

Oral History Interview
with
ERIK VON SYDOW

Permanent Delegate and Head of the Swedish Mission to the Organization for European
Economic Cooperation, 1949-1953.

Geneva, Switzerland
July 7, 1970
by Theodore A. Wilson, University of Kansas

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WILSON: Well, I very much appreciate your giving me some time to talk about this, and in such pleasant surroundings.

VON SYDOW: Well, isn't it nice, these quarters here? And for me it's practical. I have EFTA [European Free Trade Association] in the house, so I go down to the meetings, and can go to the Secretariat and get documents and information and so on. And we can walk over to the Palais des Nations. It's all very practical, I should say.

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WILSON: Since I cannot expect, or really prepare myself, to have you go over day by day your service in those years, my procedure has been to ask for any impressions which you have, and to focus at the beginning on your personal service. I will ask you to describe the role that you

played, how you happened to be appointed, and perhaps then that will suggest questions, and you can go from there.

If I may refer to my notes, you were head of a division in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the period when the Marshall plan was enunciated.

VON SYDOW: Yes.

WILSON: Might you describe your activities in that role?

VON SYDOW: Do you mind if I try to give a general background to it, and then comment on what you want?

WILSON: No, not at all.

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VON SYDOW: Well, Mr. Wilson, I would like to say that I certainly very much welcome this opportunity to have a chance to talk about good old days in OEEC. You see, I think it had and it still has an enormous importance -- that American initiative of President Truman and Secretary of State George Marshall. Here in Europe we criticize, as you know, the United States, which is sort of inevitable when it's not only a big power, but a superpower. The criticism is either that you intervene too forcefully and try to dictate, as it were, and to intervene in their internal affairs, and what have you. Or, it's very likely the same people might say that you are too isolationist; you want to withdraw within your own walls so to speak.

I think here we really have an initiative that was welcomed very much in Europe, because it had broad perspectives and it was, after all, quite different, if you compare it to what happened after the First World War. Even now, there were of course people who felt that maybe one should

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split Germany into provinces and all that, and make them pay for what they have ruined all over Europe. But a broader view prevailed as we know, and the Marshall plan is the best example of it, I feel. It also is important because at a very early stage after the war -- and feelings ran high then so we wouldn't have blamed governments if they had taken a different attitude -- they brought Western Germany into cooperation as an equal member of OEEC.

So, it makes me really very happy to talk a little about it. It also was an open proposition. If the Eastern countries had chosen to cooperate, and be members, I don't know what the results would have been. It may have speeded what we now see as detente in Europe, but it could easily have been the other way around, because we had the cold war. Anyway, we know what happened to Czechoslovakia and, perhaps on balance, it was better to start in Western Europe, with this reconstruction work.

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Well, so much for the background as I see it. You also asked about my own role. I was head of a division in the Department of Commercial and Economic Affairs in the Foreign Ministry,

Department of State. I was in charge of lots of negotiations with Eastern bloc countries. In a way, in retrospect, they were relatively simple negotiations because there were two parties, and it was hard bargaining, but you know also the odds and you know what you could give, and so on. I don't know why I was picked for this post as head of our mission there. I was rather young at the time, and I believe that the late Dag Hammarskjöld was instrumental in making this appointment. He was, of course, the one who had been the Swedish chief delegate in the preparatory work which led to the convention in '47, the OEEC convention. I'm not ashamed to say that I was rather nervous when I got this news about being appointed, because, first of all, multilateral negotiations was a rather new

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thing and it certainly was new to me. It is quite a different proposition than to deal with one country where you know exactly, more or less, what you can do and not do, and the background and so on. Here, you have to take into account so many different things. And you must keep in contact with the Secretariat and with all the major interested countries, and see to it that the Swedish point of view would, at least to some extent, prevail in this connection.

