

Oral History Interview
with
ETIENNE HIRSCH

French civil engineer and administrator. President of the French Supply Council, London, and French representative on the temporary Economic Committee for Europe, 1945; Head, Technical Division, Commissariat-General au Plan, 1946-49; Deputy Commissioner, 1949-52; Commissioner General, 1952-59; participated in negotiations setting up European Coal and Steel Community, 1950-52; and member NATO Committee of Wise Men, 1951-52.

Paris, France
June 30, 1970
by Theodore A. Wilson, University of Kansas

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WILSON: Perhaps I could begin by asking you about your service with the French Supply Committee in London. Was this a comparable organization to that of Jean Monnet in Washington?

HIRSCH: Yes, it was. I was responsible for purchasing what we could not get from the United States.

WILSON: Did you deal with lend-lease arrangements which came through England?

HIRSCH: That was during the war. What Monnet did and what I did in the Supply Council was afterward, not on lend-lease.

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WILSON: I see. Were you in London at the time?

HIRSCH: I was in London between '40 and '43, and there I dealt with lend-lease for Army supplies and supplies for the regiments which were with General [Charles] de Gaulle.

WILSON: I see.

HIRSCH: I had a representative at that time to Washington, who on my direction or instructions dealt with American supply under lend-lease.

WILSON: I see. That's right. I mixed things up a bit. You were then in...

HIRSCH: I was then in the Armaments Division of the Free French Forces, and I dealt both with military supplies and civilian supplies.

WILSON: And then in 1945 you were on this temporary economic committee, the French representative?

HIRSCH: Yes.

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WILSON: How temporary was it viewed as being?

HIRSCH: Well, that was just before the liberation of continental Europe, and so we tried to prepare solutions to the problems which were at hand on the transportation of supplies and things like that.

WILSON: Some of the arrangements were, if I am correct, continued, particularly those on inland transport?

HIRSCH: Yes. On transport, that was continued.

WILSON: And it merged later with the Economic Commission for Europe in '47?

HIRSCH: Yes.

WILSON: What was the view at the time, when you were preparing for the period after liberation and the end of the war? Was it recognized that Europe was going to be in extremely serious difficulties?

HIRSCH: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

WILSON: Were there American observers?

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HIRSCH: I don't think so. I am not sure, but I don't think there were. There were British members and continental members, but I don't think there were any Americans at that time.

WILSON: What was seen as being the most serious problem -- an inclusion of supplies, of raw materials, or...

HIRSCH: Yes. And transport equipment, because of the destruction, you know, from bombing of the highways. Also of concern was equipment for power stations; to get power as quickly as possible.

WILSON: Was it thought that this could be done, at that time, in '45, '46...

HIRSCH: Well, that was not in '45 or '46; that was in 1944. That was '44, before the liberation, see.

WILSON: So, you were really doing the planning even before?

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HIRSCH: Yes, we were doing the planning before. And apart from this committee, which was the Emergency Committee for Europe, I went to Washington, in February of '44, in order to make arrangements for civilian supplies at the time of the landing. There, I spent three months making arrangements, discussing what kind of supplies, what amount, and what means of transportation were needed in order to distribute them, and so on. That continued. Then I went to London before the landing, in order to make arrangements on the spot there.

WILSON: I see. So you carried through.

HIRSCH: Yes. And there I was in constant liaison with both the Americans and the British, and that continued in Paris. At that time, we sent out an emergency request for supplies, which came to be called the "80,000 ton supply program." The military at that time said, "Well, it is a question of landing facilities." As you know, some of the harbors were destroyed, and some were still occupied.

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So they said, "Well, we can supply 80,000 tons. You have to make your choice, your shopping list, within the 80,000 tons." So I just got together with the various departments or ministries and we devised the shopping list, and that was what was supplied.

WILSON: How difficult was it to get this sort of information in order to decide which items to ,

HIRSCH: Well, I would say that we decided that really beforehand, because you know there were some stupid problems. For instance, when we discussed this with the ministry of public works, they said, "What we require is 500,000 tons of bitumen for the roads."

