielding all forms of life it harbours from the deadly solar wind: high-energy particles that, streaming out in all directions from the Sun and travelling at high speeds, wash over the tiny planets orbiting around it. The beauty of the aurorae therefore extends well beyond their visual display, for they are a sign that the field of magnetism that envelops the Earth is working well,[2] capturing the radioactive particles ejected in massive flares by the Sun and channelling the particles to our planet's poles. There, they are neutralised by our atmosphere in a spectacular display of colour, just like the one that astronaut Cristoforetti filmed from the

International Space Station in 2022 as she flew over the Earth's Arctic region.

People living in the Arctic have a special relationship with the Sun, unlike that of anyone elsewhere on Earth, save for the few scientists stationed in the Antarctic. Nowhere can the Sun's influence on life on Earth be more recognised and valued than in the place where, for months at a time, it can remain permanently in the sky (providing 24 hours of daylight), or permanently below the horizon, revealing its presence only via a few hours of daylight and the occasional green, blue, and purple swirls that illuminate the night sky.[3]

It was in the Finnish Arctic that I took one of my favourite selfies: standing with one foot on either side of the white painted line that marks the Arctic Circle and traces the latitude north of which the Sun never rises (or never sets) at certain times of the year. I only had a few minutes to take the picture, partly because my companions and I had to keep travelling to our destination further north and partly because I had stepped out of the car without my coat; although the April sunshine and blue sky were very inviting, they were deceptive and my body temperature was dropping fast. I was on the road accompanying the mayor of Saint-Omer, François Decoster (see Chapter 6), in his capacity as president of the Renew Europe CoR group, to an external meeting of the CoR, the European Committee of the Regions.

This particular meeting was taking place not in the Finnish Arctic, but over in neighbouring Sweden, and we were travelling with Mirja Vehkaperä, of the Finnish Centre Party, who had recently authored a CoR report on the challenges that Arctic communities face this century. Ahead of the

meeting, she had invited us to first visit her city of Oulu (pronounced 'Oh-Lou'), where she held the position of Chair of the City Board, in other words the political leader of the municipal council (I will however refer to her as Mayor -— see footnote at the start of this chapter).

After our visit to Oulu, we travelled by car, making our way from northern Finland into the high north of Sweden, witnessing along the way the beautiful forests, rivers, snow fields, and towns of the Arctic landscape.

Perhaps my biggest surprise during that road trip was discovering that many more people inhabit the Arctic than I had previously imagined. To be sure, it is a mainly rural and remote region, but more than one million people live in the European arctic region, across Norway, Sweden, and Finland,[4] and Oulu is the largest urban concentration in this part of Europe, with a population of over 200,000. It is a high-tech centre boasting a high-performing university working closely with major companies, including tech-giant Nokia, one of the world's largest telecoms equipment manufacturers.

Mayor Vehkaperä was not at all surprised by my astonishment. She had seen it many times before, not least in the national parliament of her own country. It was back in 2007 that, having been a local councillor for more than a decade, she decided to run for election to the Finnish parliament after observing that investments and political attention seemed to be exclusively focused on the south of Finland: 'I realised that there was this impression in the south that there was nothing up north, and I was determined to fight that mistaken idea.'[5] She ran a successful campaign and entered national politics.

To her own astonishment, Mirja Vehkaperä discovered that while many of her parliamentary colleagues had travelled to far-flung corners of our planet, they had never been to the north of their own country. They had no idea of the life, the opportunities, the culture that exists in the Finnish Arctic. 'They didn't even realise how dependent they were on Arctic industry! I had to explain how much mining and food industry we have in the Arctic that is important for Finland and Europe, and I had to fight hard to explain how there were real education and investment needs in the north.'

In more than a decade as a member of the national parliament, her battles and achievements centred around road, rail, and port infrastructure because, she said, 'we need to ensure the Arctic is connected to everywhere'.

One of her biggest struggles and successes was to expand the educational offer of the University of Oulu, a decision which at the time was in the hands of the national government: 'our fight was to prove that we needed a large university covering many sciences, keeping up to date with society's evolving needs'.

The University of Oulu had been established in 1957 by Education Minister Kerttu Saalasti — the first woman in Finland to hold that office — herself a member of the Finnish parliament for the Oulu constituency and also a member of the Finnish Centre Party.[6] Half a century later, another pioneering daughter of Oulu, Mirja Vehkaperä, followed in the footsteps of her illustrious predecessor, pushing the boundaries further to help the university secure its place in the twenty-first century. With the New University Act of 2010, additional faculties were established: Biochemistry & Molecular

Medicine, Information Technology & Electrical Engineering, and a new School of Architecture.[7]

Today, the university has more than 14,000 students from all over the world; is ranked highly among its international peers;[8] and has a thriving relationship with hundreds of high-tech local businesses, including Nokia, with a joint collaboration establishing a world-first 6G mobile communications technology research programme.[9]

Some of the research carried out at the university is so cutting-edge that it cannot be filmed or photographed, as Mayor Decoster and I discovered during a guided tour of the PrintoCent research lab that develops flexible, stretchable, and wearable electronics.

The main campus of the University of Oulu is located just 5 km north of the city centre, but perhaps one of the university's most emblematic units, and certainly its most historic, is to be found more than 300 km further north — well beyond the Arctic Circle — deep inside Lapland. The Sodankylä Geophysical Observatory is a collection of low-rise timber buildings nestled inside a thick forest at the banks of the Kitinen river. Founded in 1913 to carry out observations of the Earth's magnetism and to study the Northern Lights, the SGO rapidly became a key player in its field and has provided the world's scientists with uninterrupted comprehensive measurements for over a century.[10]

In 1997, the SGO was absorbed into the University of Oulu, and with the increasing digitization of human society, its work has only gained in importance. The fact that scientists are still unable to predict when a flare will burst through the Sun's surface, hurling waves of high-speed particles into the

Earth's path, means that the increasing number of satellites orbiting high above the Earth's atmosphere that are essential to our digital societies are vulnerable to damage. This, in turn, exposes human society to large-scale electric and internet blackouts that can last for days, putting vulnerable people at risk, and even potentially threatening national and international security.

Never has the study of the Aurora Borealis and the mechanisms by which the Earth's magnetosphere shields our planet from solar storms been so important, and now the SGO is extending its century-old observational capacity from the ground into space itself with the launch of the LappiSatı satellite. Funded by the European Regional Development Fund, LappiSatı is the first satellite conceived in, built in, and launched from Lapland.

As exciting as this new development is for the region, it has to be managed with great care and sensitivity. Lapland is also the homeland of the European Union's only recognised indigenous people, the Sami, who have ancestral roots in the Arctic zones of Europe, spanning the northern latitudes of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola peninsula of Russia.[11] Present in these areas for thousands of years and living off hunting and fishing, the Sami have a unique language and culture, focused on acting in balance with nature. For many centuries they coexisted peacefully with the Nordic populations who mostly stayed south of the Arctic, but as the nation-state emerged as a new form of political organisation, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia imposed their sovereignty in an increasingly aggressive way, disrupting the Sami and even compelling them to give up their lands and change

their lifestyle.[12] Sami children were forcibly placed in religious schools, and the Sami language was banned. Most Sami turned to reindeer husbandry as their main source of income.

The abuse and discrimination continued well into the second half of the twentieth century, until an attempt by the Norwegian government in the 1960s to build a dam that would destroy a Sami village sparked a major civil-disobedience protest from the Sami community lasting two decades and ending in defeat for the government. This prompted the Norwegian government to seek a better way to dialogue with the Sami,[13] and in 1989, the Sami Parliament of Norway was inaugurated. This was followed in 1993 by the Swedish Sami Parliament, and Finland's Sami Parliament in 1995, although the Finnish government had already been experimenting with different methods of representation for the Sami since the 1970s.[14] In 2000, the Sami Parliamentary Council was established, providing formal cooperation among the three parliaments and giving representation to the Russian Sami, who have no elected body of their own.[15]

Much progress has been made since then, with the Church of Sweden making an official apology in 2021 for the historical abuses and establishing a fund for reconciliation measures into the next decade,[16] and each of the three Nordic states have established Truth and Reconciliation Commissions.[17]

In Finland, one of the prime centres of academic research into and preservation of the Sami culture is the University of Oulu, via its dedicated Giellagas Institute.[18] The name Oulu is itself derived from the Sami word meaning 'floodwater', although, given that the city was founded by Nordic populations, there is disagreement among academics as to

whether the link to the Sami language is direct or indirect.[19] Despite the Sami being a tiny minority of the population of Oulu, the city is committed to recognising their culture — in addition to the Giellagas Institute, since 2018, the municipal government has provided a child day-care centre where the language is taught.[20]

The Sami culture of reindeer husbandry has evolved with the times, incorporating technology and sophisticated motorised vehicles, while other Sami have branched out their activities into the arts and crafts or tourism sectors of the economy. But their culture is under threat in a significant way.

The day I took the selfie standing on the line that marks the Arctic Circle, Mayor Decoster and I were travelling with Mayor Vehkaperä to the northern Swedish town of Kiruna, where the challenge of facilitating the progress of modern society, on the one hand, and respecting the ancient traditions of indigenous people, on the other, can be observed in spectacular fashion. Invited by the mayor of Kiruna and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions, the European Committee of the Regions held a meeting of its Bureau there in order to witness more closely this extraordinary challenge taking place in the Swedish Arctic.

It's not often that a town of 20,000 people becomes the focus of attention of such international media as CNN, The Guardian, Le Monde, Euronews, or of specialist media such as World Architecture News or The Architects' Journal. As well as being Sweden's northernmost city, Kiruna is also home to the world's largest iron-ore mine and the site of a space centre that is one of the world's most versatile. It is the expansion of the mine which has brought on all the

international attention: as the mine continues to expand its activities underground to extract newly found rare earth minerals essential for Europe's transition to clean energy, it has become unsafe to live on the ground above and a huge segment of the town has to be physically relocated. Almost one third of the population, their homes, and several historic buildings are being moved to the other side of the town, well away from the danger zone.

Relocating one third of a town is a huge undertaking, and it will take the rest of this decade and beyond. None are more worried by the expanding mine than the Sami people. Already in 2021, the Sami Parliament raised the alarm over the impact that the expanding mining activity would have on reindeer husbandry.[21] Whereas the nearby Esrange Space Centre has found a workable compromise with the Sami by building 19 safety bunkers throughout the vast impact zone of the launch site, and before any launch a helicopter flies over the area warning the herdsmen to take shelter,[22] the challenge presented by the mine is of a different order because of the potential ramifications.

The Sami are truly caught between a rock and a hard place, with their way of life threatened by the expanding mine and the impact a changing global climate will have on them, of which they are well aware. Throughout 2022, the Sami Council conducted a survey of what they refer to as their knowledge-holders, members of the community with extensive first-hand experience and knowledge of their culture. The purpose of the consultation was to assess the degree to which the changing behaviour of the Earth's atmosphere is affecting the Arctic. The following statements from

two knowledge-holders illustrate the threat.[23] The first is from a reindeer herder in the higher Arctic latitudes: 'The weather has become much more unpredictable and extreme. It is always windy, and the wind is stronger. The precipitation is much more intense — a lot falls in a short time.' The second is from a reindeer herder in the southern Arctic: 'They say it was more stable weather before — when it was winter there was winter. Nowadays you don't know how the weather will be next week — if it will be raining in the middle of the winter, in January and February, or will be cold. It can be –20° C one week in January and four days later it can be zero degrees and raining.'

The debate around climate change has become so polarised and messy that the simple science behind it has got lost or, at best, blurred. This is a pity, as well as dangerous, because the science really is very easy to understand: the Earth's atmosphere is like a closed system of gases interacting with each other, the gases being kept in place around our planet by the Earth's own gravity. With any closed system of gases, say a mixture of gases inside a closed glass bottle, the interaction and behaviour of the system will stay constant and quite predictable as long as the mixture of gases remains the same. If, however, you slowly start injecting higher quantities of one of the gases, and over time you inject more and more of this gas, the behaviour of the system will change. By burning fossil fuels for nearly two centuries and doing so in greater and greater quantities as the human population has soared, humans have been injecting greater quantities of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and because this particular gas is very effective at trapping heat,

the overall temperature of the Earth's atmosphere has steadily increased. The behaviour of our planet's closed system of gases is therefore changing and doing so at a faster and faster rate as we continue to pump carbon dioxide into it and more and more heat gets trapped inside it.

So the Sami are well aware of the urgent need to move the global economy away from fossil fuels to an energy industry that does not inject carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. Indeed, the same Sami Council report concluded that:

> 'Climate change impacts in the Arctic are occurring at a magnitude and pace unprecedented in recent history, and much faster than projected for other regions of the world. Climate change in Sápmi [the lands inhabited by the Sami] is estimated to have far-reaching consequences for nature, ecosystems and their composition, and thus for the entire Sámi cultural landscape. As we, the Sámi people, have a strong connection to the land through our cultural practices, traditions and livelihoods, changes in environmental conditions have a direct impact on our society. In an Arctic context, climate change has negatively affected mental health and well-being'.

In Kiruna, one of the buildings that lies just metres from the evacuation zone which will fortunately be spared the move is the Sami Theatre. As I learnt talking with the person who heads it, Åsa Simma, calling it a theatre is perhaps a misnomer in that it has ended up performing more the function of a community support centre. An accomplished theatre director and actor,[24] she explained that mental illness is a major

and urgent concern in their community for a couple of reasons: for some it arises from the distress over the uncertain future of the Sami culture; for others who are involved in mining because of the nature of their work. Moreover, the bureaucratic procedures to access a psychologist may appear insurmountable to some of the patients, worsening their situation. At times, she has found herself personally driving them and helping them with the paperwork.

It was evident from our visit to Kiruna that finding the right balance – between the necessary respect for indigenous rights and culture, the urgent need to shift to a global decarbonised economy, and seizing the economic opportunities offered by the mine and the easy access to space — is one of the trickiest political challenges in the Arctic. And for a region that has so often been overlooked, such economic opportunities cannot be ignored. Presenting her CoR report on the EU's New Arctic Strategy at the Kiruna meeting, Mayor Vehkaperä outlined some of them:

> 'Climate change is something that we talk a lot about in the north, and we have to find a solution. We have to put the people first, because we have a lot of indigenous people who have been here for centuries and they must be heard and listened to. You have all come from far away and have had to take several flights. We need to boost connectivity of the Arctic — maritime, rail, and road connections — if we want to develop the mineral extraction industry, and we are investing heavily across Finland, Sweden, and Norway, a combined total of €160 billion is dedicated to the transition, coming from the private

and public sector, and all levels of government. And it is important that the European Union is visible here in the Arctic.'[25]

More than two thirds of the investment she spoke about is for low-carbon industry and clean energy production, while the rest will go towards infrastructure, tourism, and other support sectors, such as schools and day-care centres. 'I believe', she added, 'that we have enough potential to become energy exporters. In Oulu and the wider surrounding region, we already produce as much as half of Finland's wind energy, and we want to be part of this growth, so we are going to need more people and workers to relocate to the north.'

On our journey back to Oulu, travelling on the road admiring the snow fields, frozen lakes, and dense forests of the Arctic, Mayor Vehkaperä elaborated further on what she meant by the European Union being more visible in the Arctic: 'I have been a member of Oulu City Council for 28 uninterrupted years, I was briefly a Member of the European Parliament before becoming Chair of the Oulu City Board, and all my political career I've been fighting to raise the voice of the Arctic.'

If she had found it a challenge during her time as a member of the Finnish national parliament to demonstrate to her colleagues from southern Finland that the Arctic is a thriving place that deserves serious investment, she soon found out that the challenge in the European Parliament was on another level: 'I was the northernmost MEP [Member of the European Parliament], and my hobbies and experience of farming were so different to those of the majority of Members

there. A lot of the time I just spent explaining what life is like in the Arctic, and I ended up illustrating my interventions with photos because I realised I just wasn't getting through to them. Many simply couldn't understand that for us in the Arctic the nearest university might be 300 km away, or that for us, the rules on maximum driving hours are a problem because the distances here are so much greater than elsewhere in Europe.'

Though it lasted little more than a year, her experience as a Member of the European Parliament proved to her how important it is, on the one hand, to be active at European level, and on the other, for the European level to be visible and present throughout the Union: 'As an MEP one has, in some ways, more power than a national minister. I realised there is much that I could do at European level but at the same time, citizens feel detached and I tried hard to explain back in Oulu what my work in the European Parliament involved, but it wasn't easy, as the work is often abstract. That said, being an MEP demonstrated to me the importance of belonging to the European Union, in particular as a union of values and peace, and my local, national, and European experience has been an advantage in my role as Chair of the Oulu City Board.'

Becoming the political leader of the city of Oulu allowed her to be appointed as a Finnish representative to the European Committee of the Regions, the EU body that represents subnational government in the Union's legislative process. Her membership came at a crucial time for her city, which she hopes will change how the people of Oulu tend to think of the European Union: 'People tend to think of the EU as

something that is "over there", but we have a huge opportunity in 2026 to help citizens finally see that *they* are the Union.'

Since 1 January 2026, Oulu is one of the two European Capitals of Culture 2026, and already in the immediate years prior, the city didn't wait to help the local population take ownership of it: for several years, when disembarking from a flight at Oulu airport, passengers have been greeted by a large banner announcing it. For Mirja Vehkaperä, Capital of Culture is the perfect vehicle through which to make the European Union more visible in the Arctic and vice versa: 'It's already proving to be a very positive experience for our citizens. We are in the spotlight and I hope that the citizens feel the spotlight. Some people were against the whole idea, arguing it would be a waste of money, but now that they see the development and the enjoyment, they support it, because it's about something much bigger. Capital of Culture is helping us project our voice internationally and give other parts of Europe a taste of the Arctic.'

And even that statement falls short of the ambitions of Oulu2026, which is bringing together 32 partner municipalities from the wider region so they too can be part of Capital of Culture. The programme is centred around the motto 'Cultural Climate Change', with projects and activities grouped according to three themes: 'Brave Hinterland', 'Wild City' and 'Cool Contrasts'.[26]

'You need to be brave to live here' is the line that introduces the reader to the 'Brave Hinterland' theme. 'Far away from everything, on the periphery of Europe we face an uncompromising nature, extreme climate (change), enormous distances and wild vastness, excessive light and excessive

darkness. Only a few in Europe are willing to live with extreme hardship and extreme beauty. Yet Europe is much more than just its geographical core. We want Europe to get excited by its edges in 2026! […] Finally, actual Climate Change impacts us more visibly here than almost anywhere else in Europe with biodiversity already significantly diminished. The global response to climate change has so far been too timid. We explore this topic in our theme Brave Hinterland.'

Some of that extreme beauty is on display as an interactive exhibition called Aurora Revelare, which uses the latest technology to bring the Northern Lights to visitors, while the more intrepid ones go on nighttime expeditions to remote nature sites to film and photograph the Aurora Borealis directly.[27] Chances are good that visitors will get to see the Lights, as Oulu2026 coincides with the peak of the Sun's 11-year cycle of activity.

'Cool Contrasts' builds on the extreme contrasts of the Arctic — the 'nightless nights of the midnight sun and sunless days in the heart of winter' — to focus on reducing health inequalities. 'People are literally dying of loneliness in parts of Europe, both in big cities and in struggling rural hinterlands. Oulu2026 wants to help Europe to reconnect with itself, promoting community life and face-to-face connection.' And 'Wild City' asks 'what exactly is a creative city in the middle of the wild nature? What is a lively, creative village? How do art, subcultures and creative spaces fill emptiness, silence and darkness?'

Living up to their commitment to the Sami people and because the City of Oulu recognises that the Sami culture is not sufficiently visible there, Sami people and the University's

Giellagas Institute have been actively involved in designing the programme, with one of the main creative advisors of Oulu2026 coming from the Sami community.[28]

On 26 January 2024, Mayor Vehkaperä attended the launch of European Capital of Culture 2024 hosted by the Estonian city of Tartu. There she joined liberal leaders of other cities hosting European Capital of Culture: Ruben Latcau of the Union Save Romania party and deputy mayor of the Romanian city of Timişoara, Capital of Culture 2023; Gunars Ansins, independent mayor of the Latvian city of Liepaja, Capital of Culture 2027; and the Tartu mayor Urmas Klaas of the Estonian Reform Party. Connecting with the mayors of other European Capitals of Culture helps to share experience, develop joint initiatives, and build connections between the cities and their citizens. Tartu is only 50 km from the Russian border, and for all of these mayors the invasion of Ukraine weighs heavily on the future. Each of them have received Ukrainian refugees, and discussions about peace and security have become part of daily municipal life.

One of the projects that the Oulu2026 organising team told me they are particularly attached to is the Peace Machine, which honours the late Timo Honkela, the young artificial intelligence scientist of the University of Oulu whose dream had been to create a machine using artificial intelligence to facilitate conflict resolution and promote world peace. The Oulu2026 Peace Machine combines art and technology to create an immersive experience so that the machine learns from its users, who become co-producers of the experience. In the run-up to Oulu2026, children in schools built prototypes of the Peace Machine, encouraging them

to explore the nature of conflict and learn how to use science, art, and technology to resolve them. Schools from past and future Capitals of Culture, as well as Oulu's twin cities, have participated. The Peace Machine will then continue its journey at Liepaja 2027.

Considering what the legacy of Oulu2026 might be, Mirja Vehkaperä says: 'I believe that culture is such an easy way to bring people together, to understand each other better, and European Capital of Culture is a huge opportunity for us, because culture is about so much more than artistic expression. It's also about food, customs, and lifestyle, and we have so much of all of that in Oulu. So, we want to be proud of our traditions and our roots, and to witness how visitors from all over Europe appreciate them and learn from them. But Capital of Culture also comes with responsibilities; on the one hand, towards ourselves to ensure that we build something that lasts for the future, and on the other, it reminds us that we belong to the European Union and that we should aspire to succeed also at the European level. Ultimately, strengthening that connection between the local and the European levels is good for the Union.'

Since Athens in 1985, the European Capital of Culture programme has become one of the EU's most successful initiatives, helping citizens to discover the European dimension of their identities while establishing and strengthening connections between the host cities and other places in Europe. So great is its popularity and impact that similar programmes have also been developed: European Green Capital, European Capital of Innovation, and European Capital of Inclusion and Diversity.[29]

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, we have seen how through the symbolism of Europe Day, the networks of local councillors, and long-term high-profile programmes such as Capital of Culture, mayors are able to reveal to their citizens that *they* are just as much the Union as the EU institutions in Brussels — that they are the *reality* of the Union and the reason it exists. In the final chapter of Part 2, we will look at the most tangible way that mayors have of bringing the European Union into their local communities. For that, we have to go deep inside a Slovenian mountain.





↑
Already in 2024, Oulu was proudly welcoming travellers at the airport with announcements proclaiming its status as European Capital of Culture 2026.

↑
The author with Mirja Vehkaperä and François Decoster, ready to set off on their trip from Oulu in Finland to Kiruna in the Swedish Arctic.



←
The Market Square of Oulu has a statue honouring the policemen who from 1906 regularly patrolled the market. They were so popular that when the patrolling ended in 1979, citizens raised funds for the statue, which is today a favourite spot for tourists taking selfies.



←
The selfie mentioned in the chapter. The line marking the Arctic Circle runs under the sign but is covered by the snow in this picture. I'm standing with one foot north of the Circle and one foot south. The foot to the north would never see the sun set in summer.

CHAPTER 8

Finding a Future

(Trbovlje, Slovenia – Mayor Jasna Gabrič)

Down, down, down, down, down they run, while the only source of natural light — a bright white circle puncturing the dark entrance to 'the cave' — shrinks away, receding into the distance until it disappears. Now only the bobbing torches of their helmet lamps illuminate the path as they hastily make their way along the narrow metal walkway taking them deeper and deeper into the mountain.[1] Then, a rare isolated light gradually appears on the tunnel ceiling revealing bare walls of rock, decorated only with a few thick cables, leading the way into the pitch-black hole of more darkness up ahead. Once again, as the lone light recedes, only the bobbing lights and the clattering of their footsteps on the metal walkway disturb the dark silence of the mountain's entrails. It hadn't always been like this — there had been a time when 'the cave' had been a noisy place.

Down, down, down, down… then unexpectedly, a small opening to the right, through which they clamber and follow a new path further down until finally they reach level ground

and a well-lit, better-equipped tunnel with a solid floor, leading them further into the mountain. Suddenly voices shouting, and the sound of something being dragged along a metallic rail. Then, a strange vehicle the size of a small car and hanging in mid-air appears, pushed by two men. Instructions are given, and one of the runners climbs into the suspended vehicle while two other runners push him along for about 50 metres. Out he jumps and the running continues. Running, running, running for nearly six kilometres, dodging and managing obstacles which were once upon a time essential machines and indispensable tools of this now abandoned coal mine. Finally, they encounter the toughest challenge: an incline. It is short but much steeper than the long easy descent they had run down at the beginning, leading them — panting and transformed — back into daylight, re-emerging at the other side of the mountain.

The runners have just completed the Jamatlon — literally meaning 'cave run', an obstacle course through the abandoned tunnels and shafts of the coal mine that once gave the Slovenian town of Trbovlje its meaning, its purpose, and its identity.

In 2014, Jasna Gabrič (pronounced 'Ga-breach') was among those participating in one of the first iterations of Jamatlon. Newly elected as mayor, at just 29 years old she was both the youngest then holding the office in Slovenia and one of the youngest in the country's democratic history. Running through the tunnels and shafts of the mine was not only a record-breaking, gutsy young person but a determined woman on a mission to transform her town and give it a new purpose in the twenty-first century.

Although only in her 20s, she had been born at a time when Trbovlje (pronounced 'Ter-bowl-yeh') was still considered 'the red beacon' of Yugoslavia's communist economy, with factories producing glass and cement, extracting ore, casting lead, processing zinc, generating electricity, and, of course, all part of the ecosystem around the coal-extracting mine that dominated the local economy and social life.[2] It was the mine that had placed Trbovlje on the map, without which the town would have remained no more than a tiny settlement nestled in a beautiful and lush green valley.

Approaching Trbovlje by train from the Slovenian capital Ljubljana is to arrive at the centre of Slovenia in more ways than one: Trbovlje is equidistant from Slovenia's borders to the north, south, east, and west; it lies in Slovenia's only region without an external border; and the Zasavje region was until not so long ago the centre of Yugoslavia's coal mining industry. But for the traveller, it is above all a beautiful meander through the Sava river valley of central Slovenia, gazing out at fast-moving water and traversing bridges as the train twists and turns in between steep slopes of thick greenery. The scenery captivates the traveller, and words such as 'factory', 'mine', 'coal', and 'industry' seem incongruous with these surroundings and are almost entirely forgotten.

Those words come rushing back to front of mind when the train emerges from under a small bridge to roll up alongside what has the appearance of a three-story countryside hotel and is in fact the small railway station of Trbovlje, built at the foot of Buková mountain. Looming ominously over the station as if about to engulf it from behind is a bright-blue sprawling cement factory that hugs the side of the

mountain and unambiguously declares to the first-time visitor that this place was shaped by the industrial revolution and the economic needs of communist Yugoslavia. And just as for any other place described in similarly sweeping terms, such statements do little justice to the fascinating stories of the people who, in their unique ways, shaped the course of that local community.

It was in 1804 that extractable coal — also known as 'black gold' — was discovered in Buková mountain in central Slovenia,[3] and in subsequent decades, as the newly invented railway spread across Europe, those deposits became a vital source of fuel for the locomotive. When the Austrian Empire built the Vienna–Trieste railway line in the mid 1800s, the challenge of extending the railway through the almost impassable Sava river gorge became an economic necessity.[4] Thus, Trbovlje, a place that didn't even appear in a mid nineteenth-century map of the Austrian Empire,[5] had by 1910 grown to become Slovenia's fifth-largest settlement, with 9,000 inhabitants.[6] By the time Jasna Gabrič was born in 1985, Trbovlje had doubled in size, having lived through the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire during World War I, the subsequent birth of Yugoslavia, the occupation and exploitation by Hitler's Reich during World War II, and finally Yugoslavia's communist era under the rule of Josip Tito, flourishing despite these turbulent episodes thanks to the 'black gold' buried in its mountains, making Trbovlje a vital supplier of energy far and wide.

For the Jamatlon participants, running through the mountain is a personal challenge and a form of entertainment, as well as a crash course in the town's historical heritage. But for the twentieth-century miners of Trbovlje, the tunnels

and shafts of the mine were a daily life-threatening hazard. A typical day would begin with the men huddled up in the small carriages of a mini-train that would transport them from the world above into the world below. Once inside the dark innards of the mountain rock, the work would be sooty and involve heavy and noisy machinery, hard physical labour, and the risk of death.[7]

Up above, the 'black gold' produced other types of hazards. The population had grown so fast that the quick rise in housing stock, heated by coal-fired stoves, ended up badly polluting the air — which, trapped by the mountains, would linger heavily and make it difficult for people to breathe. 'We had to be taken into the hills to breathe clean air', Gabrič recalls of her childhood, 'and clean clothes that were hung out to dry would end up black by the time they were collected'.[8]

But the 'black gold' provided jobs, stability, and a sense of purpose within the national economy. Until it all came crashing down. After the death of the communist leader Tito in 1980, Yugoslavia descended into a period of increasing fragmentation and resentment amongst its constituent republics, leading to Slovenia's declaration of independence in June 1991 and the Ten Day War against troops loyal to Serbia, largely fought along Slovenia's external borders as well as at a limited number of strategic points inside Slovenia, bypassing the people of Trbovlje, who observed from a distance.[9]

'After 1991, we suddenly woke up in a democratic country moving towards capitalism, but the old factories didn't know how to survive in this new system, and one by one they closed down', Gabrič explains. 'And then, in 2000, the decision was taken to close the mine. If the locals were already finding

it difficult to understand how a market economy works, which in their eyes had only brought about the decline of their town, the closure of the mine demoralised the population further.'[10]

Jasna Gabrič was part of a generation that would experience something that Trbovlje had never known before: decline, depression, and uncertainty. The town that had literally appeared on the map because of the 'black gold' in its mountain and whose existence depended so heavily on the coal's extraction had entered a severe existential crisis: in the first ten years of Slovenia's independence from communist Yugoslavia, 4,000 jobs had been cut in Trbovlje's coal mine and its related industries, and 15% of the population had packed up and gone to live elsewhere.[11] Would Trbovlje disappear from the map again? Was it destined to become a relic of a forgotten past, a ghost town, a future archaeological curiosity?

But there was also hope in the air. On 10 June 1996, the newly independent Slovenia had formally applied to join the European Union, a process enjoying huge popular support.[12]

Throughout this period of uncertainty mixed with hope, Jasna's mother, a local schoolteacher hailing from rural eastern Slovenia, was determined to provide her daughters with the skills to succeed in the new economy, and in 1997, at age 12, Jasna found herself on a bus with older teenagers on her way to spend a few weeks at a summer school in the UK to boost her English. Before she became an adult, she would twice again be sent abroad to spend time in the UK as well as Ireland.

It was in her final year of high school that the name Jasna Gabrič started to become known beyond her immediate

circles. An active and successful member of the school's debate club, Jasna caught the attention of the local radio station and was invited to work with them. It was 2002, and Jasna Gabrič was made editor of the station's youth show and eventually a reporter on the local news. Two years later, Slovenia became a member of the European Union. It would be another decade before the people of Trbovlje defied political expectations and elected Gabrič to lead them on a new path.

Up, up, up, up, up they climbed, stopping at the first landing to pause for breath and to begin taking in the spectacular view. Fourteen more ladders to go, climbing literally into the clouds. Nine young men, four of them intrepid Slovenian acrobats, conquering their fear to perform death-defying acrobatics at the top of a narrow structure whose height surpasses the Eiffel Tower. Europe's tallest chimney stack is to be found just further down the river from Trbovlje's train station and is one of several impressive sights that greets the visitor upon arriving by train from Ljubljana. It's a long narrow cylinder of concrete and reinforced steel reaching upwards 360 metres from the banks of the river Sava and puncturing through the head of the valley. As with every major twentieth-century feature of Trbovlje, the chimney is an offshoot of the coal mine.

The development of the mine in Trbovlje coincided with the invention of electrical engineering and the rapid spread of electrical devices, which began to power industries and households throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The banks of the river Sava proved to be an ideal location to build a coal-fired electricity-generating power plant in 1915.[13] By 1968, a new, more powerful plant

was built, but the existing chimneys were too short to pull the increased volumes of sulphurous fumes out of the unventilated valley, and the resulting environmental and health hazards led to plans for a much taller chimney that could release the fumes much higher up, beyond the head of the valley. Approaching an expert company in capitalist West Germany to carry out the design, the communist state of Yugoslavia had the chimney built in 1976.[14]

Up, up, up, up they climbed, aiming for the chimney-top which they knew to be somewhere beyond the low early-morning clouds snaking through the river valley. Strong, athletic young men pushed to the limits of their endurance as they tried to conquer this towering feat of pre-internet civil engineering. And when they eventually worked their way through the cloud, finally reaching the top of the chimney, they discovered the breathtaking view of green mountain peaks and narrow valleys, as far as the eye can see and in all directions. It is a view that reveals to the observer that the story of Trbovlje doesn't have to be exclusively associated with the coal found inside the mountain. And, in fact, as we are about to discover, there is another story unfolding in this town. One that gives the town a new purpose in the twenty-first century.

The five-minute video of the young Slovenian acrobats climbing the now-disused chimney is a must-watch.[15] The acrobatics they perform high up beyond the clouds, on and around the narrow rim of the chimney top, are — as they admit themselves — not for the faint-hearted. The idea for such a spectacular stunt, which was dubbed *Vertigo Bird 2020*, came from an artist from Trbovlje, Maša Jazbec, who in turn was inspired by a daring art performance by the pioneering

contemporary dance artist Iztok Kovač, also from Trbovlje, who back in 1996 (when Maša was in her teens) performed a death-defying solo dance around the narrow rim of the chimney top, which featured in a film called *Vertigo Bird*.[16] In 2021, during a new media arts festival, she explained that 'for a long time, I had been toying with the idea of documenting the grandeur of our 360-metre smokestack in 360° technology'.[17] The opportunity finally came about in 2020, with Slovenia's renowned acrobats, the Dunking Devils, eagerly taking up the challenge. They named their project in honour of Kovač's stunning 1996 performance.

Thus, the town that was built to exclusively serve a coal mine produced a groundbreaking contemporary dance artist, Iztok Kovač (awarded multiple times internationally, in particular for his dance *How I Caught a Falcon*),[18] and a Fine Arts graduate, Maša Jazbec, who is at the vanguard of artistic production using high tech robotics.[19] And such a phenomenon can hardly be surprising, for children are never carbon copies of their parents. Instead, they use their talents to explore new interests, while frequently preserving a link with their heritage and building upon their parents' work. One major outcome of working a coal mine and its derivative industries for over a century is that Trbovlje developed over time a knowledge, understanding and appreciation for engineering, technology, and technical expertise. And it is from this point on that our story begins to converge with the election of Mayor Jasna Gabrič and her leadership in helping Trbovlje find a new future.

At the time of the acrobatic project on top of the chimney, Maša Jazbec was heading up the DDTLab in Trbovlje's

Katapult Business Accelerator, after graduating in Fine Arts from the University of Maribor in Slovenia and then obtaining a PhD in Empowerment Informatics from the Japanese University of Tsukuba. The DDTLab was established as a research lab in the field of cybernetics, robotics, and virtualisation with the purpose of producing 'projects that are at the intersection of art, science and new technologies'.[20] One of the key building blocks in the establishment of DDTLab was the Katapult Business Accelerator, the brainchild of a visionary can-do entrepreneur also from Trbovlje.

Probably very few people today embody the technical DNA of Trbovlje as much as Jure Knez. Born in 1974, his father worked for Rudis, a local engineering company specialising in the construction of mining facilities with clients around the world,[21] and his mother ran the technical high school, which Jure attended.[22] After graduating in Mechanical Engineering from Ljubljana University in 2000, he and fellow mechanical engineer Andrej Orožen founded Dewesoft, and together they built up this company manufacturing high-precision measuring instruments for the aviation and automotive industries.

At this time, Jasna Gabrič was only 15 and not yet making a name for herself in the school debating club.

Despite the existence of other major companies around the world providing measuring instruments, Knez and Orožen were confident their product was better, and in its third year of existence Dewesoft managed to secure a contract with NASA for the analysis of Space Shuttle data: 'We started with no money and with a very small customer base […] We worked like crazy, days and nights. We blindly believed that we would succeed', Knez explained during an interview

with the Katapult Accelerator team.[23] A year later, in 2004, Slovenia joined the European Union, and Dewesoft became a player inside the European Single Market. After the NASA coup, the company expanded into aerospace and defence, growing over the following decade to over 200 employees and adding major multinationals to its list of clients from across Europe and beyond.

As Dewesoft grew and took over the buildings of abandoned factories in the northern part of Trbovlje at the opposite end of the train station and the river, so too did Jasna Gabrič grow in fame. By the time the local elections of 2010 came around she had been a regular fixture on the local radio station for nearly eight years. She was approached by a liberal centrist local councillor and invited to join the candidates list for the election. Gabrič agreed on condition that she would be registered as an independent, and by the end of the year she found herself elected and sitting as a member of the town council.[24] Within two years, at the age of 27, she was invited by the mayor to join his team as deputy mayor, and that same year she was appointed by the national government to join the Slovenian delegation in the European Committee of the Regions. By the elections of 2014, she had seen enough of how Trbovlje was being run and knew she could do a better job. Despite the successes of Dewesoft, the town was still clinging to a dying past and uncertain of what the future might be. Gabrič ran as an independent candidate for mayor of Trbovlje, up against five male candidates, each with established parties backing them.

The people of Trbovlje were in the mood for something different — a fresh face, a young, dynamic, outspoken

woman unafraid to challenge the status quo and to leave behind the persistent defeatism and pessimism about Trbovlje's future. Jasna Gabrič reached the second round, and then she won, becoming the youngest mayor in Slovenia.

As if to test the mettle of this young mayor, politics and nature delivered Trbovlje two major blows in her first 18 months of office. It had been known for many years that the mine was closing, but soon after her election, it was announced that the power station on the banks of the river Sava — the reason Europe's tallest chimney stack existed — would also cease to function.[25] This hadn't been expected and came as a shock to the local community, aggravating further the feeling that Trbovlje had no future. Then on 20 February 2016, over 500 cubic metres of rock and debris slid down the side of one of the mountains, cutting off Trbovlje from the road to the capital Ljubljana and rupturing pipes and cables running underground, leaving many citizens without electricity and water.[26] Mayor Gabrič sprang into action ensuring that municipal services provided drinking water to affected households, liaising with emergency services, and coordinating the actions taken by the local community — citizens and companies alike — to keep the town functioning. A couple of months later, in April 2016, as a true leader, she hosted a ceremony — not to take the credit for the successful response and rehabilitation of Trbovlje's vital link with Ljubljana but to share it with all those who had played a part, including the national political leaders who had stepped up to provide assistance.[27] Although a major tragedy had been avoided thanks to the early morning hour of the rockfall,

the natural disaster did little to dispel the general feeling that Trbovlje was in decay.

How do you restore the morale of a depressed town that has lost its main source of income?

In an essay she wrote in 2018,[28] Mayor Gabrič explained:

> In the municipality, the major challenges I identified were: high unemployment (22%), tense relationships between people, absolute pessimism, and bad reputation of the municipality both within and outside its borders as a grey and unpromising valley. How do you deal with this? How do you first convince people living in your city that Trbovlje can be among the successful municipalities and that this can only depend on them? My team and I worked hard for the first two years, disregarding pessimists and baseless criticism, and only focusing on our work and results.
>
> In the municipal administration, the situation was no better: the administrative efficiency of the organization I inherited was really low. Therefore, my first goal was that of building values within the local administration. I started purposefully placing success, professionalism and fairness in the spotlight.
>
> The city started changing its image, we cleaned it up and it immediately started looking more orderly [and] through a very business-friendly approach, we achieved an incredible fall in the unemployment rate that dropped to 13 per cent.

If administrative professionalism and a business-friendly approach were two pillars of Mayor Gabrič's strategy, there was also a third key pillar, which she often speaks about with particular enthusiasm. And this is where Slovenia's membership in the European Union made all the difference. One of the Union's most successful policies is the funding provided for local and regional development, also known as its 'cohesion policy'.

Many people, including numerous leading national politicians, do not understand what makes European funding so much more effective than national funding schemes. One of the clearest and most succinct explanations of the value of EU funding was given by a British politician, the former deputy leader of Liverpool City Council, Flo Clucas, who was in charge of managing European funds in preparation for Liverpool's year as European Capital of Culture (2008):

> 'But it wasn't just the money. The way that local people, councils, businesses, social enterprises, universities and community groups took the decisions are what made change possible. Some politicians say that the EU tells people and governments what to do. Well, nothing could have been further from the truth. We, local people, looked at what was needed and then took decisions as to what to support. It worked. The cash that we were given was not simply from election to election, but lasted for decades. We knew the money was going to be there, knew that we could plan for the future, knew that we could build over time, looking at the needs of our people, of our businesses, of our social enterprises and seeking to create better

opportunities for them. We could do that because every EU funding period lasted for six years, with an additional two years to complete programmes. The cash was in the bank. Secure, safe, committed'.[29]

Few national governments, if any, are in a position to guarantee funding beyond electoral cycles, but because the national governments that set the European Union's budget do so over a seven-year period, the Union is able to provide a long-term guarantee to local communities that receive funding for development.

And so, when Jasna Gabrič was elected mayor she knew from the start that European funding could help her achieve the goals she had for Trbovlje.

'I didn't have any specific projects in mind at the start, and there was no technical team to turn to. So, I just looked around Trbovlje and asked myself what I wanted to change, what I wanted to build. I spotted a park that badly needed renovating and saw how the funds could be used to renovate it. I also knew that the European Union funded cycling paths, and I was determined to build one, even though the municipal council had reached the conclusion in 2012 that a cycling path in Trbovlje was not possible. I decided we should try to do it, and we did. My objective was to show that Trbovlje could evolve from an old mindset and lifestyle — most people drive because our public transport isn't good — and so I wanted to encourage more cycling among residents. The path goes from the railway station at the bottom up to the Dewesoft company at the top. It's easy going downhill, but hard work going up! Thankfully, we have electric bikes these

days. And now, every time I see people using the cycle path, it makes me happy and I think to myself — we did it for them!'[30]

And it was a partnership with Dewesoft that would set the foundations for what has been Mayor Gabrič's proudest EU-funded achievement.

As Dewesoft grew into a successful company based in Trbovlje, its co-founder Jure Knez one day thought to himself that it was time to give something back to the town that hosts the company: 'One day we were looking at the graph of revenue growth and realized that the first seven years, the curve rose rather slowly, but then went steeply upwards. To have the success we needed a whole bunch of things and, consequently, time — we had to buy equipment, establish infrastructure, strengthen the team, and penetrate foreign markets. We realized that our experience, knowledge, infrastructure, and connections could effectively help young companies.'[31] And that thought turned into a vision called Katapult, a business accelerator that would support young entrepreneurs to scale up their budding companies and help reduce unemployment in Trbovlje and the Zasavje region.

The idea quickly became a reality and start-up businesses began to pour in (by 2024, more than 100 start-ups had passed through).[32] The success of Katapult, the accelerator, soon inspired a new complementary project: a publicly-owned business incubator that would help local entrepreneurs at the earliest stages, converting their ideas from nothing into something. When hearing of the plan, the business-friendly Mayor Gabrič was immediately enthusiastic and committed to finding the necessary funding. Having seen what Jasna Gabrič was capable of doing and how she used her European

knowledge and experience in the European Committee of the Regions for the benefit of the local community, the people of Trbovlje re-elected her in 2018 with an amazing 67% of the votes. And by then an expert in European funding, she set out to secure the funds for the establishment of the new Zasavje Business Incubator in a repurposed building in the old industrial quarter, just metres away from the Dewesoft headquarters.

On 9 June 2022, the deputy mayor of Trbovlje, together with Dr Jure Knez and the Slovenian minister of Economic Development and Technology, inaugurated the new business incubator, thanks to €1.2 million from the European Regional Development Fund, €400,000 from the Slovenian government, and another €400,000 from Trbovlje's own municipal funds. Without the European Union providing 60% of the funding, the project would very likely have never seen the light. As for Mayor Gabrič, she could only be present via a video message, having become a mother for the second time only days earlier.

The co-founder of Dewesoft paid tribute to the mayor's work that day: 'Zasavje has always been known for its innovative and hard-working people. We are delighted […] that the municipality, with the support of the Ministry of Technology and the EU, has taken a truly huge step and invested in the Zasavje Business Incubator, which represents a significant leap forward in expanding the city's offerings.'[33]

For Jasna Gabrič, the understanding that Slovenia's European Union membership was allowing Trbovlje to find a new future for itself was knowledge that had to be shared with the people of her town.