Well, we told them, "How can we, inside our 80,000 tons, give you 500,000 tons of bitumen?"

They said, "Well, we need it."

We said, "Well, we're sorry we can't do it." There were some kinds of discussions like that.

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WILSON: Did it continue to be necessary, for the next two or three years, to choose a shopping list, and then cut down these things on the spot?

HIRSCH: We had to decide on priorities.

WILSON: Did you have any relations at all with the UNRRA [United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration] people?

HIRSCH: No. UNRRA had to do only with Germany and Italy, if I am correct.

WILSON: There were some proposals for programs in the liberated countries, but they didn't work out?

HIRSCH: No, no, no, we had no dealings with UNRRA.

WILSON: Then you went from there to work with Jean Monnet, is that correct?

HIRSCH: Well, I worked with Jean Monnet since the middle of '43, when we discussed these emergency programs before the landing.

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WILSON: He had very close relations I gather, particularly in the United States, because of...

HIRSCH: Oh, yes. Well, he had been in the United States since 1940.

WILSON: Yes, and was very highly respected at all levels.

HIRSCH: And he had very close relations with -- I don't remember the name of his counsel who was a close intimate to Roosevelt.

WILSON: Benjamin Cohen perhaps?

HIRSCH: No.

WILSON: Corcoran?

HIRSCH: No. He published a book.

WILSON: Not Dean Acheson?

HIRSCH: It was before Dean Acheson came into the picture.

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WILSON: In the administration? As one of the Cabinet officers?

HIRSCH: Well, he was a Presidential advisor.

WILSON: Oh, Harry Hopkins perhaps.

HIRSCH: Yes, Harry Hopkins. Well, he was in constant connection with Harry Hopkins. In fact, it is Monnet who made the suggestion for the victory program, you know, of 50,000 tanks, 50,000 planes, and 50,000 ships. It was Monnet who put that on a sheet of paper and gave it to Harry Hopkins, who took it.

WILSON: Yes. This is perhaps a question you may not wish to answer, but did you have the impression that in regard to the personal relations between Jean Monnet and President Roosevelt, that there was any difficulty because of President Roosevelt's views about the Free French and particularly General de Gaulle, and supplying him.

HIRSCH: There were political problems. You see, Monnet

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was asked by de Gaulle to try and get Roosevelt to consider de Gaulle as the leader of France, which Roosevelt refused. So in this respect, there was a roadblock. But that didn't prevent technical matters to be discussed and resolved. But de Gaulle was sensitive to the fact that Roosevelt would not agree to recognize his leadership in France.

WILSON: Yes, that's right. There's some question in the United States that President Roosevelt, until very late in the war, was determined to strip France, or to have France abandon its colonial possessions after the war. Was that demonstrated in a personal...

HIRSCH: No, no, the fact was that Roosevelt had a personal antipathy to de Gaulle. There was this meeting in the Anfa Hotel, in Casablanca, where Roosevelt tried to educate de Gaulle. They had different characters; it was quite obvious that they could not understand one another.

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WILSON: President Roosevelt could be very imperious. He had an imperial mind or mentality at times and...

HIRSCH: And de Gaulle also.

WILSON: Yes. Yes.

I wonder if you might describe the circumstances, particularly your part, in the setting up of what we call the Monnet plan.

This, of course, is perhaps the major example of national effort of reconstruction. I'd be interested in any comments you may have on how this came about.

HIRSCH: Well, it started first with this planning of what would be the requirements at the time of the liberation. Then, as the industrial life, economic life, of France was to be reconstructed, Monnet had the idea that in order to decide on priorities and what should be done, it was useful to have a plan. And so he got two or three people, among which was myself, and we prepared a document by the

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end of 1945, which was presented to General de Gaulle. He approved it without changing a word. Incidentally, this document is published in the third volume of his memoirs as an annex. So it was decided that a plan should be made in a period of six months; well, it took practically one year. First, we had to assess what the real situation was, which took about three months. It showed what we probably knew beforehand, that we should have to discuss with the United States the problems of financing a large investment program. Leon Blum was the head of the mission but Monnet had to do the job of negotiating. A financial agreement was arrived at with the United States. This was before the Marshall plan, and it was purely on a normal financial basis.

WILSON: A loan?

HIRSCH: A loan, with interest and with repayment; a loan by the United States Treasury and also a loan by the International Bank. In the meantime

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we pursued with the plan.

WILSON: There had been just after the war some nationalization of certain industries in France.

HIRSCH: Yes.

WILSON: And some talk about the possibility of further nationalization. Did you discover that Americans were opposed to this as a principle? Did this influence...

HIRSCH: No, they didn't interfere whatsoever.

WILSON: In some ways, later, there came to be an identification between nationalization and socialism in the American view, but this had no effect at that time?

HIRSCH: Oh, no. There was no interference by the Americans.

WILSON: The planning, if I'm correct, stressed investment, particularly in heavy industry.

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HIRSCH: Well, the plan gave priority to energy, steel, transport, cement, and agricultural implements.

WILSON: Was there any thinking, at the time the plan was being devised, about the possibility or desirability of expanding this program into certain areas of the international sphere? Any talk at all about doing something similar to what occurred with the Schuman plan?

HIRSCH: No, not at that time. When the Marshall plan was proposed, various European countries got together. Another idea then was the OEEC. I was concerned with it at the beginning, not when the organization was set up, but before it was set up. We had talks with other countries; especially, I had talks with the British. The British representative was later an ambassador to your country.

WILSON: [Oliver] Franks?

HIRSCH: Franks, yes. Well, I had a few meetings to discuss and see what could be set up. Especially,

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we were concerned with power supply. But it didn't mature. I think one of the reasons was that although the Americans were pressing the Europeans to work together, they decided that allocations under the Marshall plan should be set up country by country.

WILSON: Why was that decided; do you know?

HIRSCH: It was decided on the American side.

WILSON: Yes.

HIRSCH: They wanted to make a case for each country and present each case to Congress. So, really there was no joint plan; it was the United States dealing with individual countries.

WILSON: Would it be fair to suggest that there was awareness on the British side that they would always be well treated?

HIRSCH: Oh, I don't think the British had anything to do with that kind of situation. It was on the

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American side. The decision was made that there should be allocations country by country. There were discussions inside the OEEC, but really that had no impact on this.

WILSON: What I was trying to suggest was that, as you indicated, you had some talks about cooperation with the British, and...

HIRSCH: But in my talks with Franks, they were quite willing to do something. But the decision was with the Americans. Although they had insisted that the Europeans should work together, they made the decision that the allocation of funds should be made country by country.

WILSON: I see.

HIRSCH: I would say that there were two mistakes on the American side, if I may say so. First, there was the one just mentioned. The second one was the decision that allocations should be made year by year.

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WILSON: That I know something about, because of the role of Congress.

HIRSCH: But I think that the question was whether the plan should be on a "hand to mouth" basis, or on the basis of a program over, say, five years.

WILSON: Yes, but certainly the United States, or American representatives, talked from the beginning about a four-year program.

HIRSCH: Yes.

WILSON: And continued to emphasize this. Yet some of the persons with whom I've talked have taken a different position, and have stated that it was a year-to-year thing. These people were, of course, convinced that the OEEC had contributed significantly to European integration...

HIRSCH: It had contributed, but not on the industrial basis of working together. It had contributed through the payments agreements. I think that is

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the most important result of OEEC.

WILSON: These people have suggested that it was perhaps the "carrot and stick" approach. That is, knowing that there would be a deadline each year, and knowing that Americans were going to say, "How far have you gone in integrating Europe?" Then the European countries would make progress, because the yearly appropriation was hanging over their heads. You apparently don't think that really had an effect.

I can see the difficulties. Was there an effort on the part of the American administration here, the ECA people, to try to explain the difficulties caused by congressional control, and did they try to get across the problems which this caused them?