'As a member of the European Committee of the Regions, I always understood how important it is to enlighten citizens about the benefits they receive as citizens of the European Union. For every investment that received funds from the Union, I ensured that the EU funding would appear not just on the website, but also on large billboards visible to passers-by, as well as in ads on the local radio so the whole town would know how the Union helped us find a new mission in this century.'[34]

As obvious as it sounds to provide public information in the manner described by Mayor Gabrič, the fact is that good communication is costly and too many projects around the Union display no more than a small logo or plaque next to the project and on the relevant website, depriving citizens of the awareness and understanding of how the European Union invests in their local community and thus how their local community fits into — and contributes to — the development of the Union. Such lack of knowledge leaves citizens vulnerable to messages that portray the European Union as distant, indifferent, and incomprehensible, when the reality is that every local community is intimately connected with the Union, and indeed every citizen has a European dimension to their identity, whether they know it or not. An information campaign like the one carried out by Mayor Gabrič is thus a fundamental democratic service to the citizens, allowing them to relate to that dimension of their identity, celebrate it, and be better equipped against disinformation.

Weeks after the inauguration of the Zasavje Business Incubator, Jasna Gabrič announced that she would not be seeking a third mandate as mayor at the November 2022

election and would instead be pursuing new professional challenges. But before departing, she had one last very major task to carry out that would not only transform Trbovlje further but would echo across the entire Zasavje region, even having the potential to boost the Slovenian economy as a whole.

A few years earlier, shortly into her second mandate, the Trbovlje mining company had begun selling off its assets and land. Mayor Gabrič immediately recognised the value of this land and, pooling all the resources of the local administration, managed to purchase it for the municipality in the hope that a suitable opportunity for local development would come along. Unsurprisingly, a spectacular plan was put to her by the indefatigable Jure Knez.

The growth of Dewesoft and the Katapult business accelerator meant that they desperately needed additional space, so Dr Knez proposed the construction of what he called 'City of Acrobats', a technology park dedicated to start-ups and named after the performers of the impossible — for Dr Knez, entrepreneurs are like acrobats in that they achieve seemingly impossible feats. On 21 October 2022, Mayor Gabrič and Jure Knez held a joint press conference and signed a letter of intent to build what, in the words of the mayor, would transform Trbovlje 'from a once important mining area to the Slovenian Silicon Valley'.[35]

Projected to be the size of three football pitches,[36] the City of Acrobats is expected to create 1,000 jobs within its first decade, with the European Union providing €9.3 million from the EU Just Transition Fund, which helps former coal regions to restructure their economies.

In coming years, once the City of Acrobats is up and running and its sleek, futuristic-looking offices and labs are filled with highly-qualified twenty-first-century entrepreneurs and employees, they might perhaps occasionally pause and look out over the town. As they do, they might reflect upon the men and women who gave Trbovlje its unique DNA: the technical ingenuity and know-how that shaped the mining industry and its spin-offs, which became the foundation for new and inspiring local leaders of the public and private sectors to guide Trbovlje away from the abyss of economic collapse. Leaders who recognised the value of belonging to the European Union and saw the opportunities provided by European funding to offer Trbovlje a new purpose.

And if those entrepreneurs and employees listen carefully on a quiet day, they might just hear the faint echo of the voices of the men who, decades earlier, toiled in the tunnels underneath them, risking their lives to extract the 'black gold' that put Trbovlje on the map.



↑
Jasna Gabric delivering a speech as Vice-president of the Renew Europe group at a plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions.



↑
The author, about to board a train at Trbovlje railway station after a visit in June 2024.





↑
The design for the futuristic City of Acrobats business centre. Deep underneath it will lie the remains of the coal mine that put Trbovlje on the map.

↑
The tallest chimney stack in Europe, which the daring Slovenian acrobats climbed to perform and film their heart-stopping feats.

* * *

And thus we reach the end of the first two parts of this book. In Part I, we explored the European quarter of Brussels; we relived the birth of the European Union from the perspective of the city of Brussels, which eventually became the EU's capital via a tortuous route; and by exploring Brussels, we came to understand its historical relationship with political power and its fitting profile to be the Union's capital. In the second part of this book, we have explored various ways in which local leaders can, and do, make the Union a reality on the ground and are helping reveal for their citizens the European dimension of their identities.

It may seem obvious to us now, but the notion that local leaders should have any role to play in developing the Union was far from the minds of the founding fathers. Just after a cataclysmic war, they had other considerations, concerns, and constraints at the outset of European integration. When in 1950 Robert Schuman read out his declaration proposing the European Coal and Steel Community, precursor to today's European Union, he pronounced a line which has

since become famous: 'Europe 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.'[37] With this statement he was recognising that there would be twists and turns and forks in the road that could not be foreseen back in 1950 and which would require the decisions and choices of future leaders.

One such fork in the road presented itself nearly four decades later, in the spring of 1988. The European Economic Community, as it was then called, had grown to 12 Member States: the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Denmark joining in 1973, Greece in 1981, and Spain and Portugal in 1986. In May 1988, the president of the European Commission was the Frenchman Jacques Delors, appointed in 1985 to drive forward the next stage of European integration, in particular the development of the Single Market. Coming from a political tradition based on dialogue and consensus-building,[38] Delors had expressed from the very beginning of his presidency the desire to see a 'true democratic life at European level, driven by the citizens',[39] and he proposed in his statement to the European Parliament new ways of communicating with citizens on European matters.[40] He was also particularly sensitive to the idea that political decisions should be taken at the closest possible level of government to the citizen — what is known as subsidiarity — with the 'closest possible level' not necessarily always being the local or regional but at times being the European or national, depending on the problem to be solved.[41] The new fork in the road came three years into his tenure, on 19 May 1988, when President Delors attended a conference of German *länder* in Bonn, from

which he came away convinced that the Union had to find a way to take the concerns of subnational authorities into account.[42] He began developing the idea, and by the early 1990s, Delors was openly declaring support for the involvement of both regional and municipal levels of subnational government. He stated that 'the participation of regions in the construction of Europe was a crucial factor for its success'[43] and that cities 'are a crucial element in the construction of an authentic Europe [as they are] fundamental intermediaries between a level of political power which is distant, with the problems that arise from that, and its citizens'.[44]

Not everybody agreed with this additional level of participation,[45] nor indeed on whether both levels should be included. For a brief period there had been a political struggle over whether to create a body only for regional authorities or one which also gave voice to municipalities,[46] but the mixed approach won the day and a new political assembly of municipalities and regions — the European Committee of the Regions (CoR) — held its inaugural session on 9 March 1994, bringing together local and regional elected representatives from the 12 Member States, in the presence of its founding father, Jacques Delors.

This was also a time when the plate tectonics of power in Europe were shifting on a grand scale. The Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact were collapsing, with the members of that Pact turning away from Moscow and nations that had been subsumed for decades by the USSR (such as Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, or Moldova) regaining independence and reappearing on the map of Europe. Observing the opening proceedings of the European Committee

of the Regions in 1994, Delors could never have imagined that three decades later, as we shall see in Chapter 10, the president of Ukraine — a country that at the time of that inaugural session had just regained independence from the Soviet Union — would personally address the members of this new institution to thank them for their invaluable aid in response to a brutal military invasion from Russia. Indeed, the support and mobilisation required in the CoR after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 would stretch the CoR's capacity and the resources of local authorities across Europe in a way that could never have been foreseen when the Committee was established in 1994.

Thus, in the final part of this book, we come full circle: we return to Brussels to see how and why local leaders spend time in the EU's capital and how, by bringing knowledge and experience from their local communities to the European level, they help shape the Union. In this way, the title of this book, 'The EU Downtown', acquires its full meaning: after exploring how local leaders inform their citizens about their European democracy and help reveal to them the European dimension of their identities, we will see in Part 3 how local leaders bring 'their downtown' to the heart of the EU's capital, into the quarter where the decision-making takes place. In other words, how — right in the heart of the EU's capital — local leaders connect EU decision-makers with the Union's local communities. And we will learn how Brussels is adapting – albeit with some growing pains – to its status as the Union's capital. Afterwards, in the final chapter of the book, we will consider the future of the EU, reflect upon the importance of having strong roots in local communities for

the Union's long-term viability, and warn against any complacency regarding its stability and solidity, given the scale of the challenges on the horizon.

We had ended Chapter 1 of this book at the top of the arches of Cinquantenaire Park, surveying the European quarter of Brussels. We begin the next chapter back at the heart of the European quarter, right inside the Brussels zoo among a group of revolutionaries in the midst of an intense discussion.

3

The Downtown Union

CHAPTER 9

The Three Revolutionaries and the Three Revolutions

In the closing days of the month of October 1927, a group of revolutionaries gathered in the Brussels zoo, next to the enclosure for alpacas and llamas. They were intensely discussing several ideas which had the potential to change human society radically and forever, and the disagreements amongst them were profound. There were appeals to common sense and one idea was even described as 'abominable!'.

Any passers-by would have remained oblivious of this revolution: there were no barricades, no chants or shouted slogans, no fists in the air, not even spitting alpacas. Quite the opposite, it was all extremely civilised. The revolutionaries who had gathered inside the Jardin Zoologique were of a different kind: some of them were Nobel Prize laureates, and all of them were revolutionising our understanding of how our world and the universe function.

Invited by Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay,[1] the gathering included Albert Einstein, Niels Bohr, Max Born, Paul Dirac, Werner Heisenberg, Wolfgang Pauli, Max Planck, and

Erwin Schrödinger, all of them among the top physicists of the time, as well as Marie Curie, the only woman present and the first person to be awarded the Nobel Prize twice. The topic chosen for the conference was a new theory that two of the participants, Born and Heisenberg, had proposed two years earlier about the functioning of the subatomic world and which they called in German *Quantenmechanik*.[2] The theory of quantum mechanics had generated huge, though not unanimous, excitement amongst the physicists who had been trying for nearly three decades to make sense of what in 1900 Max Planck had called the 'quantum of action'. Planck's proposal was that energy (the action) manifests itself not as continuous waves but in discrete packets, or quantities, hence his use of 'quantum of action', meaning quantity of energy. This simple but radical idea about the packets of energy permeating the fabric of the physical world we inhabit had enormous consequences. Most disturbingly for some physicists, it meant that the body of laws and equations that make up what is known as classical Newtonian physics, which for several centuries had so well described the natural world we observe around us, was in fact inadequate at the level of atoms and subatomic particles. This realisation had plunged the physics community into crisis.[3]

The *Quantenmechanik* paper that Heisenberg and Born published a quarter of a century after Planck's idea was widely considered a major breakthrough in resolving the crisis: they had discovered that by applying a revolutionary mathematical approach they could make sense of a number of baffling atomic phenomena, and thus they concluded that through this technique the subatomic world would be open

to scientific understanding. Despite the appeal of quantum mechanics, several eminent scientists – including Einstein, as well as Planck himself — arrived at the 1927 Solvay Conference unconvinced by certain aspects. So much so that in December 1926, months before the conference, Einstein had written to Born: 'Quantum mechanics is certainly imposing. But an inner voice tells me that it is not yet the real thing'.[4] The gathering therefore promised to be consequential.

Even before it began, this Fifth Solvay Conference was also notable for political reasons: this was the first time since the end of the First World War (during which Belgium had suffered a brutal German occupation) that German physicists had been invited to participate at the conference, receiving for the occasion the approval of King Albert I of Belgium, who declared 'that a better understanding among nations is strongly needed for the future, and that science should help to bring it about'.[5] Indeed, several of the participating scientists were also actively involved in reflecting upon and supporting initiatives to prevent war and ensure lasting peace amongst nations.[6] One of them was Albert Einstein, who had become a household name thanks to his theory of relativity and the equation $E=mc^2$, which proved that matter is just another form of energy and showed that time is another dimension, which advances differently depending on your speed of travel. Einstein used his celebrity status for a number of causes, and at the time that the *Quantenmechanik* paper was published in 1925, he had been actively supporting an altogether different revolutionary idea that also involved seemingly impossible mechanics: a peaceful and voluntary union of European nations (see Chapter 3).

If the zoo and the alpaca enclosure was an odd place for a meeting of Nobel Prize physicists discussing the quantum world, the fact is that by the time this group of revolutionary geniuses came together in 1927, the zoo and the alpacas had long disappeared. All that remained were the ticket offices at the entrance of the park. Inaugurated in the early decades after Belgian independence, when the authorities wanted to provide the people of Brussels with a new form of entertainment on the outskirts of the capital,[7] the zoo had gone bankrupt in the 1870s and it lay almost abandoned until, eventually, the industrialist and philanthropist Solvay convinced the authorities to allow him to turn it into a science park with new buildings to house four different institutes: Anatomy, Hygiene & Bacteriology, Physiology, and Sociology.[8] It was in the Institute of Physiology, within the grounds of the former zoo (which by then had been renamed Parc Léopold), that the 1927 Solvay Conference took place, and it would no doubt have appealed to Einstein's well-known sense of humour that the path leading up to the institute traversed the very spot where once resided the alpacas, known for resolving conflicts with other alpacas by spitting regurgitated grass at each other.[9] Whether any of the eminent scientists knew this about their conference venue is, however, not known; and in any case, as is the nature of the scientific community, their disagreements would have been limited to oral and epistolary forms of expression.

Among those invited to the Solvay Conference was a young Belgian priest, Georges Lemaître, who had recently received his doctorate in physics and was already showing signs of scientific brilliance. During a break in the animated

discussions, Lemaître was introduced to Einstein, who was just stepping away briefly from the Conference to visit the laboratory of one of the other participants and friend of his, the Brussels-based Swiss scientist Auguste Piccard. Upon meeting the young priest, the father of the theory of relativity invited Lemaître for a brief stroll in the park before he and Piccard had to catch their taxi to the lab.[10]

As the three walked along the footpaths of the park, they discussed the young Belgian priest's own new theory that the universe must be expanding. Published a year earlier, Lemaître's idea was also revolutionary: astronomers were only just beginning to demonstrate that the boundaries of the universe extended well beyond our own Milky Way galaxy. For as long as humans had walked the earth, we had been oblivious to the vast cosmological distances hidden in the night sky, and new telescopes and scientific techniques were starting to lift the veil. The first evidence of the mind-boggling distances came in 1922 when the Estonian astrophysicist Ernst Öpik calculated that the well-known Andromeda nebula was in fact at such a great distance that it could not be a feature inside our Milky Way galaxy and had to be a whole other galaxy on its own.[11] Thereafter, many such objects were found to be located even farther away. Georges Lemaître had followed these developments closely and, applying Einstein's equations to these distant objects, had concluded that the universe must be expanding. But this concept, which we now take entirely for granted because subsequent observations proved Lemaître to be right (and led him to propose, years later, the theory we now call the Big Bang), was so revolutionary at the time that Einstein refused to accept it.

As they walked through Parc Léopold, he told Lemaître that he thought the suggestion was 'abominable', even though (by his own admission) he couldn't find any fault with the young priest's mathematics. Despite this disagreement, Einstein and Lemaître would remain on friendly terms and met several times again.

As they emerged that day of October 1927 from the Institute of Physiology where the Conference was taking place and headed out of the park, the three revolutionaries would never have imagined that the no-less-revolutionary peaceful and voluntary union of European nations would one day come to be, and would be centred on land only metres from where they walked.

Immediately to their left upon leaving the Physiology building they would have observed the beautiful Institute of Hygiene & Bacteriology, built in the Flemish neo-renaissance style, with its characteristic combination of red brick, white stone, and bluestone creating an attractive chromatic effect, further enhanced by ironwork, gables, and a turret. Behind the Institute of Hygiene & Bacteriology, they would have also seen two- and three-storey residential homes that indicated the way towards downtown Brussels.[12] Absorbed by their discussions on the behaviour of the universe, and living as they did at a time when European nations were having great difficulties in overcoming the wounds and enmities of the devastating 1914–1918 war, they would only have taken a passing interest in these buildings. Yet, many decades later, the site on which those buildings stood would host buildings belonging to the economic and political union of European nations that Einstein hoped to see one day.

If they could have looked into the future, the three scientific revolutionaries would probably have been astonished to learn that this political and economic union would be anchored all around the very same Parc Léopold they were at that moment strolling through, and they would have no doubt considered it amusing and curious that nearly a century after their own Solvay Conference, another kind of conference would take place just a few metres away from where they were standing. Rather than gathering Nobel Prize laureates, however, the conference that would be held in the distant year of 2024 would bring together citizens from 27 different nations for whom Brussels had become home, and who were being called upon to help shape the future of the Belgian capital, which had also become the capital of this Union of European nations.

As powerful as their mental abilities were, and even if Einstein himself had already reflected upon and written about a united Europe, it is safe to say that none of this was on their minds as the three walked past the Institute of Hygiene & Bacteriology. And if someone suddenly were to appear in front of them having travelled back in time bringing news about the twenty-first century, they would no doubt have been fascinated by the physics that allowed this to happen, but they might have found it harder to actually believe that European unity had become a reality — that 27 European nations (which had at various moments of their histories been archenemies) had been successfully, voluntarily, and peacefully brought together. They might even have asked the time traveller to take them to the twenty-first century so they could witness such a feat for themselves.

If I were that time traveller, I would tell them what I would tell any reader of this book: that seeing for oneself the union of European nations is best done as an experience, a personalised one tailor-made for one's interests and taking place well beyond the seats of institutional power and constitutional procedures, to connect with the reality of life of European citizens across the Union. I would tell the three physicists that what I had in store for them was just such an experience. And I invite you, the reader, to enjoy the rest of this chapter thinking all the while how a similar experience might be designed for yourself.

Before setting off on our journey through time, I would invite Einstein, Lemaître, and Piccard to take a good look at the Parc Léopold and its surroundings, for they were about to discover how much it had changed nearly a century later.

Upon arriving in the twenty-first century, the three eminent physicists would have seen that the Institute of Physiology where they had been holding their scientific discussions — seemingly only minutes earlier — was still there at the start of the year 2020, but they would have been bewildered to see hundreds of teenagers pouring out of the building, now a secondary school, dressed in unrecognisable clothes, behaving as teenagers do, but most of them equipped with rectangular hand-held devices that seemed to be the centre of their attention. Noticing Professor Piccard, some of the teenagers might have walked past giggling and commenting on how much he looked like Professor Calculus. I would have had to explain to Auguste Piccard that shortly after the Fifth Solvay Conference, in 1929, a Belgian comic-strip artist known as Hergé had created a fictional character

known as Tintin who became one of the most popular comic-strip characters of the twenty-first century, and that in the 1940s, Hergé had introduced a scientist into the series called Professeur Tournesol ('Calculus' in the English translation) and that he, Professor Piccard, was the inspiration for the character.[13] Perhaps bemused and certainly astonished by this news, Piccard might not have known how to interpret it, so I would have quickly reassured him that he would also be remembered for his scientific achievements, including his studies of the Earth's upper atmosphere, and especially for being the first human to enter the stratosphere.[14]

As for Georges Lemaître, he would have been unable to take his eyes off the hand-held devices the teenagers were manipulating. Back in 1927, he was only three years away from opening up a whole new passion in his life: early prototypes of computers. In 1930, he encountered and used for the first time a 'calculating machine' known as the 'Differential Analyser', built at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.[15] This experience developed into a lifelong interest parallel to his theoretical work on the cosmos. With this innate and latent fascination for machine learning, Lemaître would have no doubt wanted to know more about the devices the teenagers were using, and I would have assured him that the journey they were just beginning would be an immersive experience into the twenty-first century and its technology.

The astonishment of the three physicists would only grow upon turning and seeing that the Institute of Hygiene & Bacteriology had completely vanished, demolished only six years after their Solvay Conference and replaced by a grand three-storey white art-deco/modernist building financed by

the founder of the Kodak photography company, George Eastman, whose philanthropic work included dental institutes for children suffering from poverty.[16] They would have seen, however, that it was no longer a dental institute and was now emblazoned with the words 'House of European History', having been transformed into an interactive museum explaining the history of Europe and focusing in particular on the birth and development of this extraordinary union of 27 nations that they had travelled so far in time to witness.

At this point, I would have disclosed that I was taking them on a voyage of discovery, a special tour of Europe tailor-made for them and their individual interests, at the end of which they would understand the European Union, its functioning, and its diversity in a unique and unprecedented manner. And along the way, there would be some astonishing and amusing surprises in store for them.

First, they would need to familiarise themselves with some basics about this Union, as well as learn how to navigate an electronic world. I would have invited them into the museum for a guided tour, where — after allowing them some time (especially Lemaître) to have fun with touchscreen technology – they would have discovered the events that led to the founding of the European Union, its subsequent development, and its institutional mechanics.

Being scientists and thus preferring to observe a phenomenon directly, I would have then taken them outside and drawn their attention to a building behind the museum, just outside the park. They would have noticed — by now no longer surprised — that the residential homes that back in 1927 pointed the way to downtown Brussels had been

replaced by an eight-storey building with the words 'European Committee of the Regions' running down the side of its glass front in 24 different languages.

I would have asked them to take a good look at that building and told them that, as physicists who were exploring the micro quantum world and the macro vastness of space, they would instinctively have a profound understanding and appreciation for what this building represents: the effort to connect the micro and the macro of European governance, as they were about to observe. I would have explained that we had come to the year 2020, to the month of February, to begin their tailor-made voyage at a special gathering where that interaction between the micro and the macro played out in two unprecedented and momentous ways for the European Union.

I would have pointed to the building housing the European Committee of the Regions and told Einstein, Lemaître, and Piccard that they were looking at the Union's assembly of subnational leaders — mayors and local councillors, regional presidents and regional parliamentarians — elected by citizens to govern their local communities, and that the gathering of February 2020 was special for several reasons but mostly for one tiny detail that almost went unnoticed. It was a detail of huge significance, and it represented the last tremor of an earthquake that shook the foundations of the Union. To see it and understand it they would have to join me at the 138th plenary session of the CoR.

That specific session took place on 12 February 2020. More than 300 subnational leaders gathered in the hemicycle of the European Parliament for the inauguration of the

CoR's seventh mandate, and their main task that day was to elect a new president.

Surveying the impressive hemicycle, with its large presidential podium, hundreds upon hundreds of desks arranged in semi-circular rows, and the superposed rows of interpretation booths embedded in the back wall, the three physicists would have marvelled at the size and arrangement of the room where deliberations and decisions were taken by the representatives of 27 nations.

But, they might have wondered, why would the European Parliament that most directly represents European democracy, and whose own members are directly elected by the citizens every five years, be filled with local and regional politicians? I would have answered that these political leaders had been given a unique and challenging mission to help European lawmakers at the macro European level to better understand the lives of citizens at the micro level in local communities across Europe, and that the European Parliament often lends its hemicycle to the European Committee of the Regions for its plenary sessions. I would have added that, as they would see for themselves during this personalised voyage around Europe, involving subnational leaders in the affairs of the Union not only makes sense but is a necessity for the good health and long-term survival of the Union.

Of the hundreds of political leaders seated in the parliamentary chamber, few (if any) paid attention to the flags above the presidential podium, but that is exactly where I would have invited my guests to turn their gaze, asking them to count the flags. They would have found that apart from the flag of the European Union there were 27 others.

The tiny detail of huge significance that had gone largely unnoticed by most in the room that day was that a flag was missing. At the previous session there had been 28 flags plus that of the Union. That small change, that one missing flag, had made the 138th session hugely different, both in symbolic and very practical ways.

To the three scientists accompanying me, I would have explained that the United Kingdom had belonged to the Union for nearly half a century and that the European Committee of the Regions is one of the few EU institutions and bodies which the UK had co-founded as a Member State and where its flag had been present at the very first opening session. Britain's Union Jack had appeared at another 136 sessions after that, but the absence of the flag in the first session of 2020 had been a long time coming, following the decision nearly four years earlier by the British people in the so-called Brexit referendum to leave the European Union. That decision had a seismic impact on the Union, causing many initially to fear its collapse. Instead, the other 27 showed a unity that few, if any, had foreseen. The long-protracted negotiations spearheaded by the EU's Chief Brexit Negotiator, Michel Barnier, to ensure the separation would happen with the least possible disruption allowed the formal departure of the United Kingdom to take place on 31 January 2020.

So, the flag's absence came as no surprise, and indeed, for some it was even a relief. The whole process of departure had been painful and emotional for all involved — including, of course, for local leaders on either side, many of whom on that day of February 2020 awaited the consequences with trepidation: it had been well established that Brexit would

have an impact on flows of people, school children, university students, tourists, workers, goods, ships, trucks, trains, planes; it would disrupt families and their life plans, businesses and their investment plans, and farmers and their export crops. Because every single one of the items on this list was of direct relevance to municipal and regional authorities, Michel Barnier had kept in close contact with the CoR, speaking regularly at its plenary sessions and holding private meetings with its political leadership.[17]

Now, with 'Brexit done' as per the wishes of the British Government, the immediate practical consequence for the European Committee of the Regions was that its membership had dropped from 350 members down to 329. Beyond the cold numbers, and more poignantly, this meant that the very eloquent and constructive voices of the incredibly committed British local leaders would no longer be heard in the discussions about how the Union was functioning on the ground. The English, Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish perspective would be gone, perhaps forever.

Several weeks earlier, at the session of December 2019, a local councillor from the English city of Newcastle, Doreen Huddart, had taken the floor, knowing that it would be her last plenary, to 'apologise once again' for Brexit,[18] recalling how she had opposed it. She recalled as well the work of previous British members like Lord Tope (the leader of the London Borough of Sutton) and Cllr Flo Clucas (the deputy leader of Liverpool City Council), who had both hugely influenced the work of the CoR, holding high office in the Committee and leading on policy work related to the fight against terrorism, or warning against the tendency

of national governments to 'gold plate' EU legislation (thus rendering it more constraining than it need be). Such members had also been at the forefront of discussions on EU funding, maritime safety and ports management, and better integrating the European rail network, while Doreen Huddart herself had led the CoR's work on child poverty and the EU's asylum system.[19] The level of British contribution and leadership in this EU institution was perhaps best symbolised by the fact that the CoR itself had been presided over from 2002 to 2004 by Sir Albert Bore, at the time the leader of Birmingham City Council.

Listening to that story while observing the CoR's plenary session, Albert Einstein might have harked back to what he wrote in his 1925 article calling for a united Europe, expressed as only a rational physicist would: 'A task so full of difficulties as Europe's unification does not permit simplification to one design formula; all the complicated preconditions must rather be cleared up and consolidated in advance'.[20] His sentiment nonetheless comes through, and he would have thus not been surprised to learn that in the year 2020 the development of the European Union hadn't been a smooth, linear process, but rather an evolution peppered with setbacks.

But there was no time or appetite amongst the members of the assembly to dwell any further on Britain's decision, and the candidate to become the CoR's next president, Apostolos Tzitzikostas, Governor of the Greek region of Central Macedonia, promptly launched into his presentation. Putting on their headphones to experience the interpretation, Einstein, Lemaître, and Piccard would have listened with astonishment at one of the president's opening lines:

'My home town is Thessaloniki, my home region is Central Macedonia, my home country is Greece, but at the same time I feel at home in each and every corner of the European Union.'

And he went on:

'And that exactly is the strength of Europe. It is the diversity found in our regions, in our cities, in our towns and villages, that makes our Union stronger.'[21]

For three observers coming from the interwar period of the twentieth century, where toxic ideas of national supremacy, racial purity, and hate-driven confrontation were on the rise, those words pronounced by Governor Tzitzikostas would have been simply extraordinary and almost beyond belief. Indeed, they were a reflection of how far European unity had developed in just a few decades.

But it was one of the governor's proposals which would have caught the attention of the three physicists:

'The second priority which I propose to you is for our institution to focus on understanding and responding to the profound transformations that the current green, digital, and demographic revolutions entail for our local communities.'

I imagine that the three scientists, experienced revolutionaries as they were themselves, would have turned and looked at me quizzically: what were these odd-sounding revolutions? Imagining how baffling these terms would have sounded to people for whom 'green' was no more than the name of a colour and 'digital' was more likely to signify fingers, I would have answered that the three revolutions were in many ways intertwined and that this is where this visit was about to get uniquely personal to them, and that we would

in a moment begin their tour of Europe. The so-called green revolution would be of particular interest to both Piccard, because of his passion for studying the Earth's atmosphere, and Lemaître, because he descended from a family involved in the coal industry.[22] Watching them consider how coal and the Earth's atmosphere might be linked, I would have explained that to begin to understand more about these revolutions we needed to travel a little further into the future, to the autumn of that same year, and I would have warned them that things were about to get very strange.

On 13 October 2020, the plenary session of the European Committee of the Regions looked very different. The room was almost empty and the few people present were all seated as far apart from each other as possible, and most bizarrely, they all wore face masks covering their noses and mouths. Knowing something about the difficulties of breathing rarefied air from his studies of the Earth's atmosphere, Piccard might have instantly recognised that there was a problem with the air in the room. And Einstein, who in 1918 saw friends and relatives in Switzerland suffer badly from a flu pandemic, might have deduced what the problem was.[23]

Sure enough, I would have explained that in 2019 a dangerous microscopic virus had caused an epidemic in China and was rapidly spreading around the world. Unbeknownst to all attending the 138th plenary, when Governor Tzitzikostas had delivered his presidential speech, the virus had already reached Belgium and that session would be the last time that most of the attendees would see each other for two years. Easily passed on from one person to another through the air, the spread of the virus would within days trigger pandemic

lockdowns across the European Union in an effort to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed by the number of sick patients. By the time the 140th CoR plenary was held in October 2020, normal life in Europe had almost entirely ground to a halt, impacting the economy, public health, and day-to-day life in local communities.

It was at that October CoR plenary, I would have added, that we would see how the pandemic had forced the world to speed up the digital revolution, which in the previous decades had seen humans generate, transmit, and store information, including sound and moving images, in truly groundbreaking ways, as the three scientists had observed during their visit to the House of European History. I would have informed them that in the years following the Fifth Solvay Conference, knowledge of and manipulation of the electron had led to the development of new and faster ways of trapping and processing data, expressed directly as numerical digits, hence the term 'digital'. This technology had continued to evolve in leaps and bounds, to the extent of now allowing people to hold meetings as if they were in the same room, while in fact being in different locations, sometimes on the other side of the planet. Something which, more than useful, became a necessity because of the pandemic, and which they were about to see happening before their eyes.

Just at that moment, Einstein might have hushed me. President Tzitzikostas was introducing German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose face appeared on a large screen from her office in Berlin, the city where Einstein had been living and working at the time of the Solvay Conference. Noting that a woman was the chancellor of Germany, he would have been

particularly interested in hearing what his country, whose reputation in Europe back in 1927 was in tatters, had to say.

'Germany', Chancellor Merkel explained, 'is holding the Presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of this year. We can state that this is a Council Presidency that is taking place in an exceptional situation. The COVID-19 pandemic is making us face challenges at all levels — in Europe, in the Member States, in the regions and in the municipalities […] Many people have lost their lives. So I must say that the situation continues to be very serious.'[24]

Continuing, she observed: 'As elected officials, you are aware of the challenges in your regions — in hospitals and care homes, in schools and kindergartens, in companies and also in public places […] Ladies and gentlemen, your perspectives on Europe, your experiences and commitment are what Europe needs in order to get through this difficult time in a spirit of solidarity and to assume responsibility in your regions. Without you, we can have only a limited impact as Heads of State and Government — and we can have just as limited an impact without the citizens of Europe.'

And to clarify her point that success depends not just on good will between political leaders of the different levels of government but on having the right structures in place, she emphasised: 'We need a strong Europe — a Europe with institutions that cooperate well, and a Europe with Member States whose strength emerges precisely from decentralised structures, which do justice to the different situations in the regions, cities and municipalities.'

After listening to Chancellor Merkel's speech, Einstein might have sat back in amazement, with the words 'citizens

of Europe' still ringing in his ears, and perhaps recalling the words he himself had written in 1925 about the difficulties of reconciliation between neighbouring peoples: 'it is far more difficult to harmonize with one's neighbors, where the recollections of countless earlier frictions and quarrels that arose out of close proximity act as an impediment'.[25] He would have no doubt thought that hearing the leader of a major European nation, of Germany no less, speak naturally about the 'citizens of Europe' was a revolution in itself.

To illustrate how far the reconciliation between the two historic enemies, Germany and France, had progressed, I would have urged him to listen to the subnational leader who was about to speak in response to the Chancellor.

'Now,' said President Tzitzikostas, 'I give the floor to François Decoster.'

'Madame Chancellor [...] I too welcome you to the Committee of the Regions,' began Mayor Decoster, who was also using the latest digital technology and had connected remotely from his local office. He was about to focus on the demographic challenge facing Europe, specifically one controversial aspect of it. 'In your opening words you mentioned the Moria catastrophe. The initiative that together with the French President you have taken to welcome unaccompanied minors from that camp to Germany, France, and other Member States of the Union, illustrates perfectly what you mean when you speak of solidarity. It so happens that just a few days ago in my town of Saint-Omer, in the French region of Hauts-de-France, a fire also broke out in a centre hosting unaccompanied refugee minors, which had to be evacuated. Fortunately, there were no victims.'[26]

Mayor Decoster explained that these tragedies shone a spotlight on an area where the Union was lacking and in urgent need of completion: 'In the absence of a true European asylum and migration policy, those who voluntarily take it upon themselves to contribute to the solidarity, do so often beyond their actual capacity, with all the inherent risks that follow. My town has 15,000 inhabitants, and is located 40 km from Calais, and every year we receive more than two thousand young refugees who don't manage to cross the English Channel […] Some of them choose to stay, return to school, learn a trade, or even some, coming from Pakistan and Afghanistan introduced a new sport to our local pitches, and we have become regional cricket champions. But for every success story, there are many tragedies, fires, and drownings. Six years ago, I drafted a report at the CoR, which was adopted unanimously, in which I called for genuine solidarity as part of a real European migration policy, and I drew attention to the fact that local leaders don't have the luxury of waiting for a decision at European level, we are already having to take action because we are on the front line.'

At that point, I would have turned to Einstein, who had himself spent five years of his youth as a stateless person and — though he did not yet know it at the time of the 1927 Solvay Conference — would become a refugee six years later in Belgium after the Nazis came to power in Germany.[27] I would have explained to him that the demographic revolution that President Tzitzikostas had mentioned in his February speech was the result of four parallel trends: first, the explosion in global population (which had grown from two billion in the 1920s to nearly eight billion by 2020); second,

an increasingly ageing population in Europe due to a rapid decrease in birth rates in the latter half of the twentieth century; third, an increasingly urban population, with three quarters of Europe's residents living in cities (causing serious urban–rural inequalities); and finally, the rise in international organised crime, which had found a lucrative business in the trafficking of desperate and vulnerable people fleeing conflict or poverty. It was this last dimension which was the basis for the exchange between Chancellor Merkel and Mayor Decoster, and for which the Union was struggling to develop a common, effective, and humane answer, resulting in major challenges for local leaders across the Union. And I might have added that for political leaders at all levels of government and all across the Union, trying to take back control of large migration flows from the hands of criminal gangs while responding to the humanitarian needs of the people migrating and finding ways to integrate them into their new society — and at the same time adjusting to the welfare and economic impact of an ageing population and dealing with the practical consequences of rapid growth of urban populations, coupled with rapid decline of rural ones — had become an enormous puzzle, on a par with the most complex problems tackled by Nobel Physics laureates.

Einstein might have nodded in agreement, perhaps thinking that it was no wonder that President Tzitzikostas had described the problem as a demographic *revolution*.

I would have then turned to Georges Lemaître and Auguste Piccard and said, 'before embarking on your personalised tour of Europe it's essential to understand that it is in the demographic revolution that we find the roots of the

so-called green revolution, which has come about because of what happens when you burn coal or petroleum'. The eminent physicists would have known that when coal and petroleum are burnt, carbon dioxide gas is released into the air. However, they probably would not have heard of the largely ignored American scientist, Eunice Foote. In 1857, she had proved that large amounts of CO_2 gas in the Earth's atmosphere would result in high atmospheric temperatures.[28] And they would definitely not have known, because it happened in 1938, that the English engineer Guy Callendar had demonstrated that human activity was increasing the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere and thus impacting its temperature.[29]

With this new information, Auguste Piccard, the passionate explorer of the Earth's atmosphere, would have immediately spotted the problem: if the burning of coal and oil releases into the atmosphere carbon dioxide, a gas which traps heat, then a four-fold increase in the world's population in one century would require a massive expansion of the coal and oil industries. This would result in a huge injection of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, trapping enormous quantities of heat and increasing the overall temperature of the atmosphere – and all of that in a space of time which, in geological terms, is a blink of an eye. Such a chain of events will inevitably and drastically change the atmosphere's behaviour.

It would not have been necessary to spell out to these eminent scientists the inescapable conclusion: a radical and abrupt change in the atmosphere's behaviour — its climate — could be devastating for human society. 'So it has become

urgent', I would have told them, 'to prevent, or at least slow down, the change in the Earth's climate, and this requires switching to forms of energy production that don't release carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.' The three physicists might have exchanged looks, all thinking the same thing, with Einstein vocalising their thoughts: '$E=mc^2$'.

Albert Einstein's famous equation, which demonstrated that matter is just another form of energy, had triggered heated debates throughout the 1920s about its implications, in particular whether large amounts of energy could be released from inside the atom in a controlled manner.[30] All the way up to 1927, Einstein had been sceptical that a means could be found to harvest that energy. So, hearing about the urgent needs of the twenty-first century, he might have wondered aloud whether humans had finally found a way to do it, and I would have revealed to him that indeed so-called nuclear energy had for decades been a source of energy in many countries around the world, especially in Europe. But I would have added that because of the inherent dangers of dealing with radioactive materials and a few tragic accidents along the way, the alternative energy sources widely preferred in the twenty-first century were, on the one hand, wind power (thanks to new large-scale turbines that used wind to generate electricity) and, on the other, solar panels that capture and convert sunlight into electricity, and that other approaches to reducing carbon emissions were constantly being explored.

Just as the three physicists would have begun to get carried away discussing the science behind these new technologies, I would have stopped them to explain that, now that

they had a broad understanding of the three revolutions (green, digital, and demographic), it was time to embark on their custom-designed tour of Europe. They were about to truly understand how the micro and the macro get woven together in the European Union, and they were about to have an understanding of Europe like never before and such as they could never experience anywhere else. Then, I would have handed them each a virtual-reality helmet and showed them how to use it. A fascinated Lemaître might have commented to his colleagues how incredible it was that they could travel without going anywhere, simply by putting a sophisticated 'calculating machine' on their heads.

I would have then launched their experience.

Inside the helmets: darkness.

Then, slowly rising, the sound of waves rolling up a sandy beach, and the darkness gradually replaced by daylight to reveal the waters rushing towards the viewer. Wearing their helmets, the three physicists would have flinched before remembering they were in a virtual experience and that the waves were not really there. A caption on their screens would locate them at White Bay Beach, County Cork, Ireland. The sound of a large ferry in the distance would make them look up from their feet. The virtual experience would transport them into the air and towards the ship. Hovering over it, they would follow it into one of the largest natural harbours in the world, past the two small islands strategically located at the entrance of the river Lee, upon which in times past fortifications had been built to protect the city of Cork from invasion. Sailing past the islands, the ferry would dock at the Deep Water Berth of the Port of Cork, but the

virtual experience would take them floating past it, up the river, and instead of heading towards downtown Cork, it would hover on the outskirts over an Irish-language secondary school called Coláiste an Phiarsaigh. With the school in view down below, and downtown Cork in the distance, my three guests would hear inside their helmets the voice of one of the school's teachers, Gillian Coughlan, an elected local councillor and the incoming Cork County mayor.

They would hear her say as she presented to the CoR plenary, in May 2021, her report on digital education: 'Good afternoon, my dear fellow Europeans […] We know that COVID-19 has altered every aspect of our lives […] As a practitioner, I can attest to the fact that many teachers and students did feel as if they were hurtled into another dimension by the pandemic […] From their own homes, students could now join their teachers and classmates online and work could proceed. This was very fine in theory, but the pandemic shone a light on the home lives of our learners: on the availability of a quiet space, on the availability of a digital device, and the availability of a reliable broadband connection. As we emerge from the pandemic, we must not forget that these obstacles will continue to exist for our students and if we are to intensify digitalisation in education we must address these obstacles […] Therefore, I have suggested that all teachers and students should be provided with a suitable digital device along with free access to digital communication and educational applications and platforms […] In keeping with my approach, I propose a voucher system modelled on the WiFi4EU scheme. This funding would be offered to groups within regions — teachers, universities, and groups like

that — to develop digital solutions to their specific educational challenge, for example an agricultural college may bid for funding for an app for young farmers […] The more the European Union can empower individuals to access devices and networks, to learn digital skills, and to feel part of the digital revolution, the better for the citizens of the European Union and for the EU as a bloc.'[31]

The three scientists might have cheered upon hearing those words. They would not have known much about the digital revolution, but as dedicated university lecturers themselves, they would have certainly shared Cllr Coughlan's passion for the world of education.

A change of scene inside the helmets.

Albert Einstein might have gasped upon seeing the picture developing before his eyes. In March 1924, he had written about the work of the nineteenth-century mathematician János Bolyai,[32] one of the founders of a form of alternative geometry, and there on his screen he was looking at a statue of Bolyai, wearing an overcoat, looking down as if pondering a complex mathematical problem.[33] The statue was the main feature of a small garden inside the courtyard of the university that was named after him: the Babeș-Bolyai University of the Romanian city of Cluj-Napoca.[34] As the virtual experience slowly rotated around the neatly arranged courtyard, keeping the statue in sight and revealing the white-bordered arched windows of the three-storeyed main campus, they would hear the voice of Emil Boc, Mayor of Cluj-Napoca, former Prime Minister of Romania, presenting at the CoR plenary of April 2022 his report on a European Strategy for Universities: 'Europe is home to close to five thousand higher

education institutions, 17.5 million students, 1.35 million people teaching in the universities, and 1.17 million researchers […] The European Commission proposes to […] empower universities as actors of change in the twin green and digital transitions […] and I think here is the clearest role of the local and regional authorities: we can create the best ecosystem possible to provide innovation, research, development, and promote democracy, […] contributing with financial resources, land, human resources, to create educational clusters at local and regional level […] [creating also what I call] "the living lab", offering the city as a place to test [university innovations]. Use the university as a gold mine for your community. If you have it, advertise it. If you don't have it, create it, because we are living in the knowledge economy — the only resource on Earth without limits.'[35]

For Professor Piccard, as Chair of the Applied Physics Department of the University of Brussels, this would have been music to his ears and he would have no doubt nodded in approval, his virtual-reality helmet moving up and down noticeably.

Darkness and silence would have returned to the helmets.

Suddenly, dramatic orchestral music, making the three scientists jump. Gradually, the screen would reveal a moonlit night sky, underneath which an almost fully preserved ancient Roman theatre beautifully illuminated in blues and reds and Roman motifs. On stage, a few dozen people wearing a diverse range of costumes. I might have noticed Einstein's hands subtly following the rhythm. Indeed, as an accomplished amateur violinist who loved to play Mozart,[36] he would have instantly recognised the music of *Don Giovanni*,

one of the operatic masterpieces of his favourite composer. A caption on the screen would reveal to them that they were witnessing the 2021 premiere of *Don Giovanni* by director Michał Znaniecki,[37] held at the Ancient Theatre in the city of Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second-largest city and one of the oldest cities in Europe, with origins dating back thousands of years.[38]

The scene would then switch from the operatic performance at close range to a more distant bird's-eye view of the Roman theatre, again at night, and in the foreground a tall three-storey tower of huge electronic cubes, at the foot of which a woman was delivering a speech to a crowd to launch European Capital of Culture 2019. A key EU decision-maker, herself a graduate of the University of Plovdiv (where she studied for four years in the late 1990s), she was saying: 'I am proud that Plovdiv is the first Bulgarian city to be Capital of Culture […] and this is fully deserved. Plovdiv has always been at the heart of the cultural history of Bulgaria and Europe […] with thousands of years of history, with a strong European dimension, and exceptional historical monuments and buildings, which combine in a unique way cultural elements from the Balkan peninsula and the whole of Europe. This is where we understand that culture is not just an addition, but it is essential for keeping and shaping our European identity, to create the sense of common belonging, to form tomorrow's Europe.'[39]

Watching closely on their virtual-reality screens, the three physicists would then see the close-up of the woman blend into a different close-up but of the same woman, this time looking straight at them, in an office with a flag of the European Union behind her. 'I now wish to speak about culture,'

they would hear her say. The caption would reveal that they were listening to the European Commissioner for Innovation, Research and Culture, the Bulgarian Mariya Gabriel, addressing the CoR plenary of February 2021 about the impact of the pandemic on the world of culture and how the European Commission reacted: 'We quickly informed the Member States of the measures taken from the first day of the COVID crisis, and [the CoR] has helped with this. You have disseminated the information, you have shared the good ideas that your cities and regions have had in order to support artists. We have also launched the "Creatives Unite" platform which has already had considerable success, with more than thirty thousand users to date, and it outlines measures taken by local authorities.'[40]

Demonstrating how the micro and the macro come together in Europe, and how her contact with subnational politicians helps her in her work, she addressed the chairperson of the CoR's cultural affairs commission. 'Thank you very much Mrs Hristova for your idea. I subscribe to it immediately: "Culture Meets Regions" […][41] I am very open to the suggestion, and I will straight away discuss it with my team and promptly come back to the Committee of the Regions to see how we can roll it out as quickly as possible'.[42]

And then, the European Commissioner spoke passionately about the partnership between the European and subnational levels in supporting and developing the cultural sector on several fronts: 'On the role of education, this is something close to my heart. Let's not forget that last August, for the first time, I launched a call of €100 million within the Erasmus+ programme, with what we have called the

Creativity Partnerships. For the first time, we have proposed that education and culture work together *at the local level* […] and I fully support the call of the European Parliament for 2% of the [pandemic] Recovery Plan to be dedicated to the cultural sector, I believe that today there are still many Member States that have not met that objective, and I count on the Committee of the Regions to help us make progress on that front too.'