HIRSCH: I must say that the ECA people here in France -- I don't know about the other countries -- understood quite well what the situation was. They did their best to prevent any interference that would hold back the program. Some American Congressmen felt

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that the people here in France didn't realize that Marshall plan aid was a gift from the American people, and so they wanted a poster put on each thing, saying this is a gift from your American friends. That would have been resented here. For instance, the landing of these things in Le Havre, which had been bombed by the Americans -- they had to do it, but all the same. To be bombed by the Americans and then to be told, "This is a gift from your American friends," would have been resented. The ECA people understood, and they tried to avoid doing some of the things that American Congressmen insisted on. They also understood the meaning of the French plan so that although, as you know, each allocation of funds was to be pinpointed on different programs, in practice they allocated it on the basis of the plan as a whole, which was something that again helped us.

WILSON: When the European Recovery Program was created,

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did the Monnet plan administration take over the functions of accepting and allocating the funds. In some countries of Europe a separate, new Marshall plan agency was set up, sometimes in the ministry of economic affairs.

HIRSCH: In agreement with ECA, Marshall funds were allocated according to the Monnet plan with the understanding of the ECA people and I would think especially of the Treasury representative...

WILSON: [William M.] Tomlinson?

HIRSCH: Tomlinson. He played a very important role in that.

WILSON: You had a number of representatives here from the American side. You had the ECA country mission; you had the office of the special representative located in Paris; you had the Embassy; you had Treasury representatives. How well were they coordinated; how well did they coordinate?

HIRSCH: Well, I must say that it worked quite well.

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WILSON: Some of the people with whom I've talked suggested that for the first two years a basic reason why the program worked so well was that there were really excellent people who came over. They were amateurs in a way; that is, they were drawn not from the Government -- the bureaucracy -- but from academic lines, and from the financial and business communities.

HIRSCH: There were two people of importance. There was the head of the mission, who was after that Ambassador to France. I don't just get his name.

WILSON: [David] Bruce?

HIRSCH: Bruce and Tomlinson; they were really the important ones.

WILSON: But what role did the Embassy play, if I may ask, between the United States and ECA?

HIRSCH: Well, when Bruce was Ambassador, he understood our problems and was of great help in explaining them to Congress in order to get the money appropriated.

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WILSON: How much should one give emphasis to the technical side -- the achievements of what might be called the experts, technicians, as opposed to people such as Averell Harriman and this sort of political appointee? Say, if you're weighing the contribution; Harriman and [Milton] Katz and other people were in the limelight of course, but...

HIRSCH: Well, I would say that the efficiency was on the side of the leaders and the politicians and not on the technicians. There was a political will; there was an ideal; there was a purpose, which on the technical level was very often lost sight of. They were lost in details and technicalities. So in order to get the things through, we had to go to the highest level, and forget about these minor technical problems.

WILSON: French representatives were, I think it's fair to say, in the forefront of those who wished for a greater role for the OEEC, and for more

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international involvement. How do you explain this?, Is it a particular awareness on the part of French representatives that that sort of activity was necessary; is it one of the effects of the war?

HIRSCH. I think much of it comes from the fact that the French thinking is universal thinking and not an insular thinking like the British thinking.

WILSON: Well, there had been examples of that previously as well. There were efforts to try to remove the British from their insularity, not very successful. Were some British representatives, those who you dealt with in Paris, more internationalist-minded once they got away from London?

HIRSCH: No.

WILSON: They were still tied to -- that's one of the baffling...

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HIRSCH: Well, before the Schuman plan -- it was a relationship with Germany -- we tried to make something with the British. That was in '49, by the end of '49. Monnet saw first the French Government and then spoke to Stafford Cripps, who was the Chancellor of the Exchequer at that

time, and said they should try to see if they could form an example of cooperation on which they could base something broader in Europe. Stafford Cripps said he was ready to try. He designated Sir Edwin Plowden, who was Planning Officer of the Labor Government. They didn't have a plan like the French plan, but they had a planning officer. We met, three on the British side and three on the French side, and we spent a week without anything being official, at Monnet's place in the country. We came out with some proposals. It was agreed that we should submit them to our Governments. On the French side they were received favorably. But after a few weeks we got the answer that the British had turned them down.

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It was for that reason that Monnet turned to the idea that resulted in the Schuman plan.

WILSON: Did the British provide you with an explanation of this?

HIRSCH: Yes, the explanation was that we had been occupied, and they had not; that they were still a great country; and they could do without committing themselves to the plan. They gave the same reason for not participating in the Schuman plan. That was in 1950; I went there with Jean Monnet, who tried to persuade the British to come in. They discussed that in the Cabinet and decided not to take part. What is very amusing is that on the 20th anniversary of the Schuman plan, on the 9th of May this year, I was invited to London, and Her Majesty's Government gave a dinner in honor of that anniversary.

WILSON: It might better have been three or four days later when the rejection came. What was your impression of the position of the United States

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in trying to get the British to take part? The United States was in favor of the Schuman plan.

HIRSCH: Oh, yes . Oh, yes .

WILSON: One of the unresolved issues is whether there was what has since been called "a special relationship between the United States and Great Britain," which implied that Americans would not press the British to do things which the United States would insist other nations live up to. Is that a fair

HIRSCH: Well, at the time of the Schuman plan no pressure whatsoever was exerted by the Americans on any country. You know, this was not prepared with the knowledge of anybody outside. Dean Acheson was informed by Schuman just the morning before his declaration. He knew nothing about it before. And as soon as there was this declaration I got a visit from Tomlinson who told me how happy he was. He said, "I'm all the more happy because we have not been consulted -- because you took the

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initiative without consulting us."

WILSON: So you would reject entirely the latter day theses that there was some kind of a plot to obtain economic control of Europe and that the Marshall plan was a means of getting American investment in Europe?

HIRSCH: I totally disagree with that view, because we required this assistance. If it had been on the basis of loans, we would have been obliged to accept it because we had no choice. But being on the basis of gift, it meant exactly the contrary.

WILSON: I think that that's a fair statement. I'm baffled by the views of those who argue or take this other case. I saw a man named [E. H.] van der Beugel of the Netherlands. He said he thinks this is a part of a masochism of Americans in the last few years -- the argument that plays down any possible good the country might have done in Europe. There may be something to that. It's a

[28]
very popular idea.

HIRSCH: In America?

WILSON: Yes.

HIRSCH: Is it?

WILSON: Oh, yes. Well, this has been very helpful. Did you ever meet President Truman?

HIRSCH: No.

WILSON: Did you meet [Paul] Hoffman?

HIRSCH: I met Hoffman, yes. I met Eisenhower.

WILSON: Oh, yes.

HIRSCH: But never Truman. But I had great admiration for Truman.

WILSON: On what grounds, the Marshall plan or the support for that?

HIRSCH: Not only that. His attitude in Korea; his attitude towards Douglas MacArthur. I think he

[29]
was one of your great Presidents. It's very funny for this type of man, but it's a fact.

WILSON: What was your reaction at the time if you can recall?

HIRSCH: Where I have my doubts is on the bomb. On that I don't know.

WILSON: Nor do many people.

HIRSCH: There I have my doubts. I don't know if it was right or wrong. It's very difficult to say.

WILSON: What was the impression of the French about the election of 1948? Was it thought of as a great achievement, coming from behind in that way? I suppose the question I'm asking is that he had been identified with this program of assistance, and was there a belief that it would continue if there was a Republican President?

HIRSCH: Well, I can't say, technically. But my impression is that Dewey was not considered as a great figure.

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WILSON: But the person who would have been Secretary of State, and then did become Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, was going through Europe about every week at that time - it seemed to be. Did you ever meet him?

HIRSCH: No. Jean Monnet knew him quite well. Probably Dean Acheson was a better Secretary of State than was Dulles.

WILSON: Yes, I'm writing a history of the Democratic administration, and so I would...

HIRSCH: But it's just a speculative question; it's not based on facts you see.

WILSON: Yes, Well, there is always a benefit in flexibility, and I think that's more the difference between the two there.

HIRSCH: Yes.

WILSON: This has been very interesting. I appreciate it.

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