She could not conclude her remarks without mentioning the European Capital of Culture programme: 'I want to thank Mayors Cubbard and Obsernel, of our Capitals of Culture, Galway and Rijeka. I have to say, you will be remembered as pioneers, who have further developed the Capital of Culture concept at a difficult moment when there was a real threat to it [by the pandemic], and I salute all your efforts […] I have proposed that we set up a network of all the mayors of Capitals of Culture together with the mayors of Capitals of Innovation. It is long overdue that we use their experience and best practice for the benefit of other regions right from the beginning […] To conclude, I think I have outlined here the main topics: coordination, synergies, and absolute close collaboration between the Committee of the Regions and the European Commission on the new initiatives.'[43]

It is easy to imagine that while listening to these words, the physicist–priest Georges Lemaître, who loved the theatre and would later in his career spend years researching the life and work of the French playwright Molière,[44] might have lightly shaken his fists as if in a show of support. As a cultured, musical, and well-read man both by his upbringing and by his personal interests, there can be no doubt that

he would have unreservedly applauded the efforts to keep the world of culture alive during the twenty-first century's COVID pandemic.[45] In fact, Lemaître was truly a 'renaissance man'. He had been born in 1894 to a well-off business family located in the Walloon city of Charleroi, whose business collapsed in 1908 due to a fire and lack of insurance, forcing the family to start a new life in Brussels.[46] Despite the misfortune, they rebuilt their lives and Georges received a broad education. Throughout his life he cultivated a wide range of interests that not only included cosmology, theology, music, literature, and theatre, but also sports, actively promoting them at the Université Catholique de Louvain.[47]

With this rich and varied background — as a Belgian and a priest with a passion for sports, whose entrepreneurial family had experienced the two extremes of business (great success followed by sudden collapse) — Lemaître would particularly appreciate the next site that would begin to appear inside the virtual-reality helmet. A visit that would end, for his companion Professor Piccard, with an astonishing surprise.

The sounds of many children nearby, chatting and laughing as they approach.

In the picture developing on the virtual screens, hundreds of children and adolescents would be seen walking and running up and down the pavement on both sides of the street, speaking Spanish. Many would be congregating around the popular Freddo-Freddo ice-cream parlour. On the other side of the road, a long five-storey cream-coloured building on elevated terrain would explain the presence of so many children: the huge school of San Agustín, which has been a major landmark of the street for over half a century. The virtual

experience would pan to the left and zoom in on the plaque affixed to the façade of the building on the corner, revealing the street's name: 'Padre Damián', a name that Georges Lemaître would have immediately recognised as a fellow Belgian priest. Father Damian was a nineteenth-century Belgian missionary famous for the years he spent caring for patients of leprosy in the Kingdom of Hawaii. He eventually died after having contracted the disease himself, by which time he was known and revered around the world, in particular in Hawaii itself; when the Pacific archipelago became the 50th state of the United States it was entitled to place two statues at the Capitol in Washington, DC, and it chose a statue of Father Damian as one of them.[48] Lemaître might not have been surprised to learn that a street somewhere in Spain was named after his Belgian compatriot, but he would have wondered why at that moment it was part of this virtual experience.

From the street plaque on the façade, the virtual experience would pan to the left again and, slowly filling up the screen, a much bigger building than the school would come into view: an enormous futuristic structure, oval-shaped and steel-banded. Indeed, at 1 Padre Damián Street is a landmark which enthrals millions around the world. The virtual experience would then launch upwards to take the three scientists into the air, rising 10 metres from the ground, then 20, then 40, then 50, surpassing the top of the building at 60 metres, rising further into the sky and eventually looking down into the inside of the oval construction to reveal the words 'Real Madrid' displayed in huge letters along one side of the pitch of one of the most famous football stadiums in the world: the Santiago Bernabéu.[49] Sports fan Georges Lemaître, and

perhaps his companions too, would have gasped at the audacity and size of the architecture, and at the idea that in the future, a sport could become a form of entertainment on such a massive scale.

Panning upwards and away from the stadium, the full expanse of this mainly low-rise capital city of more than three million would come into view, offering a choice of landmarks to take in, some of which are like windows into the city's past, others exhibits of its present, and others — like the Bernabéu stadium — visions of the future. It's a city that has come a very long way since that day back in July 1510 that King Ferdinand of Aragon decided that his grandson, the Flemish-born Charles, who was raised in Mechelen and Brussels to become Emperor Charles V (see Chapter 2), was to be granted the title of Prince of Asturias — heir to the throne — at a special ceremony in a little-known town called Madrid.[50] Nearly two decades later, in 1528, Charles himself would make the same choice of location for the same ceremony of his own infant son Philip,[51] and that event in turn established a bond between the city and the baby boy that would mature over the next three decades, such that in 1561, five years into his reign as King Philip II, he announced that his Court would have a new, permanent base in Madrid.[52]

Revered and feared for centuries as the capital of a huge empire, today it is perhaps better known worldwide as the home of the most successful football club in history. But exactly 460 years after becoming a capital city, Madrid and its metropolitan region received a European award for a new and ambitious plan. It was a plan whose value Georges Lemaître,

recalling his family's business difficulties, would have undoubtedly recognised.

The virtual experience would have by then dropped down to street level and taken Lemaître, Einstein, and Piccard on a short five-minute walk west from Real Madrid's stadium, where they would discover a nondescript office on the ground floor of a residential block of flats. After stopping briefly in front of the only clue to the office's purpose, a simple sign on the front with the words 'E-Social Hub' listing a range of services for start-ups,[53] the three physicists would have found themselves inside, in the midst of a special gathering of budding entrepreneurs.

Addressing them was the young vice-president of the Region of Madrid and member of the European Committee of the Regions, Ignacio Aguado, during the inauguration of the premises in December 2019: 'This project belongs to all of us. All of you take the lead on your projects and dreams, but there has to be a government, an administration that is there to defend you, to give you impulse, encourage you, take care of you, and to offer you a hub like this one. When I imagine the [future] Region of Madrid, when I dream of it, I think of a region where regardless of where you were born, what your socio-economic or family background is, where you have arrived from, that you see in the Region of Madrid a place where you can fulfil your dreams […] That's why we have to create an ecosystem that facilitates projects such as yours, a kind of triangular ecosystem where on one side there are universities and specialised centres providing excellent training for young people to acquire the knowledge and skills for what they hope to become. The second

leg of this triangle has to be capital, so that the talent and training attracts big and small investors who will back your projects financially so you can get going as quickly as possible and overcome all the hurdles along the way. And the third fundamental pillar of this ecosystem has to be a public administration which is not reactive but which proactively facilitates the ecosystem. If we are able to deliver that three-pronged ecosystem, I am convinced that the Region of Madrid will sooner or later become the most prosperous region of Europe.'[54]

I would have paused the virtual experience at that point to explain that the E-Social Hub was one piece of a much bigger puzzle, a grand scheme to boost entrepreneurship in the Spanish capital region that less than two years later impressed a European jury and led to the regional government of Madrid being awarded the European Entrepreneurial Region label for 2021–2022.[55] Partly inspired by something called the European Small Business Act, the initiative included a plan to promote the spirit of entrepreneurship on three fronts in particular: in schools, amongst women, and in rural areas, with a firm commitment to giving a second chance to entrepreneurs who have experienced business failure.[56] At that moment, Lemaître might have turned to Einstein and Piccard and remarked that if his father had had this kind of supportive environment, perhaps his family would have been able to start anew after the fire that destroyed their business. I would have agreed and quoted from a report that preceded the European Small Business Act: 'failed entrepreneurs […] learn from their mistakes and those that re-start have lower rates of failure and experience faster growth than

newly established companies […] A second chance policy that enables formerly bankrupt entrepreneurs restart may represent one of the most promising and under exploited policy options for company creation and job growth.'[57] And this, I would have pointed out to them, was an example of thinking that had started at the European level and was now being implemented at the local level.

I would have asked them to reflect on the virtual voyage they had experienced so far to consider how the previous visits proved that so often in European politics the micro builds the macro. The visit to Cork emphasised the importance of investing in one teacher and one student at a time; the visit to Cluj, one university project at a time; the visit to Plovdiv, one artist at a time; and now in Madrid, one entrepreneur at a time, with the E-Social Hub alone helping to establish 150 companies in its first two years.[58] Each of these initiatives in turn was part of a wider plan, a broader network, helping to build the fabric of the Union. 'But don't take it from me', I would have said to them, 'take it from the man speaking inside your helmets now'.

The virtual experience would have launched again. Leaving the E-Social Hub down below and rising over the Bernabéu stadium, looking north-east to the edge of the city, the scientists would have seen the moving silhouettes of aeroplanes outlined off in the distance, taking off and coming in to land at Madrid's international airport.

The sight of planes flying into Madrid no longer instilled fear and revulsion in the people of Madrid. Long gone were those terrifying years between 1936 and 1939, when the Spanish civil war was used as a testing ground for tactics later

employed in World War II, and the Nazis' airborne Condor Legion and the Aviazione Legionaria of fascist Italy had come in aid of Franco's uprising against the democratically elected Spanish government. This period, marked by the indiscriminate bombing of civilians and buildings in the Spanish capital, awarded Madrid the tragic distinction of being the first large European city on which aerial attacks were systematically carried out as an integral part of the military strategy to demoralise and subjugate a population.[59]

Long gone were those days. A thriving democratic Spain had joined the European Union in 1986, and Madrid's international airport was today the third busiest in the Union.[60] It was over there that an astonishing surprise awaited Professor Auguste Piccard, and as the three glided over the eastern neighbourhoods of Madrid towards the airport, they would be listening to the European Commission's Deputy Director General responsible for Entrepreneurship, Hubert Gambs, speaking in March 2021 about how the macro European level depends on the micro local level: 'Since more than ten years the Committee of the Regions awards the European Entrepreneurial Region label and since the beginning the Commission is very happy and proud to cooperate closely with this initiative […] These regions and municipalities are the material from which Silicon Valleys are made, and not just one, like in the US, but many […] We need municipalities and regions to show the way forward to a more sustainable future, a more digital future, and if the pandemic has shown us one thing, it is the strong interdependence of the various economic ecosystems and the need for more cooperation, [...] and it is up to us policy-makers in Europe to support

the entrepreneurs in this, in particular the founders and owners of small and medium-sized enterprises and their staff.'[61]

With the surprise for Professor Piccard approaching fast, the three physicists would have little time to dwell further on those words or on the Union's businesses.

As the Adolfo Suárez airport in the Barajas district of Madrid came gradually into view, daylight would transition into pitch-black night. A caption on the screens would read '7 July 2012, 01:19 hours', revealing to the scientists that they were viewing an event that had happened nearly a decade earlier.

Suddenly, 16 white lights arranged in a horizontal line would puncture the darkness. Descending and approaching fast, a strange flying object neared the end of its extraordinary adventure. Touching down, the most unusual plane emerged silently from the night: it resembled something like a very long wing resting on a single middle wheel with long flimsy tail. A small aerodynamic bubble at the front, above the wheel, served as the tiny cockpit. Coming to a standstill just metres from a small gathering of supporters and a television crew, two tall ladders were brought over and propped up on either side of the bubble. A triumphant and smiling Bertrand Piccard was helped out of the cockpit to cheers and applause for having just accomplished the first intercontinental flight by plane without using a drop of fuel, flying from Switzerland/Europe to Morocco/Africa via Madrid on the *Solar Impulse* plane powered exclusively by solar energy.[62] Born in 1958, the explorer Bertrand Piccard was the son of the explorer Jacques Piccard, and therefore the grandson of Professor Auguste Piccard.[63]

With the three physicists watching in awe as Bertrand addressed the Spanish television crew,[64] Albert Einstein might have patted a beaming Auguste Piccard on the shoulder and quipped: 'You needn't worry Auguste, your legacy extends well beyond Tintin's Professor Calculus!' To which Piccard might have replied: 'Yes, but this is very bewildering because later tonight I'll be putting that man's 5-year-old father to bed!'[65]

That remark would have prompted me to quickly add: 'Hold on to that thought! Your son — and that man's father — is important for your next destination.'

Inside their virtual helmets they would see the *Solar Impulse* back in the air, heading north. This time, they would be the ones in the cockpit, experiencing for themselves what Bertrand Piccard had described as 'the magic' of silent solar-powered flight.[66] And as the eastern end of the Pyrenees mountain range which separates Spain from France would begin to come into view, the *Solar Impulse* would start a gradual descent, still heading north-east.

With the French coast snaking its way along the left side of the cockpit and the Gulf of Lion passing underneath, a huge port would appear in front of them at the eastern end of the gulf. The caption on their screen would locate them in the year 1966, on the 22nd day of April. Observing the construction work that in that year was extending the length of one of the piers to allow increasingly large tankers to deliver their cargo to an oil-thirsty Europe,[67] Bertrand Piccard's solar-powered plane would take them past the commercial port and across the much smaller, rectangular, historic Old Port. This was where the ancient Greeks from Phocaea had settled when they founded Marseille, 600 years before Julius

Caesar would 'come, see, and conquer' it for Rome, along with the rest of Gaul.

Leaving the beautiful Old Port behind, the physicists would resume their flight, passing the extraordinary nineteenth-century neo-Byzantine Basilica of Notre-Dame de la Garde, which dominates the city from its perch at the peak of historic Marseille's highest hill and which is topped by an imposing golden statue of the Virgin Mary looking out to sea and believed to be watching over sailors in their perilous maritime journeys. And in the foreground of the Mediterranean waters, drifting by as their flight continued, they would see the small island with the Château d'If fortress made famous by Alexandre Dumas in his gripping adventure novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

Their route would proceed eastwards over more modern neighbourhoods of Marseille, flying low over the Parc Chanot — unaware that they would return there in a short while to experience the biggest shock to Europe's stability in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. Within seconds after passing Parc Chanot, the physicists would be admiring the steep limestone cliffs of the Calanques National Park just outside Marseille and, skimming the spectacular cliff tops, their virtual experience would slow down and hover 25 km outside of Marseille in the coastal town of La Ciotat, where a strange-looking vessel — clearly a submarine but an unusual one — had just arrived by road transport on a special convoy, having left Switzerland ten days earlier on 12 April 1966.[68]

Placed on a sliding block in a dry dock of La Ciotat's historic shipyards, what made the white submarine so peculiar were the 20 viewing portholes all along its side, below

the waterline. But it was something else about this submarine that might have made Professor Piccard gasp, Einstein chuckle, and Georges Lemaître applaud.

Slowly swinging around to the rounded front end of the vessel, they would see that the name printed on the frontal fin of this very special submarine was none other than *Auguste Piccard*. Somewhat bewildered, Professor Piccard might have blurted out: 'I understand that I was the inspiration for Tintin's scientist, and that my grandson also became an explorer, but why would a submarine be named after me when I am an explorer of the Earth's atmosphere?'

I would have revealed to them that although back in 1927 he had been focused on the sky above, within a decade he would turn his attention to the ocean depths, inventing a special submarine to explore the deepest points of the Earth's oceans, and that his son Jacques would become passionately involved.

At that point, a 40-year-old Jacques would appear on their helmet screens explaining during an interview with Swiss television how his father had invented a deep-water submarine called the 'bathyscaphe' and then imagined a mid-depth submarine called the 'mesoscaphe', which Jacques eventually built as an entertainment vessel for the Swiss World Exhibition of 1964.[69] Thus, with all its viewing portholes the Auguste Piccard vessel became the world's first tourism submarine, taking 33,000 people to the depths of Lake Geneva. And now, it had been brought to Marseille, whose mayor was considering giving it a second life.[70]

I would have then announced to the three scientists that they were themselves about to become tourists like those of Lake Geneva, and to witness something which back in the

1960s wasn't even in the realms of science fiction, but which today placed the port of Marseille at the vanguard of the digital revolution.

Their virtual experience would then show them inside the mesoscaphe floating in the port of Marseille and beginning to dive underwater.

Down to the very bottom they would drop, and in the dark waters of the port not much would immediately grab their attention, until they realised that they seemed to be following the outline of a narrow tube lying on the seabed and tracing a path away from the port into open waters. They might, in fact, espy several of these tubes snaking their way into the dark depths of the Mediterranean and wonder aloud what they were, to which I would explain that they were looking at the most crucial asset of the twenty-first-century global digital society: the cables that transport information from one continent to the other, allowing the online world of the internet to function.

Marseille, I would tell them, had become one of the world's largest hubs for so-called data centres,[71] the sites receiving the internet's intercontinental digital content travelling through the ocean cables and redistributing it to the rest of Europe, and vice versa in the opposite direction. With 17 such cables, Marseille had climbed up the global rankings, rising from 44th to 7th and aiming to enter the top five. These cables, I would add, had become a source of friction and even target of sabotage between world powers.[72]

And it would be in Marseille that the three scientists would come to understand how this geopolitical tension had come about.

Re-emerging from the water, the virtual experience would carry the revolutionary physicists over the Old Port, retracing the short journey back to the Parc Chanot congress venue where, on 3 and 4 March 2022, subnational leaders from all over the Union had gathered for the biennial summit of regions and cities organised by the European Committee of the Regions. Planned as an event focused on the post-pandemic needs of local communities throughout the Union, it had to be hastily reconfigured to respond to the latest and most dramatic crisis to hit the European continent this century. Just days before, on 24 February, Russia had launched a full-scale and brutal military invasion of Ukraine, jolting Europe into the realisation that while the Union had made unthinkable any war between its Member States, there were others outside the Union who still harboured imperial aspirations and complete disregard for the sovereignty and freedom of neighbouring countries.

To Russia's dismay and the admiration of much of the world, the Ukrainians, led by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, put up an immediate and robust resistance which pushed Russia's forces back, keeping most of the country free from the occupation. Watching the Marseille summit from inside their virtual helmets, Einstein, Lemaitre, and Piccard would see an enormous screen spanning the length of the stage at the Parc Chanot congress centre displaying the flag of Ukraine. Then, seconds later, the mayor of Kyiv appearing on the screen from the Ukrainian capital to deliver a message of defiance to the invader and to thank the mayors of Europe for their quick reaction setting up facilities and humanitarian support for nearly one million Ukrainian refugees who

had fled the war.[73] And with the whole assembly on their feet giving a standing ovation in support of the Ukrainians, CoR President Apostolos Tsitsikostas announced that Mayor Vytaliy Klichko was being granted honorary membership in the European Committee of the Regions.[74]

Back in 1927, at the time of the Solvay Conference that the three scientists had attended, Europe and the world were only just becoming used to Russia's new incarnation – the communist Soviet Union and its expansionism — and becoming acquainted with Joseph Stalin, who had been in power for only three of the 29 brutal years he would eventually clock up. But by 1927, tension with European countries was already rising fast: the Switzerland that Einstein and Piccard knew so well had very troubled and almost non-existent relations with the Soviet Union,[75] and Britain had just broken off diplomatic relations with the USSR.[76]

At this point I would have paused the virtual experience to ask them to recall what they had learnt about the Soviet Union at the House of European History and how the EU had expanded eastwards to protect newly independent nations after the USSR had collapsed. Then, I would have asked Einstein if he remembered the invitation he had received in early 1927 — from his perspective, just a few months earlier — to tour the Baltic Sea giving lectures in different locations, including the Estonian city of Tartu.[77] In response, he would have explained to his companions that he had indeed received such an invitation but had unfortunately not been able to take it up. So, I would have informed them that they were approaching the final visits of their tour and that next they were to travel close to Russia. I would have invited them

to once again board the *Solar Impulse* to fly more than 2,000 kilometres over the French and Swiss Alps, across southern Germany, over the western tip of Czechia, the west and north of Poland, out over the Baltic Sea, into western Lithuania, and over central Latvia, finally arriving at the easternmost edge of Estonia, just 50 kilometres from the Russian border.

The date on their screen would locate them in time on 4 December 2016, a year when despite the political upheavals of Brexit, the Union's developing migration crisis, the aftermath of the euro-crisis, and the uncertainty surrounding Donald Trump's imminent first presidency in the United States, the mood in Europe was still in many ways playful, as they were about to discover. Having glided over the low-rise town of Tartu and circled the beautifully restored eighteenth-century neoclassical town hall, the *Solar Impulse* would have landed just 400 metres away on the other side of the Emajõgi river, in the outdoor car park of a nondescript three-storey office building. The peculiarity of this building is that the northern third of its façade is a plain windowless wall. But something was about to happen that this time would make Einstein gasp, while Piccard and Lemaître would chuckle.

A horizontal white bar spanning the entire width of the plain wall could be seen attached to the top of the building. Suddenly, they would notice a small robot sliding back and forth along the bar, spraying white paint onto the wall. Gradually, as the bar inched its way down towards the ground, the robot busily spraying paint, an image began to form. And eventually, as it reached the bottom, the plain wall had been transformed to display a huge mural of a laughing Albert Einstein.[78] Now it would be Einstein's turn to express

bafflement. The answer would immediately flash up on their helmet screens as the young inventor of the paint-spraying robot explained that he had chosen to demonstrate his prototype with a mural of his favourite scientist.[79] Lemaître might have patted Einstein on the arm, expressing amazement at how his worldwide fame would continue unabated a whole century later.

The dark December night of northern Europe would descend upon the Einstein mural and their screens would become pitch black. Then the silhouette of the same office building would reappear, backlit with flashing coloured lights streaking through the Tartu sky and giving the Einstein mural a ghostly appearance. The date captioned on their screen: 26 January 2024. The mural had been painted seven years earlier, and the crises Europe had been living through at that time arguably paled in comparison to the impact of the more recent pandemic and the war in Ukraine. The Union had successfully managed and survived Brexit, the euro remained a stable currency, and transatlantic relations were still strong. But there was now a new word permeating through most of the European Union's policy objectives: *resilience*, defined as the ability to cope with major challenges, as well as manage transitions with minimum disruption to our economy, society, and democracy.[80] Understanding how important this word had become for the Union was key to the scientists' visit to Tartu.

As they floated up above the mural in the direction of where the lights were coming from, they would hear the voice of Maroš Šefčovič, at the time vice-president of the European Commission responsible for strategic foresight:

'our societies are changing fast and new threats or shocks are likely to affect our lives […] [so designing] forward-looking policies that make Europe more resilient [will] support our transition to a green, digital, and fair future […] Foresight can help us make the right choices today for a more resilient Europe tomorrow.'[81]

As the voice faded and the virtual experience brought the physicists closer to Tartu's river, a fast-paced rhythmic music unlike any they had heard before would invade their helmets. They were witnessing the launch event of European Capital of Culture 2024 reaching its climax, with a spectacular show of dance and acrobatics entertaining thousands of locals and international guests seated on the other side of the frozen river.[82] With the scientists tapping their feet and nodding their helmets to the beat, I would have had to shout over the music to explain that they were about to see how culture was being used to deliver resilience.

With the show over, a more tranquil aerial view of Tartu would emerge on their screens, and the three would embark on a gentle tour of this city of 100,000 inhabitants: the impeccably clean Old Town, the wooden-house neighbourhoods, the historical ruins, the renowned university — one of the oldest in northern and eastern Europe, the fun and colourful street art, regenerated industrial quarters, the upside-down houses, the futuristic national museum, the charming parks and river banks, and the peaceful boat rides down the river.[83] And as they admired this free city located just 50 kilometres from the Russian border, they would hear the voice of Tartu's Mayor Urmas Klaas explaining why the motto chosen for Tartu Capital of Culture was 'Arts of Survival':[84]

We are organising the Capital of Culture at a very difficult time. We are only just recovering from the coronavirus crisis, the climate crisis is upon us, and there is war in Europe. As the theme of the Tartu Capital of Culture also states, what we are talking about here are the arts of survival in the literal sense.

Our message as the European Capital of Culture is that the arts still can and must give people the ability and courage to dream of a future in this difficult time, and to change themselves and the world through their choices. [...]

The theme of 'Arts of Survival' was born well before COVID-19 and the war in Europe, and referred to the concerns of a small European town — poor accessibility, shrinking population, exodus of young people. [...]

We have rethought the theme of the Capital of Culture in many ways because of the crises that have changed the world. This catchphrase thus now refers to the knowledge, skills and values that will help us live and cope better in the future. Such arts are very important when it comes to restoring mental balance, hope, foresight and the courage to act.

All areas of culture speak about the arts of survival in our programme: traditional and food culture, music, film, visual arts, theatre, etc. The well-known Estonian writer Valdur Mikita said that the theme of the 'Arts of Survival' very well summarises one of the most important keywords of our time — 'resilience', which marks the way people cope and adapt. I find that this is by no

means a pessimistic view of the future, but rather an optimistic one.'

The virtual tour of Tartu had ended outside the town hall, focusing on the three flags of Tartu, Estonia, and the European Union flying together on the façade of the Tartu 2024 office, with only the background sound of people going about their daily lives in Town Hall Square. Reflecting on the words of Mayor Klaas and on the three levels of government represented by those flags, and being a specialist of the mechanics of complex systems, Albert Einstein might have spoken at that moment, saying something like this: 'After listening to the mayor's words, I now want to rewrite my 1925 article about European unification.[85] I had argued that the complexity of the task required all complications to be resolved in advance. But now I see that European unification isn't a destination, and instead it's a permanently evolving process. Even if common symbols are adopted and common institutions are created to make decisions, the fact is that objectives set at the European level will in most cases only become a reality and mean something to the people if they become integrated into their daily lives. And that can only happen with local political leaders on board, having some ownership of every new objective that matters to local communities.'

'In other words', I would have added in response to Einstein, 'the European Union will only be a strong and long-lasting union if citizens feel that the EU is downtown — that their local community or region is just as much 'the EU' as the distant grey buildings where decisions are made. And that is why our final stop before returning to Brussels will be to

introduce you to one of the European leaders most widely recognised and admired by citizens across the Union, and through whom you will come to fully understand the three revolutions Europe is immersed in. We are going to meet this leader at a place which you, Professor Einstein, will immediately recognise.'

For one last time the three would find themselves flying the *Solar Impulse* westwards over Estonia, all across the Baltic Sea, and gliding down past Sweden's southernmost city of Malmö, then following the path of the extraordinary Øresund Bridge — Europe's second longest, which crosses 8 kilometres of the Øresund strait before becoming a tunnel for the remaining 4 kilometres that connect the Swedish city to the Danish capital, Copenhagen. Admiring this feat of engineering completed in 1999, they would have learnt that the bridge fulfils multiple functions carrying road and rail traffic, as well as internet traffic via a dedicated data cable.[86] Just at the point where the bridge becomes a tunnel, their virtual flight would have veered due north, heading towards the entrance of Copenhagen harbour to see an example of Denmark's early commitment to the clean energy transition: the pioneering Middelgrunden Wind Farm of 20 offshore turbines aligned south to north, partly owned by thousands of Danish citizens and which was, at the turn of the century, the largest wind farm in the world.[87] At the northernmost turbine, they would head south-west into the harbour, flying just above the surface of the water towards the world-famous Little Mermaid statue that attracts tourists daily and is sometimes the target of political protesters;[88] meander through the streets of historic Copenhagen, noticing the

thousands of cyclists and parked bicycles which make the Danish capital one of three European cities where more than 35% of residents use a bicycle every day;[89] and they would then bear north-west across the Copenhagen lakes (created in the sixteenth century to help defend the city from attack) and into the Assistens Cemetery to view the grave of Hans Christian Andersen, thus paying respect to the author of world-famous fairy tales such as 'The Little Mermaid', 'The Princess and the Pea', 'The Ugly Duckling', and 'The Emperor's New Clothes' — which Einstein had referred to in a letter about the nature of time back in 1919.[90] Finally, they would veer north-east to land on the wide Blegdamsvej Avenue, coming to a stop outside number 15, a building that also meant something to Einstein.

'I was here four years ago, in 1923!' he might have exclaimed, before catching himself and adding, 'How it has changed in a century! It was called the Institute of Theoretical Physics when I visited Niels Bohr back then, but I see that it's now named after him, and several more buildings have been added. What year are we in?'[91]

In answer to his question, a caption would appear on their screens with the date: 4 November 2021. The virtual experience would then carry them over the historic original building to another building behind and around the corner, and into a lab of the University of Copenhagen's Center for Hybrid Quantum Networks. There, two young women, surrounded by electronic and optical devices connected by cables running in all directions, were explaining their research on quantum computers to one of Europe's most powerful — and most approachable — political leaders.[92] While Einstein,

Piccard, and Lemaître observed the exchange, I would have explained to them that the visiting political leader was herself an economics graduate of the University of Copenhagen and former Deputy Prime-Minister of Denmark, and that now Margrethe Vestager was Executive Vice-President of the European Commission responsible for the Union's digital transition as well as its market competition. I would tell them about how, over the previous seven years, she had built up a reputation as a champion and defender of the rights of individual consumers by holding to account powerful corporations — in particular global technology companies — and forcing them to curtail some of their most abusive practices. Colossal by their size and planetary reach, the so-called Big Tech companies had grown exponentially in just a couple of decades and few political leaders had dared, or were even in the necessary position of strength, to challenge them. It was Vestager who had shown that the European Union had the power and clout to stand up to them, setting regulatory standards that have since been copied around the world.

I would have also had to explain to Einstein that — unfortunately for him — he had been on the wrong side of the argument when it came to quantum mechanics and that the proposers of the theory, including Niels Bohr (who believed that there was a high degree of uncertainty regarding certain properties of subatomic particles), had been proven right, to the extent that a century later the possible combinations of these different uncertain properties were being used to develop electronic machines with significantly higher computing power and speed than classical computers. Vice-President Vestager had come to the institute that Einstein's good friend

Niels Bohr had founded to see for herself what impact and opportunity this quantum research could have for Europe's economy and society.

Before the three scientists got carried away discussing this revelation about the vindication of the quantum theory — the matter they had so fiercely been arguing over at the Solvay Conference only minutes before embarking on this journey to the future — their screens flickered and changed scene, showing Margrethe Vestager in a different setting. She was no longer in the Niels Bohr lab, nor indeed in Copenhagen. She was still in the European Union, though, in its capital city Brussels, just over a year after having visited the quantum computing lab, explaining to the members of the European Committee of the Regions why getting to grips with emerging technologies is so important — even existential:

> In the geopolitics that we live in, probably it cannot be more important *how* we use digital tools. I have the responsibility of Making Europe Fit for the Digital Age. I had to get my head around that title, because actually I do think that the task is to make sure that we use technology in the best possible way, not that we fit the human in a certain shape or form [around] technology.
>
> The most fundamental choice that we have made is also the most simple one: that technology is about people, it is the human being in the centre, the integrity, the respect of every individual. That is the driving force [of] our 'Digital Decade' targets.

And she went on to illustrate one of the targets, namely the creation of a state-provided online identification tool for every Union citizen, similar to a passport, so that citizens have a credible and trusted way of identifying themselves in the digital world, rather than relying — as is currently the case — on a variety of commercial online accounts. As she explained,

> None of those targets will just happen by themselves. Regions and local communities have a key role to play in making the best use of technology, because they are as close to citizens as one can come. And this is also why we think that when Member States make their National Roadmaps for the Digital Decade — how to get there with digitization of public services, how to help businesses to rethink their business model to make the most of digital technology, how to get the infrastructure right, and how to make sure that everyone is skilled — the Member States should not do that without actively consulting regions and local communities because that of course makes it much more likely that it will actually work.

She then responded to Martijn van Gruijthuijsen, regional minister of the Dutch province of North Brabant, of the liberal VVD party, who had raised the need to appoint high-level Chief Information Security Officers in public administrations, and who called for the future EU Artificial Intelligence Act to never lose sight of the need to keep the trust of citizens in this technology. Vice-President Vestager supported the creation of those high-level roles so that there

would be someone with access to boardrooms in public and private organisations to ensure the necessary protections are put in place around the use of technology, and she added: 'My guess is that in the coming years many of you will implement artificial intelligence in the regions where you have responsibilities. Since there is a risk that AI can discriminate, can like men more than women, or majority over minority, or people from one postcode rather than people from another postcode, it's really important that people can trust the way that artificial intelligence is being used […] We will soon have artificial intelligence rules to make sure that when it's used, when someone is at risk of being discriminated [against], that these rules are in place […] But having legislation is one thing, implementing it is another thing. And only when things are fully implemented can people […] be sure that things are actually in order. And this is why this discussion is so important, because without enforcement of our rules people are left without the necessary protection but also without the necessary [opportunities]'.

And finally, she concluded her remarks to the assembly: 'There is a war in Europe. There is an energy crisis. We have a climate crisis to fight with. But what the climate crisis and digitalisation have in common is that it will happen no matter what we do and we can choose to deal with it or we can choose to not deal with it. And if we choose to deal with it, we can also make the most of it. And one thing is a given. If we do not fight climate change, the liveability of our planet will be seriously reduced. If we do not deal with technology, put it in a democratic framework, make sure that it serves citizens, well then the world will also be a very

different place to live in. Because then the risk is that we are all reduced to data points and not to the human being, [which is] how we would like to see ourselves […] and [in the future] when I think of these worst case scenarios, I will remember this debate, and this conversation, because I see that there is a willingness, which is completely integrated into the culture of this assembly to make sure that when we integrate technology into the solutions that we provide, we do it by putting people first.'[93]

The virtual experience had ended, and as I helped them remove their helmets, the priest Georges Lemaître might have whispered a short prayer that humanity may rise to the enormous challenges of the twenty-first century, while Professor Piccard, as an expert on the Earth's atmosphere, might have asked: 'When are the effects of climate change expected to start happening?'

As an answer, I would have invited them to come with me to the square just outside the European Parliament, Place Luxembourg, where I would have informed them that we were in the year 2024, in the early evening of 22 May. The square would have looked as it does on a typical day, with buses and taxis busily negotiating the large roundabout in the centre, while EU officials and stakeholders frequented the many bars, cafés, and restaurants that lined the perimeter of the square.

'A few weeks ago on 1 February', I would have explained, 'Place Luxembourg was completely taken over by tractors and thousands of farmers from around Europe protesting noisily about the vulnerable situation many of them find themselves in.[94] By coincidence, on that same day, the minister

of agriculture for the Italian region of Campania, Nicola Caputo, was presenting a report to the plenary of the Committee of the Regions intended to help farmers in Europe manage growing risks for the viability of their businesses. His report warned that climate change is now posing a huge threat to the agricultural sector precisely because of the increasing frequency and severity of catastrophic events.[95] Professor Piccard', I would have said, 'climate change is already happening!'

I would have then led them back to the Parc Léopold where their journey had begun, and along the way, I would have turned to Georges Lemaître and explained to him that his native Wallonia had suffered one of those catastrophic climate events in July 2021, and how at the first CoR plenary that took place afterwards, in October that year, the vice-president of Wallonia, Willy Borsus, of the Belgian liberal Reformist Movement, had taken the floor during a debate with the European Commissioner for Crisis Management, Janez Lenarčič. Referring to the worst floods that Wallonia had experienced in at least two centuries hitting 209 of the 262 communes of southern Belgian region, leaving 40 people dead, 45,000 buildings partially or totally destroyed, and 100,000 people affected, Borsus thanked the European Commission and neighbouring Member States for their swift reaction providing assistance, and he reminded everyone how urgent it had become to halt the warming of the Earth's atmosphere and to develop new ways of producing energy. In response, Commissioner Lenarčič had warned all those who complain about the cost of abandoning fossil fuels that 'it will cost many times more if we don't do this […] because

the weather-related events will be ever more intense and the damage from these events will be exorbitant if nothing is done now!'.[96]

'In fact', I would have told all three of them, 'there is no region of Europe, no region of the world that isn't at risk'. As an example, I would have quoted the mayor of the Finnish city of Oulu, Mirja Vehkaperä, who in June 2022 presented a report to the CoR plenary warning that temperatures in the Arctic are rising three times faster than in the rest of the world, melting ice and thawing permafrost, and that the resulting rise in sea levels was a direct threat to coastal communities all around Europe.[97] That is why climate change can only be tackled effectively via a true partnership between all levels of government, and I would have quoted the executive vice-president of the European Commission, Frans Timmermans, who addressed the CoR plenary in October 2020 saying that 'we need to double our efforts, *double* our efforts, in terms of renovation, insulation of buildings, putting solar panels on buildings […] we need to do all that and it can be done and we will mobilise the funds, but *you* need to be an integral part of that […] We wouldn't get anything done without local and regional authorities being on board, and fully informed, and fully engaged — your regions and your cities will make the difference […] and we need your direct links to our citizens'.[98]

At this point, we would have arrived back at Parc Léopold and would be standing at the entrance of the House of European History. Albert Einstein might have spoken up at that moment: '99 years ago, I wrote an article about European unification, and back then it was an impossible dream.

What we have learnt on this journey is that not only has it been possible, but it is working, and it is more necessary than ever given the scale of the huge challenges Europe faces in the twenty-first century, which are way beyond what any European nation could possibly face on its own.'

And then he might have added: 'we've had this amazing virtual tour around Europe and seen how local communities, large and small, in northern and southern Europe, east and west, connect with the Union, and play a part in the three revolutions, but what about this city? How does Brussels fare as the Union's capital city?'

'Well, that's why we have come to 22 May 2024' I would have replied, inviting them to accompany me into the seminar room of the House of European History, where a special conference was about to take place: *Brussels, A Visionary Capital for Europe?*. Organised by Brussels Commissioner for European and International Organisations Alain Hutchinson, himself a former Belgian member of the European Committee of the Regions, the event brought together around 100 non-Belgians who have made Brussels their home, in most cases because of their work for, or in connection with, European Union institutions. The event was co-organised with the *Brussels for Europe* project, which is based on the idea that the development of the Union goes hand-in-hand with the development of its capital, which in turn requires strong links between the city and those Union citizens who come to live and work in Brussels, and which organises lectures, excursions, and networking events to help the expats integrate better into the Belgian capital, thus bringing the Union to downtown Brussels.[99]

Observing the lively 90-minute discussion, Piccard, Lemaître, and Einstein would have learnt that Brussels is still adapting to its accidental role as capital of the Union,[100] that the number of citizens from the other 26 Member States continues to rise as a percentage of the city's population in parallel with the growing importance of the Union's institutions and therefore of Brussels as a centre of European decision-making. Yet a very low proportion of them register to vote in the local elections, which makes it very difficult for local leaders to govern. As Hutchinson said, 'if a third of the population doesn't feel the need to engage with local leaders, it's impossible to know what their needs are and how the municipality should respond'.[101] In an effort to bridge the divide, several of the 19 Brussels districts have allowed English as a language of communication, although official documents must still be in either of the two official languages, French and Dutch.

Departing the conference, and leaving the House of European History, I would have qualified what they had heard inside: 'it's true that many EU citizens living and working in Brussels don't engage in the local politics, but that is a problem of local governance which local leaders are increasingly finding creative ways to overcome', and I would have told them about the 2021 online consultation of 1,500 participants that led to the *Manifesto of the International Brusseler* with 22 policy recommendations, or the 2023 *Brussels Voice* assembly of 45 international residents selected at random from those who registered to participate.[102] 'And what is undeniable', I would have added, 'is that gone are the days of neglect that characterised Brussels in the second half of the twentieth

century. Today it is an incredibly vibrant, multi-lingual, fun, and increasingly confident global city. And that's a result of the Union's own role developing in response to twenty-first-century challenges, which has led to a further influx of new officials, journalists, stakeholders, lobbyists, and businesses from all over Europe and beyond, and in turn, the political leaders of Brussels Capital Region and its commune-districts reacting creatively and enthusiastically to this new phase in the history of Brussels.'[103]

I would have then recalled the story of Brussels, reminding them how the early medieval site named after 'a settlement on the marsh' rapidly grew to become the centre of power of the Dukes of Brabant, and then of the Dukes of Burgundy with their huge collection of medieval manuscripts; how it was the spiritual home of the man who ruled the world's first empire 'on which the sun never sets',[104] Charles v, passing in later centuries from the hands of one European power to another, ruled over by Madrid, Vienna, Paris, and The Hague, until in 1830 it became the capital of the newly independent Belgium.[105] How, over a century later, it was occupied and oppressed by the Nazis with some valiant Brusselers defying the murderous occupiers, risking their lives to save Jews from extermination, flying a solo unauthorised mission to shoot up the Gestapo headquarters in Brussels, or organising the only armed holdup of a packed Auschwitz-bound convoy to take place anywhere in Europe, giving a chance to a few Jewish victims to flee the horror.[106] How Field Marshal Montgomery, General Einsenhower, and Winston Churchill had visited Brussels to join the Belgians celebrating the liberation. How the Treaty of Brussels was

a precursor to NATO, and how, despite pressure from France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, Belgium refused for years to offer Brussels as the future capital of a united Europe, insisting instead that it should be the Walloon city of Liège because of Belgium's own domestic divisions (caused by the king's wartime conduct, which nearly triggered a Belgian civil war),[107] until finally the letter B determined that an unprepared Brussels should end up being the capital of European unity.

And although, I would have concluded, this city became the Union's capital by accident, the fact that it has historical ties with so many parts of Europe, its understanding of the value of peace following the suffering it experienced in the two world wars, and its identity as home of different Belgian language communities make it an ideal capital of the multilingual, highly diverse, peaceful, and voluntary Union of European states. And so, if the European Union's long-term success requires that its citizens perceive the benefits of belonging to it — in other words, that its existence and policy outcomes should be visible and felt 'downtown' throughout local communities all across the Union — that process must also take place in Brussels itself, to no less an extent.

The fact is that the pressures, the benefits, the expectations, and the opportunities that come with hosting the Union's institutional architecture, its summitry, tens of thousands of personnel and stakeholders who may or may not understand the official languages of Brussels, its culture, its history, or its customs, coupled with the frustration of having its name used and often abused throughout the world to mean something other than this city of 1,200,000 people,

all together present a challenge like no other city anywhere has arguably ever experienced in modern times.

And while it is a challenge that its local leaders have embraced and to which they have been steadily rising, it is equally a challenge that gives a strikingly unique perspective, indeed a special twist, to the concept of 'the EU downtown'. The status of Brussels, and how the EU institutions are shaping its development, as well as how the European citizens who come to work here contribute to this city's rise as the Union's capital are all questions that require special attention in the years to come.

The three physicists, being more accustomed to giving lectures than receiving them, might have — by that point — been staring at me in surprised silence.

But there would still be one last surprise in store for them.

'And now, before you return to 1927, I have to show you a small window into the past, into a special historic event.' I would have beckoned them to follow me to the secondary school from which had emerged the giggling teenagers who had remarked on Professor Piccard's resemblance to Tintin's Professor Calculus. The same building where the Solvay Conference they were attending in 1927 had taken place. As we approached the foot of the wide steps leading to the entrance, I would have pointed out the tall metallic panel displaying a black and white photograph of a large group of distinguished-looking people posing for the camera. 'Do you recognise any of these people?', I would have asked. And all three of them would have gasped.

Staring out from the centre of the front row, they would see Albert Einstein, surrounded by all the participants of the

1927 Solvay Conference. This was a picture that they didn't even know existed, for as far as they were concerned it had never taken place.

'The city of Brussels has paid tribute to you for the Solvay Conference', I would have explained, proceeding to read to them from the text on the plaque:

> The photo reproduced on this panel is one of the most famous in the history of science. It was taken at the closing of the fifth Solvay Physics Council in 1927.
>
> The summit meeting produced major contributions to quantum physics and the ensuing debates, notably between Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr, continue to fascinate the scientific community and science enthusiasts.

I would have then shaken the hand of each one of them, congratulating them for their genius and their contributions to human knowledge and progress and thanking them for their company on this tour of Europe, informing them that unfortunately — or perhaps fortunately — they would remember nothing once they returned to 1927.

Just before turning to leave, Einstein might have had one last parting word: 'I've been thinking about the world's urgent need to stop burning fossil fuels. Solar and wind are part of the answer but the real solution will come from nuclear. Not the fission type you use now with its hazardous radioactive waste, but one which is completely safe and therefore much cleaner: nuclear fusion.'[108]

With the thought in my mind that Einstein was right and nuclear fusion investment needed to be ramped up, and with

my travelling companions having departed, I would have headed down the path past the House of European History, out of the park via the entrance which is flanked by the two remaining ticket offices of the nineteenth-century zoo, up the pavement to 101 Belliard Street and into the European Committee of the Regions.

→

A sign outside the Emile Jacqmain school, formerly the Institute of Physiology, honours the Fifth Solvay Conference and its participants. Albert Einstein is seated in the middle of the front row. August Piccard is standing in the back row at the far left. George Lemaître doesn't appear, as he wasn't an official participant.



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The Summit of Regions and Cities organised by the European Committee of the Regions in Marseille in March 2024 was an opportunity to show full solidarity with Ukraine after the brutal invasion by Russia days earlier. The Ukrainian flag filled the huge screen in its entirety.





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Executive Vice-President of the European Commission Margrethe Vestager in conversation with Mayor François Decoster. She has always shown great appreciation for the work of mayors.

CHAPTER 10

The Depth of the Roots

The coffin slowly made its way along the cobbled courtyard, to the only sound of the slow funereal rhythm of the beating military drums. Step by step, drumbeat by drumbeat, carried by ten soldiers in ceremonial uniform, the coffin eventually reached the centre of the courtyard, the centre of the grand Court of Honour of the imposing Hôtel des Invalides buildings complex in the heart of the government district of Paris. Watched by hundreds physically present and millions on the screen, the ten soldiers carefully laid the coffin on the ground and marched away, allowing the dignitaries and troops to contemplate the coffin draped with the French *tricolore* flag. One man, standing alone on the cobbled courtyard in front of the gathered French and European dignitaries, stepped forward and marched past the coffin to a corner of the Court of Honour where a lectern flanked by immaculate French and European flags awaited him on the presidential stage. He began to speak.

'On 27 December, his life's journey came to an end', said President Emmanuel Macron. 'A journey', he continued, 'that

never conformed at any of the century's turning points, to habits or expectations. Yes, Jacques Delors' life was made up of side roads, far from the populated roads and known itineraries.'[1]

It was 5 January 2024, and the man who had been President of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, steering the European Economic Community towards a stronger European Union, establishing the European Single Market (with its principles of free movement of people, goods, capital, and services), creating the powerful European Central Bank, and laying the foundations of the single currency (the euro), launching the Erasmus student-exchange programme, and introducing the groundbreaking cohesion policy for regional development — the man who had negotiated, defended, and brokered the establishment of the European Committee of the Regions, had passed away at the age of 98.

Attending the homage to Delors at the Hôtel des Invalides, sitting behind the president of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, the president of the European Central Bank, Christine Lagarde, and the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, were two representatives of the European Committee of the Regions (CoR), Mayors François Decoster and Christophe Rouillon,[2] both of them members of the French delegation to the CoR and members of the CoR's Conference of Presidents, in their capacity as presidents of the liberal and democrat Renew Europe group and the socialist PES group, respectively. They had been asked by the CoR's president, Vasco Alves Cordeiro, former President of the Portuguese archipelago of the Azores, to represent him at the ceremony.

As we saw at the end of Part 2, the relationship between the CoR and Jacques Delors runs deep. So much so that in 2006, the CoR's political leadership, the Conference of Presidents, unanimously proposed that the building which houses its headquarters — as well as the headquarters of civil society's European Economic and Social Committee — be renamed after Jacques Delors. At the naming ceremony on 18 September that year, Delors joked about his surprise that a building was being named after him while he was still alive. Accompanied by his daughter, Martine Aubry, the mayor of the French city of Lille, he willingly accepted the honour and declared: 'Here is the home of participatory democracy, on behalf of proximity, expertise, and the voice of the people of Europe: the heart and soul of European construction'.[3]

At the Court of Honour of the Hôtel des Invalides, President Macron had ended his speech and returned to the coffin, where he was joined by the president of the European Commission, Ursula Von der Leyen, and 13 other European dignitaries from the main European institutions as well as several heads of state or government of EU Member States. The giant screen behind the troops lit up entirely with a European flag and the military orchestra played the European anthem, the 'Ode to Joy'.[4]

'The heart and soul' Jacques Delors had said at the naming ceremony of the building. That is hardly surprising coming from Delors because he had always understood that while the EU's legislators *design* the Union with the laws that they draft, it is subnational leaders who help citizens *experience* the Union. Indeed, two thirds of European laws are enacted at the local and regional level, which means that — in

two thirds of the cases — the objectives of the Union's legislators only become a reality for citizens when they are implemented by subnational governments. And there can be no doubt that it is personal experience that shapes the emotions of people, and thus in the case of the Union, it is by *experiencing* the Union that it acquires meaning and purpose in the eyes of its citizens.

In December 2021, President Macron himself reinforced this message when he addressed the CoR plenary just ahead of the six-month French presidency of the Council of the European Union, arguing that it was imperative to reinforce the feeling amongst European citizens of belonging to the Union, because, he said, 'if that feeling becomes too abstract we will lose our citizens'. He highlighted the key role that subnational leaders have in helping to achieve this objective.[5]

Without a strong partnership between European and national leaders who, on the one hand, shape the laws of the Union and subnational leaders who, on the other hand, link the Union with the reality of citizens in their local communities, the connection between citizens and the European dimension of their identity — in other words, their connection with the Union — will be weak, unstable, and brittle.

And this applies just as much to existing citizens of the Union as to future ones. Speaking at the CoR plenary of October 2023, in her capacity as the CoR's lead member for relations with local authorities of North Macedonia, Jasna Gabrič, mayor of the Slovenian town of Trbovlje, said:[6]

> The European perspective gave the people in [the Western Balkans] hope for decades — but hope does not last

> forever. I came across a European Commission report recently which shows that places within Europe which feel left behind are faced with disengagement and discontent in the long term. When the development trap is unaddressed, disengagement and discontent make citizens less likely to support European integration and values. Can you imagine what it does to those that have been stuck for decades in the accession limbo […]
>
> While local and regional authorities have a rather limited role in the accession negotiations as such, they have a significant, if not to say, crucial weight in accompanying citizens with relevant information on the process and implementation of concrete pre-accession projects, showcasing how membership in the EU could improve the quality of citizens lives — cities and regions have the power to fulfil the dream.

One country in which the dream and aspiration of EU membership has become a strong force, in particular following Russia's brutal invasion in 2022, is Ukraine. Here, too, the European Union's regional and municipal leaders stepped up to the task of responding to and delivering a new European reality on the ground: in record time all across the Union millions of beds and temporary homes were found for the refugees fleeing the fighting in Ukraine; resources were mobilised to collect and send to Ukrainian towns blankets, clothes, food, and electricity generators; every summer since the start of the war thousands of children have been offered holidays across the Union away from the stress and trauma; and — at the request of Ukrainian President Volodymyr

Zelenskyy — EU cities and regions have been partnering with Ukrainian cities and regions to begin the vital reconstruction, especially in liberated zones.[7]

Addressing the CoR plenary in May 2023, President Zelenskyy said: 'When the cities and communities of Europe, your cities and communities, give shelter to our people they help not only people, but support the idea of Europe […] When both the EU Committee of the Regions and your cities and communities directly cooperate with Ukraine, with our cities and communities, it means cooperation that strengthens not only both sides, but also our Europe itself […] We are fighting now not only for the future of our country, not only for the future of the Eastern flank of Europe, but for the future of the whole Europe, the way we know it today […] [and] I am sure that [our collaboration] will soon give us an obvious result, which is the fully-fledged accession of Ukraine to the European Union'.[8]

A few days before the first anniversary of Russia's unprovoked attack on Ukraine, a longstanding independent Latvian member of the CoR came up to me during a quiet moment of the CoR plenary with a grave look on his face: 'Sean, how is it possible that Europe was so unprepared for Russian aggression?' he asked, 'How come it wasn't obvious to everyone after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 that things were only going to get worse?'

Over the years, I got to know Dainis Turlais well, came to admire him, and I considered him a friend. He was a member of the CoR's Latvian delegation in his capacity as a member of Riga City Council but also had behind him a distinguished military career and a spell as a senior national minister. A man with a strong sense of duty and responsibility,

he confided that he believed Europe had neglected its responsibility and had been wilfully — or at best naïvely — blind to the rising Russian threat.

Turlais had been the CoR's first-ever lead drafter on a defence-related report.[9] It was in 2018, at a time when most people involved in European politics believed that there was no role for subnational government in defence matters. In April of that year, he also organised and hosted a visit by a Renew Europe group delegation to the NATO base in the municipality of Ādaži , outside of Riga, and which today is NATO's largest base in Eastern Europe.[10]

Acutely aware, as I was, of his profound knowledge on defence matters, I wasn't surprised by his questions and his concern, although I was lost for words and could offer no satisfactory explanation.

Turlais was, of course, right, and he elaborated further on his thinking: he had been shocked not just by the lack of military preparation but also the lack of civil preparedness and general insouciance he observed in his travels around the Union. He was adamant that the Union could never be caught out in such a way ever again and that it was essential to start preparing citizens for what might happen elsewhere if Ukrainian defence collapsed and the country came under Russian control. In the Baltic nations, he explained, they were under no illusions that they would be attacked next.

We agreed to develop the theme within the CoR's work and to touch base regularly on the matter. By December 2023 the Renew Europe political group had put together a collection of civil preparedness best-practice guidelines and shared it with counterparts in the European Parliament. As the war

dragged on and European leaders openly discussed the need to boost the Union's military capability, and President Von der Leyen appointed the Union's first-ever European Commissioner for defence, the discussions that Dainis Turlais and I had increasingly turned to the role of regions and municipalities in helping to boost military capabilities. Namely, three policy areas are highly dependent on subnational authorities: developing the industrial ecosystem that supports the defence industry, building and maintaining the physical infrastructure that transports and houses military materiel and troops, and preparing citizens for their security and support tasks in case of military conflict.

Thus, by January 2025, during the negotiations with the other political groups at the start of the CoR's 8th mandate, Renew Europe proposed and secured the necessary support for the creation of the CoR's first-ever working group on defence. Retiring from politics after the Latvian local elections of June 2025, Dainis Turlais leaves an important legacy of helping to concentrate minds on the subnational dimension of military affairs and the development of a new CoR structure to facilitate coordination with European and national military authorities. And sitting on the CoR's Defence Working Group is Karīna Mikelsone, former Mayor of Ādaži, whose NATO base Turlais had the foresight to host a visit to seven years earlier.

The kind of evidence from the ground that will emerge from this working group, or the civil preparedness best practices mentioned earlier, are examples that illustrate how the CoR helps European decision-makers and legislators to gain an understanding of how the Union is functioning at a micro

level, in the municipalities and regions, aiding them to design the macro level, the continent-spanning European Union.

One unexpected and impactful example of local leaders providing key evidence for European legislators in a different policy area occurred on 10 January 2023. Staring into her phone camera while waiting for a flight at Prague airport, the Czech member of the European Parliament, Martina Dlabajova, was taking copious notes. She was carefully listening to a group of local leaders sitting in a room 700 km away in Brussels, describing to her what actions they had recently taken to boost businesses in their local community. As Chair of the SME Task Force of the Renew Europe group in the European Parliament, the information that members of the Renew Europe leadership in the European Committee of the Regions were giving her was, in her own words, 'like gold dust' for her work. She asked if more examples could be found and put together in a document for her.

It took another eight months, but on 26 September that year, the Renew Europe president, François Decoster, accompanied by other leaders, attended the SME Task Force meeting in the European Parliament and presented a 12-page brochure describing nearly 70 different initiatives taken in regions and municipalities across the Union to help small and medium-sized businesses.[11] No more than a snapshot of what happens every day around the European Union at subnational level, but a valuable resource that helps legislators gain an understanding of the actual functioning of the Union on the ground.

One of the initiatives that caught the attention of Dlabajova and her team was the one presented by Cllr Kate Feeney of Ireland's Fianna Fáil party, who at the time chaired

the Economic Development Committee of Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council. The County Council officials had realised that the lack of financial literacy was hampering many budding entrepreneurs from successfully developing their businesses, so the Council developed a Financial Understanding app to improve the financial skills of new business owners, explaining how to read financial statements, how to assess profitability and reduce their costs, or the importance of cash-flow projections. And this led to DLR County Council being invited to present their app at an event at the European Parliament.

And the number of examples where subnational leaders regularly bring evidence to European legislators through CoR reports, debates and events, studies and publications, or bilateral contacts extends to most other policy areas, including housing, industry, agriculture, employment, integration of migrants, sea ports and airports, clean energy, education and skills, biodiversity and water management, management of hospitals, tackling crime, building physical and digital infrastructure, restoring heritage, promoting and managing tourism, attracting inward investment, developing cultural activities, and more.

I would hope that by now every reader of this book who has come this far needs no further proof that the Union's success and longevity depends to a great extent on the ability of subnational leaders to make the Union a reality on the ground and their ability in helping EU legislators gain a better understanding of that reality as it evolves. In other words, there cannot be any doubt that the Union must not be perceived as a bunch of grey buildings 'over there', somewhere

distant from the local reality of citizens, and that instead the Union must have strong roots in those local communities. The question is: how deep do EU and national leaders want those roots to be? How far are they willing to go to empower subnational leaders in establishing those roots? How much will they invest in developing an effective partnership with subnational leaders that delivers results? When they refer to 'Member States', will it mean all levels of government within the state or will it continue to mean — as has been evident for many years — exclusively the national government? If the latter, will they then also include subnational authorities in the same sentence?

As fate would have it, Jacques Delors's state funeral took place in the same year that the European Committee of the Regions — which he had fought to establish and whose inauguration he spoke at — celebrated its 30th anniversary. And in November 2024, at the official celebrations of the 30th anniversary, the CoR's six political groups issued a joint statement.* Even if they contain a little bit of jargon, it is worth quoting four short paragraphs here, since they suggest potential answers to the above questions.[12]

> […] the CoR [currently] represents 1.2 million locally and regionally elected politicians in the EU, who are responsible for half of all public investment in the EU, a third of public expenditure and a quarter of tax revenue […]

* The political groups of the CoR, in decreasing order of size based on number of full members are: European People's Party, Party of European Socialists, Renew Europe, European Conservatives and Reformists, European Alliance, and The Greens & Progressives.

[The CoR] is continuing to develop its analytical capacity in order to assist the European legislators even more effectively by raising awareness about how the Union and its policies affect local and regional communities […] [M]ulti-level governance [is] fundamental to the functioning and democratic legitimacy of the EU. Proper application of [it] would ensure a more evidence-based and effective EU legislation and policies, thus better reflecting the needs of European citizens […]

[The CoR] expects that the co-legislators will recognise it as an observer in the trilogue negotiations on the basis of a more inclusive Interinstitutional agreement on simplification and better law-making (IIA). It also expects to participate in Council meetings and working party meetings in policy areas with a strong territorial focus, paving the way for an evolution of its institutional role;

The CoR calls on the Union's Budgetary Authority to address the CoR's structural underresourcing which contravenes the spirit of the Treaty, and reiterates that any new resources would be used to amplify the voices of local and regional authorities in EU legislative processes and strengthen the connections between citizens, territories and the EU.

Brussels, 20 November 2024

The central message of this joint statement is that a political Union of more than 400 million people, spanning a whole continent, with more than 20 official languages and diverse historical and cultural heritage, contains in its very essence multiple driving forces that pull citizens in different directions.

Developing a sense of unity that overcomes those divisive impulses and is capable of turning the existing diversity into a positive asset requires much, *much* more than the very necessary — indeed, fundamental — framework of laws, speeches, and political will.

Building a lasting political Union that leaves Europe's dark past behind forever and enables the European continent to compete against global powers and stay free and protected from predatory regimes requires its citizens to 'buy in' to that Union, which in turn requires that those citizens *experience* the Union in their local community in a positive way, that they *feel* that their local community is just as much the Union as the grey buildings in the Union's capital where decisions are made, and that their local community has a real *say* in helping to shape the Union. In other words, citizens need to witness, feel, and experience the European Union 'downtown' in their local community, in the knowledge that their local community's point of view is taken into consideration in 'downtown Brussels' — in the European quarter where the Union's institutions are based. Such an objective requires a much greater investment in the relationship with municipalities and regions than has occurred in the 30 years since the Committee of the Regions was created.

The joint declaration quoted above could be easily dismissed as simply a bureaucratic organisation asking for more resources to justify its existence or to strengthen it in a competition with other bureaucratic institutions. But that would be a mistake; it would be to ignore the reality of this century and would amount to a complacency about the solidity of the Union's foundations. The fact is that the twenty-first

century brings with it numerous daunting challenges which far exceed the capacity of nation-states — certainly those the size of European ones — to address them in any effective way as they might have done in the twentieth century. Only by uniting and strengthening the European Union can those challenges be faced and overcome, but the further away decision-making is from citizens, the more necessary it becomes to grow deep roots, and the bigger the effort needed to bond with citizens. What this book has attempted to demonstrate is that there is a lot of quality local leadership across the European Union and that this leadership is one of the most overlooked and under-utilised assets in the Union, and that European and national leaders who fail to understand its importance — or worse, dismiss it — are putting the very existence of the Union in peril.

That is why it is incumbent on all those who truly believe that a strong and more effective European Union is the answer to the challenges of this century to view the Union in three dimensions. There are the two dimensions of north-south, east-west, but there is a third dimension that many don't see: the layers of what we might descriptively call 'geographically defined power'. Most people in Europe don't realise there is more than one layer — they see only the Member States, the countries of Europe. But even most people who work in and around the European institutions see only the top two layers, the whole Union and the Member States. *How much they miss because of it!*

Here's an experiment you can try for yourself right now. Find a map of the world which shows the European Union clearly, and focus on the EU's external borders — in other

words, focus on the whole Union. Once you have done that for a minute or so, find a map of the European Union that shows all the Member States, and focus on them and their borders for a minute or two. By turning to this second map, we could say you have metaphorically peeled off the top layer of government, the European level, to reveal the next layer, the national level. Once you have done that and observed them in detail, find the CoR's 2024 State of the Regions and Cities report and see the map on page 16.[13]

How different the Union looks! And how much more information this view provides! By turning to this third map you will have effectively lifted the second layer to reveal the third level of government, and by doing so you are suddenly getting much closer to the reality of life in Europe. And isn't that what we want of any decision-makers? That they be as close as possible to reality?

Here's another experiment that you can do to experience for yourself the three-dimensional nature of the European Union.

Over the next couple of weeks, observe the local community where you live. Look at the people and how they relate to each other. Notice the infrastructure and whether it's in a good state or it is lacking something. Take note of the public services you use and consider whether you find them satisfactory. Keep track of events happening, whether planned ones like cultural events or unplanned ones such as accidents. Ask yourself if businesses are thriving or floundering, if residents feel safe or threatened, if schools and hospitals are fulfilling their purpose, if there is opportunity for all or despair amongst many, if the quality of life attracts

new residents or drives them away, if community relations are good or tense. Observe whatever else goes on in your local community that you notice and wish to pay attention to.

Once you have done all of that for a couple of weeks, you will begin to have an idea of what is involved in being a mayor. And if, for each of those observations, you consider whether and how they link up with European laws and objectives, how those European decisions might be working well or might have been designed without taking proper account of the reality in your local community, how you should pass on to European legislators essential information about your local community, in other words about your part of the European Union — indeed the most important part, as far as you and your neighbours are concerned — then you will have experienced why the European Committee of the Regions exists, and you will have discovered for yourself why it is an essential component of this precious Union.

You will have also experienced a transformation.

By viewing the European Union through the prism of your local community, and by coming to understand how much the government of the Union needs to know what is happening where you live, you will have come to realise that the European Union is not some abstract entity 'over there', in grey buildings populated by busy people with strange-sounding names — as necessary as those people and buildings unquestionably are to the good functioning of the Union. Instead, you will have come to realise that the reality of the European Union is here, where you are, where you live, where you sleep, where you walk, where you play. And so it is in the almost 90,000 other localities across the Union.

That is a profound realisation: that every local community, anywhere in the European Union, has just as much a claim to being the Union as the buildings in which the decisions are made. And that to say 'the European Union' in fact means more than the summits of national leaders that appear in the media, or more than its institutions, or indeed more than the laws and decisions that design the Union. It means, more than anything else, its people and the places they call home.



↑
Dainis Turlais (middle) hosts the author (right) and Mayors Decoster and Somers (left) for a visit to the Ādaži NATO base outside Riga in April 2018. Turlais understood well before most the security threat that was building at the EU's eastern border.



→
The author next to the bust of Jacques Delors, commissioned following his death, and which greets visitors to the Jacques Delors building of the European Committee of the Regions.

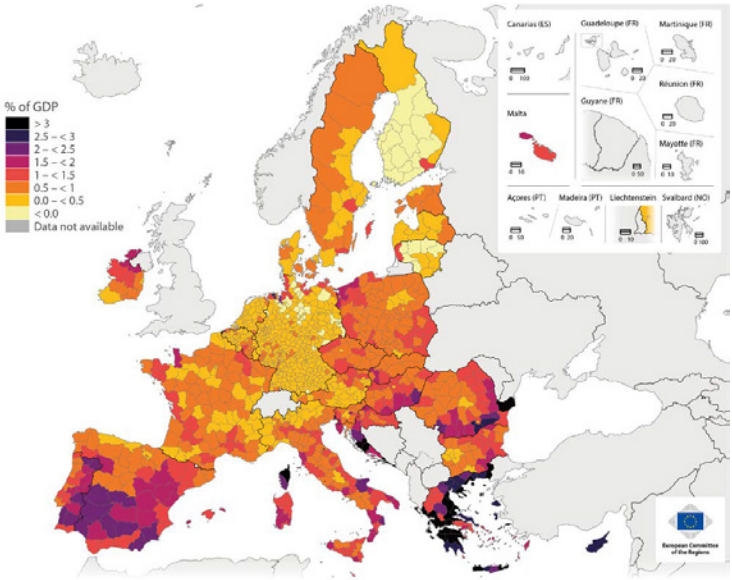


Figure 4 — The impact of climate change under a 2°C global warming scenario
Additional economic costs by NUTS 3 regions
Additional economic cost of a 2°C global warming scenario by 2050 compared with the present-day baseline
Source: *Data retrieved from the 9th Cohesion Report, through the JRC*
Administrative boundaries: © EuroGeographics © UN-FAO © Turkstat
© Cartography: Eurostat - IMAGE, 08/2024

↑

The map on page 16 of the CoR's 2024 State of the Regions and Cities Report. Looking at the European Union from the subnational perspective reveals so much more information and gets one much closer to the reality of life in Europe as experienced by citizens.

Epilogue

The idea to write this book emerged slowly and then suddenly.

I had for many years entertained the idea of writing a book. Ever since I learnt to read, the world of words has been a constant fascination of mine, and throughout my life one of my biggest weaknesses has been entering a bookshop and coming out with more books than I have time to read, having spent more than I had initially intended!

I loved the idea of one day contributing my own book to those bookshelves, and in fact, more than once, I actually started writing a book, believing I had a perfect idea to develop. Each time, however, I struggled to get past the first page — until, one day, I realised that through my job at the European Committee of the Regions, I had developed a knowledge about the work of mayors that deserved to be shared.

Slowly, I started to put ideas into words and having previously done some postgraduate research in democratic theory, I was beginning to develop an idea about mayors

and democracy, when suddenly something happened that made me change course, resulting in the book that you have just finished reading. In November 2021, a journalist reporting on EU affairs referred to a new national political figure as someone who had previously 'only been a small-town mayor'. That remark, implying that small-town mayors are in some way less important or are to be taken less seriously, lit the fire in me! I knew instantly that I had to tell the story of those mayors of lesser-known towns who are helping to shape the reality of the European Union.

The underlying thought upholding the idea of the book was a simple but profound one: for every human being living on this planet, the place they call home is the centre of the universe. Therefore, whether they realise it or not, the political leader in charge of running and transforming their local community is one of the most important political figures in their lives. I also knew that I was well placed to tell that story, having witnessed the work of so many of them and having had the privilege — through my work at the CoR — of discovering so many places around Europe that are so special in their own right. If I have learnt one thing thanks to the European Committee of the Regions, it is that wherever there are people living — whether it's a tiny rural community or a large metropolis, and everything in between — there is creativity, ingenuity, and determination. And there is always a story worth telling. If, on top of that, those people are lucky, there will also be among them individuals willing to genuinely serve the community for the better.

This book is therefore a homage to those local leaders who, on the one hand, with genuine dedication and passion,

devote their energy, lives, and a huge amount of their family time to ensuring their fellow residents enjoy the community they call home and, on the other hand, who have the vision and drive to offer their citizens the opportunities that come from being part of the continent-wide community we call the European Union.

I chose to split this book into three parts because before telling the story of how mayors help to shape the reality of our Union, it was necessary to recall why and how the European Union came to exist, and because this is a book about the local perspective, I chose to tell that story from the perspective of its capital city, Brussels: how the history of the Belgian capital has been intertwined with political power, how it experienced the horrific war that convinced enlightened leaders that European unity could wait no longer, and how it became the capital of the Union by accident.

I thought I knew the story about the emergence of European integration well, but in researching this book, I learnt that many of the foundations for it were already laid down during the war itself. I felt it important to share that with the reader, and to interweave those developments in parallel with the dramatic, tragic, and heroic events taking place in occupied Brussels.

Having set the scene, providing the full context that led to the creation of our European Union, albeit from a new perspective, and having demonstrated why Brussels was a very suitable capital for the Union, it was now possible to develop Part 2. This meant introducing readers to four local leaders who are not only convinced of the need and the benefits of European unity but have gone out of their way to ensure

their citizens are active participants and co-owners of their European Union. Crucially, through these chapters, readers would also become familiar with the wealth and diversity of Europe's localities.

Part 3 took longer to develop in my mind. I knew it was essential to tell the story of what mayors and other subnational leaders do when they come to the Union's capital, and how they participate in EU decision-making. But how could I keep the reader engaged after the gripping and fascinating stories of Parts 1 and 2? How to make the work of a political assembly entertaining to read? That's where the coincidences of life provided the solution: discovering that Einstein had written about European unity and that he had once strolled through the park that is today adjacent to the European Committee of the Regions gave me the idea of a semi-fictional chapter. What I never imagined when I started writing Chapter 9, and which turned out to be a real joy, was to discover all the amazing connections between the three protagonists of the chapter and the work of the CoR that I had chosen to highlight. Either I was incredibly lucky or (just as with the degrees of separation that connect all humans on this planet) perhaps such connections can be found for everyone and every situation? I leave that investigation to someone else!

Speaking of coincidences, the fact that key events of WWII that happened in Brussels and which are featured extensively in Chapter 2 also involve the towns of Mechelen and Saint-Omer, which are in turn the focus of Chapters 5 and 6, is purely coincidental. The chances that the mayors of those two cities should — many decades after the dramatic events — be appointed by their national governments to the

CoR, that they both belong to the same political group, that they both were elected president of the group one right after the other, and that the secretary general of that group decides to write a book about their work and about Brussels are so extremely low that the coincidence is hardly believable. Yet that is exactly what happened!

One final thought before inviting you to proceed to the next pages, where you can discover suggestions for further reading and places to visit.

When I wrote at the beginning of this Epilogue that I had to tell the story of those mayors of lesser-known towns who are helping to shape the reality of the European Union, the emphasis was on *story*. From the start, I knew this would not be an academic book but one in which I shared with you, the reader — to the greatest extent possible — the sense of wonder and awe, the inspiration and admiration, and the pleasure that I have experienced discovering each of these extraordinary places in Europe, their incredible stories and histories, and of course, their amazing local leaders.

If you have enjoyed reading this book even a fraction of how much I have enjoyed writing it, and if I have instilled in you a curiosity to see these and other places in Europe for yourself, and –perhaps most of all — if you now view our European Union in a more complete way, accepting that while many people instinctively find the *idea* of Europe appealing and want to support it, it is mainly in its local communities that the *bonds* with citizens can truly take hold and become strong, then my mission is accomplished.

Suggested Further Reading

In Part 1: Who Is 'Brussels'?

Chapter 1: The Million and The Quarter

- For more information on the European Union (its principles, members, history, institutions, laws, citizen opportunities, and general news), visit www.europa.eu and select your preferred language.
- For more information on the European Committee of the Regions, visit www.cor.europa.eu. For more information on each of the other EU institutions and bodies, including those in each Member State, see the interactive map on the europa.eu website to find their details and websites: https://european-union.europa.eu/institutions-law-budget/institutions-and-bodies/search-all-eu-institutions-and-bodies_en.
- For a presentation on the evolving and future plans for the European quarter of Brussels, how it is a diverse and fun place to work, live, learn, and relax, see visit.

brussels (2022) 'Le quartier européen: le quartier cosmopolite (et culturel!) de Bruxelles', 22 February. Retrieved 21 March 2026 from https://www.visit.brussels/fr/visiteurs/organisez-votre-sejour/le-quartier-europeen-quartier-cosmopolite-et-culturel-de-bruxelles?Tabs+quartier+europ%C3%A9en=lifestylechill.

- For before-and-after pictures as well as a critical view of how the European quarter developed in the twentieth century and has struggled to connect with local residents of Brussels, see M. Baele & A. Carton, *Bruxelles: le quartier européen, un quartier sacrifié à l'Europe ?*, (2019, September 21), RTBF Actus. Retrieved 21 March 2026 from https://www.rtbf.be/article/bruxelles-le-quartier-europeen-un-quartier-sacrifie-a-l-europe-10317469.
- For an insight into the impact that the Turkish invasion and occupation of Cyprus had on real people and local communities see *Occupied Municipalities*, (n.d.), Union of Cyprus Municipalities. Retrieved 21 March 2026 from https://ucm.org.cy/en/municipalities/occupied-municipalities/.
- For information on the design, symbolisms, and importance of Nicosia's new town hall, as well as the significance of its location near the Green Line that marks the beginning of the occupied territory of Cyprus/EU, see the dedicated page by the architectural and design magazine EK: https://ek-mag.com/new-town-hall-in-nicosia/.

There are many books about the history of Belgium and Brussels, but here below are some I recommend.

- A treasure of a book, recently published, describing the history of Brussels using ancient maps: B. Vannieuwenhuyze, p. De Maeyer, M. Galand, C. Loir, G. Vanthemsche (2025), *L'Histoire de Bruxelles en cartes anciennes* (Brussels: Éditions Racine).
- Anyone interested in the work of mayors and the history of Brussels must read about Adolphe Max, one of the most consequential mayors in the history of the city. He was mayor for three decades, from 1909–1939, during which he became a symbol of the resistance to the brutal German occupation of World War 1. Second-hand copies of the first biography about him (in French) can be found online: L. Cooremans and M. Martens (1964), *Adolphe Max* (Brussels: Éditions Weissenbruch). https://www.belgicana.be/livres/adolphe-max-lucien-cooremans-mina-martens-editions-weissenbruch-1964/
- A magnificent and hugely acclaimed book of the medieval history of the lands which today we know as Belgium and the Netherlands: B. Van Loo (2023), *The Burgundians — A Vanished Empire. A History of 1111 Years and One Day* (Bloomsbury Publishing). Translated from the original Dutch: *De Bourgondiërs*. Also available in French: *Les Témeraires*.

- D. Blyth (2014), *The 500 Hidden Secrets of Brussels*, 5th edition (Antwerp: Luster).
- N. Capart, I. De Pange, N. Van Beek, and F. Verstraeten (2019), *Secret Brussels* (Jonglez).

Chapter 3: The Need for a Union

- For this chapter, I relied heavily on this fantastic resource provided by the Belgian State Archives, which details life in Belgium throughout World War II. Anyone interested in the topic should browse through it: https://www.belgiumwwii.be. It exists in Belgium's three official languages: Dutch, French, and German, but with online machine translation is accessible to anyone.
- For the full and horrific story of what happened to Albert and Simone Jonnart, and Erich, Edith, and Ralph Mayer, as well as others, during the Nazi occupation of Brussels read J.-C. Dubuisson's excellent *L'Epopée de huit réfugiés juifs allemands dans l'Europe occupée* (2023) (Brussels : Éditions Racine).
- The infamous military barracks in Mechelen, Kazerne Dossin, from where Jews and others were deported to Auschwitz, are today a memorial museum and documentation centre on holocaust and human rights. Their book *Holocaust & Human Rights* (2012) is a powerful and helpful contribution to the efforts to never forget what fanaticism has led to in the past in Europe and elsewhere.
- For the most authoritative information on the Auschwitz extermination camp, visit and browse the

history section of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial Museum website: https://www.auschwitz.org/en/history/.

Chapter 4: It Cannot Be Brussels!

In addition to the publications mentioned, especially towards the end of this chapter, the following are also of particular interest:

- The full text of the Schuman Declaration via the Robert Schuman European Centre — ECRS: https://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/en/robert-schuman-en/robert-schuman-declaration.
- The excellent biography of the man whom US President John F. Kennedy credited as being one of the reasons why European unity was finally becoming a reality: F. Dûchene (1994), *Jean Monnet, the First Statesman of Interdependence* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company).
- For the Belgian perspective on the crucial years for Europe of 1949 and 1950: V. Dujardin (1995), *Entre Régence et Royauté* (Brussels: Éditions Racine).
- The full text of the Treaty of Brussels is available via the NATO website: https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1948/03/17/the-brussels-treaty.
- The full text of the NATO Treaty: https://www.nato.int/en/about-us/official-texts-and-resources/official-texts/1949/04/04/the-north-atlantic-treaty?selectedLocale=.

In Part 2: The EU Downtown

Chapter 5: The Day of Symbols (Mechelen, Belgium – Mayor Bart Somers)

- For the full story of how Bart Somers transformed the city of Mechelen and developed the policies that led to his World Mayor prize, read his 2016 book *Samen Leven* (in Dutch), available also in German as *Zusammen Leben*.
- For Mayor Somers's work as rapporteur in the CoR, see Opinion of the European Committee of the Regions (2016), *Combatting radicalisation and violent extremism: prevention mechanisms at local and regional level,* https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/cor-2015-06329-00-02-ac-tra-en.docx/.
- For more information on Beethoven's correspondence, consult the digital archives of the Beethoven-Haus Bonn association, the leading centre for the preservation of his work and heritage: https://www.beethoven.de/en/archive/list/node/5749547452071936/Texte.

Chapter 6: The Streams of Knowledge (Saint-Omer, France – Mayor François Decoster)

- For more information about the English Jesuit College of Saint-Omer as well as the links with the Carrolls of Maryland, see the various publications available on the website of the Saint-Omer Foundation for Transatlantic Values: https://saintomerfoundation.org/bibliotheque/.

- For the work as CoR rapporteur of Mayor Decoster where the idea of a network of local councillors was first mentioned, see the 2018 opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on *Rights and Values*: https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/cor-2018-03994-00-01-ac-tra-en.docx/content.
- For more information about the EU Local Councillors Network, see the dedicated website: https://eu-local-councillors.europa.eu/index_en.

Chapter 7: Raising the Voice (Oulu, Finland – 'Mayor' Mirja Vehkaperä)

- The bid book of Oulu2026, *Cultural Climate Change*, is more than a technical presentation of the plans for European Capital of Culture: it is an insight into life in the Arctic and how the Arctic connects with the rest of Europe. It is available online at: https://oulu2026.eu/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Oulu2026_Bidbook.pdf
- For the work as CoR rapporteur of Mirja Vehkaperä focusing on the future of Europe's Arctic region, see the opinion of the European Committee of the Regions on *The New EU Arctic Strategy*: https://webapi2016.cor.europa.eu/v1/documents/cor-2021-06509-00-00-ac-tra-en.docx/content.
- The Sámi Parliament of Finland has produced a guidebook with practical advice for ethical and respectful tourism in the Sámi homeland. See https://matkailu.samediggi.fi/en/vocabulary/.

Chapter 8: Finding a Future (Trbovlje, Slovenia — Mayor Jasna Gabrič)

- For more information on the economic profile of the Zasavje region and plans to complete the transition away from coal, see European Commission Directorate-General for Energy (2024), *Regional profile — Zasavje, Slovenia* (Publications Office of the European Union), https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2833/920818.
- For more information on how EU funding is used in Slovenia, this government website contains a lot of useful details and publications: https://evropskasredstva.si/en/slovenias-cohesion-policy-programme-2021-2027/.

In Part 3: The Downtown Union

Chapter 9: The Three Revolutionaries and the Three Revolutions

- For more on Einstein's thinking, read Max Born's *The Born-Einstein Letters 1916–1955, Friendship, Politics and Physics in Uncertain Times*, published in 2005 by Macmillan.
- For more information on the scientific causes of climate change and the need to transition to clean energy, read this United Nations Climate Action page:https://www.un.org/en/climatechange/science/causes-effects-climate-change.
- For more information on the EU's digital transition, browse the European Commission's Digital Decade

Policy Programme: https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digital-decade-policy-programme.

- For more information on Europe's demographic change, read the 2023 Eurobarometer report *Demographic Change in Europe*: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/api/deliverable/download/file?deliverableId=89714.

Chapter 10: The Depth of the Roots

- For more information about the liberal and democrat political group in the European Committee of the Regions, browse their website www.reneweurope-cor.eu, where you can also subscribe to their podcast *Letter from Brussels*, and their monthly snapshot *Streetfield*.
- For an understanding of how ideology and political principles play a role in local politics, read Renew Europe CoR (2018), *Principles that make cities and local communities liberal*. Available via: https://reneweurope-cor.eu/liberalprinciples/.
- To personalise the message of this book and make it part of your own life, read about the history of the local community you call home and discover its connections with people and places from other parts of Europe. Find out also how EU funds are used locally, and how the local leaders connect the local community with the European Union.

Suggested Places to Visit

In Part 1: Who Is 'Brussels'?

Chapter 1: The Million and The Quarter

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter, the following are also recommended:

- All the EU institutions mentioned in the chapter can be visited by the public on Open Doors Day, every year on the Saturday closest to Europe Day, 9 May. They can also be visited throughout the year upon request in advance and following certain rules — see their respective websites.
- In each Member State, there is at least one office representing the European Commission and one for the European Parliament. Frequently they are in the same building and can also be visited by the public. Check their respective websites.

- In Nicosia, visit the rooftop of the new Town Hall, which offers a full view of the occupied territory of Cyprus.

Chapter 2: The Legacy of Julius

This chapter is already a feast of places to visit in Brussels, but I would recommend in addition:

- The guided tour of the opera house La Monnaie-De Munt and its workshops.
- The paintings of Pieter Bruegel the Elder at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts in Brussels for an insight into life in Belgium in the sixteenth century.

Chapter 3: The Need for a Union

- For anyone wishing to understand in full how the Nazis planned, prepared, and carried out the Holocaust in Belgium, a visit to Kazerne Dossin in Mechelen is a must. It also offers information about the events leading to and the lessons to be learnt from other genocides.
- For an understanding of how Nazis used political prisoners as slave labour as part of their war machine, visit the enormous structures built in the woods on the outskirts of Saint-Omer, France: La Coupole and the nearby Le Blockhaus, both of which were built in connection with the production and launching of V1 and V2 flying bombs towards the United Kingdom.

- The Jewish Museum of Belgium has a special section on the Holocaust in Belgium, with films and documents that further complement the events told in this chapter.
- For more information on the liberation of Belgium in September 1944, the excellent Memorial Museum of the Belgian city of Mons is well worth a visit. As one of the first Belgian localities to be liberated, it has a special section dedicated to this event.

Chapter 4: It Cannot Be Brussels!

- In addition to the basket-weaver's cottage that Belgium's Prince Charles retired to, near Oostend, visit the Raversyde Atlantik Wall. It is one of the best-preserved remains of the Nazi defensive line, with more than 60 bunkers, underground passageways, and artillery positions. Having read Chapters 3 and 4 of this book, and if you have watched films like *Dunkirk* or *Saving Private Ryan*, the visit to Raversyde offers a real-life glimpse into the events that happened along the Belgian and French coasts. It also includes remains of the German defence line during World War I.
- The house outside the city of Metz, France, where Robert Schuman wrote much of his famous declaration is today a museum and research centre well worth visiting, with an exhibition about his life and work, as well as insights into his life in the house: https://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/en/museum-en.

In Part 2: The EU Downtown

Chapter 5: The Day of Symbols (Mechelen, Belgium – Mayor Bart Somers)

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter, and the Kazerne Dossin mentioned above under Chapter 3, the following deserve a visit:

- Mechelen has recently opened up its historic Town Hall to guided tours for the public. This magnificent building is steeped in history and a visit to Town Hall reveals the significant political, judicial and economic role that Mechelen has played throughout the centuries.
- The house where Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn is just a 2.5-hour drive from Mechelen. It is one of the most visited music museums in the world and retains much of the original charm of when he lived there. It is also a prime centre for the preservation of his music and heritage, with original possessions and documents of his on display.

Chapter 6: The Streams of Knowledge (Saint-Omer, France – Mayor François Decoster)

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter, as well as La Coupole and Le Blockhaus mentioned above under Chapter 3, the following should be included in any visit to Saint-Omer:

- The extraordinary library of old books, dating back centuries to the origins of the English Jesuit College that the Carrolls and Daniel O'Connell attended, is an absolute must. It contains tens of thousands of volumes, including a Shakespeare First Folio, an original Gutenberg Bible, an early version of Diderot's Encyclopaedia, and much more! It is formally known as the Salle Patrimoniale (the heritage room) of the Bibliothèque d'Agglomération du Pays de Saint-Omer.
- The Italianate theatre in the Old City Hall. An extraordinary gem of a theatre that fell into disrepair and was abandoned and closed in 1973, until François Decoster was elected mayor and he obtained the funding for the restoration. It reopened in 2019.

Chapter 7: Raising the Voice (Oulu, Finland – 'Mayor' Mirja Vehkaperä)

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter:

- The Kauppahalli (Oulu Market Hall) has been recently restored to its former neo-gothic glory of 1901. It's a great place to become acquainted with the vibe of Oulu, its people, and its food.
- The natural surroundings. One doesn't travel to the Arctic to stay in an urban setting. If you go during the winter you will have good chances of seeing the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights.

Chapter 8: Finding a Future (Trbovlje, Slovenia – Mayor Jasna Gabrič)

In addition to the sites and locations already mentioned in the chapter:

- A must is taking a selfie standing at the foot of the tallest chimney stack in Europe. By reserving in advance, it is also possible to see the chimney on the inside, and a virtual-reality climbing experience is also on offer.
- If you feel up to the challenge, try running the Jamatlon through the old coal mine. Check out the website for future editions: https://jamatlon.si/.

In Part 3: The Downtown Union

Chapter 9: The Three Revolutionaries and the Three Revolutions

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter:

- Take a stroll through Parc Léopold trying to imagine what it was like when it was a zoo in the nineteenth century.
- Walk up to the top of Parc Léopold, the southern-most end, where you will find the Institute of Natural Sciences, home to one of Europe's best natural history museums. Tracing its origins to the early nineteenth century, the museum and institute moved to this site not long after the zoo in Parc Léopold closed down.

Do visit the museum, in particular the spectacular dinosaur collection.

Chapter 10: The Depth of the Roots

In addition to the sites and locations mentioned in the chapter:

- Visit your hometown with different eyes. Find out what has been supported by EU funds and go see those sites and venues.
- Find out if your hometown is twinned with another town in Europe and, if so, visit it.

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Although this book was very much a personal project carried out in my private time, it could not have happened without the dedication and hard work of the staff of the European Committee of the Regions, who create the space — politically and logistically — for local and regional politicians to fulfil their European mission. This comes through most clearly in Chapters 9 and 10.

As most of the leaders mentioned in this book belong to the Renew Europe political family, the staff of the Renew Europe CoR secretariat deserve a very special mention for their steadfast commitment to the mission and their willingness to constantly innovate, always aiming to create new opportunities for our mayors and regional leaders to achieve results

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Waffle, April 2016 – April 2025



About the Author

Sean O'Curneen has been working closely with local and regional political leaders from across the European Union for more than 25 years. In his capacity as Secretary General of the Renew Europe political group he is one of the senior officials in the European Committee of the Regions, the EU's assembly of municipalities and regions, and in this role since 2004 he has met thousands of political leaders from all levels of government and has seen first-hand the work that many local leaders carry out both at the European level as well as in their municipalities and regions. He personally knows most of the leaders featured in Parts 2 and 3 of this book and has worked very closely for several years with the mayors featured in Chapters 5–8.

In this capacity he has been writing and hosting a regular podcast about the European work of local leaders called 'Letter from Brussels', which is available on YouTube and most major podcast platforms.

Prior to Brussels he worked for four years in the European and International Team of the Mayor of London, responsible

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In the 1990s he worked as a journalist for BBC Television in London, and Radio France International in Paris, having graduated with a Master's degree in Journalism from the Université Aix-Marseille. He also holds a BSC in Astronomy from University College London.

Of Irish-Spanish descent he was brought up in Madrid, has studied and worked in London, Paris, and Marseilles, and now lives and works in Brussels. He is fluent in English, Spanish, and French and is married with two children.

About the Publisher

The European Liberal Forum (ELF) is the official political foundation of the European Liberal Party, the ALDE Party. Together with 54 member organisations, we work all over Europe to bring new ideas into the political debate, to provide a platform for discussion, and to empower citizens to make their voices heard. ELF was founded in 2007 to strengthen the liberal and democrat movement in Europe. Our work is guided by liberal ideals and a belief in the principle of freedom. We stand for a future-oriented Europe that offers opportunities for every citizen. ELF is engaged on all political levels, from the local to the European. We bring together a diverse network of national foundations, think tanks and other experts. At the same time, we are also close to, but independent from, the ALDE Party and other Liberal actors in Europe. In this role, our forum serves as a space for an open and informed exchange of views between a wide range of different actors.

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Endnotes

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