Anyway, Dag Hammarskjöld had not had a real office in Paris. He had done it as sort of a one-man show -- this preparatory work. After all, he had authority and he didn't need to write long reports and get authorization from his government. He personified the government. He became eventually, as you know, Under Secretary of State and a bit later Cabinet minister in charge of European cooperation. Incidentally, I think unless he had been in on the Marshall plan, he wouldn't have been as internationally known as to

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qualify for becoming Secretary General of the United Nations. So that was sort of what you in America would say "a spillover effect of the Marshall plan," and a very happy one, although unfortunately with a tragic end.

I should have said, and when you edit it, you could perhaps say that as the general consideration (I come to think of it now), not only was it good that you gave all European states an incentive to cooperate, but you also saw the necessity of including the North American continent, that is, the United States of America and Canada. We have exactly the same problem now with the European Security Conference, where Sweden has very much supported the idea that a conference be held, but on the condition that the United States and Canada be members.

I said that there wasn't any established office, that Mr. Hammarskjöld did it all by himself. I started out by having a small room, or two rooms, perhaps, with a secretary and a

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young man as an assistant. That was all; it was in the quarters of the Swedish Embassy. And we were, I'm afraid, adopted by the Ambassador and his staff, as poor relatives, sort of. No one at that time realized what this meant. They felt this was a new very curious international cooperation: Will it really achieve anything? Is it useful, since we have the ordinary normal diplomatic channels, that can handle matters? What sort of thing is this? It took some time for them to realize it.

As for the OEEC itself, we also had our council meetings in very small and modest quarters. I think we had the French tobacco monopoly's rooms on the Seine. Later on we moved to the Chateau de la Muette, which was splendid, and very nice.

Sweden cooperated, as you know, in a special way. We were not in actual need of dollars, of support for reconstruction, because after all we had managed to remain neutral. That wasn't

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actually popular immediately after the war, but was later on recognized as being in the interest of everyone. So we had this famous system of drawing rights, whereby we could, by this medium, give the opportunity for other OEEC countries to purchase, in Sweden, important machinery and so on for reconstruction of their countries. There certainly was a spirit as in the beginning, early beginning, of the American republic, I would say. In the OEEC, really, everyone worked with a purpose and was keen to contribute. Frankly, I was a little afraid, originally and for some time afterward, that it would develop more or less exclusively into a division-of-aid operation, whereby everybody would be for himself and would make a case, and try to grab as much as they could of available Marshall plan funds. Well, to some extent this is, of course, true. I wouldn't say that the countries in Europe are particularly altruistic, but incidentally there again, one always expects the United States, because it's

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a world power, to have such rather dark designs.

Few realized this, but I know -- I have lived in America, and I was in Japan when MacArthur and his troops came -- and so I realize that there very often is an ingredient of idealism in American policy. I wouldn't say that you don't look after your national interests; of course, you should, but there is also an element of idealism looking towards the broad vision.

The division-of-aid sessions I remember well. We were sitting late at night at the Chateau de la Muette and, of course, there was a lot of competing, but still one managed to solve it in a sensible and dignified way. And parallel with this -- this wasn't a purpose in itself, although it was very important for the reconstruction -- one started to map out a policy for liberalization of trade, and payments. One examined how one could increase the liberalization, and abolish quotas and all that. That was a very difficult proposition because once you have established a position, because of war

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or whatever it is, it's very difficult to get out of it. Well, one did. And on trade, one made large progress, I think. Equally on payments, I'm less of an expert there, but I did take part in all the sessions that were the forerunner of convertibility. We had what became known as the EPU, the European Payments Union, which provided a measure of convertibility. I remember the head of the Belgium National Bank, [Hubert-Jacques-Nicolas] Ansiaux, who was in the chair.

WILSON: I've met him, yes.

VON SYDOW: He was, of course, quite an expert. One took small steps, but nevertheless, one worked and advanced in the right direction, too. I've been trying to recall a little of the atmosphere and the work, and I was struck how important it is, and that's still the case in international cooperation; that is, how much personalities count. I think there was a very good setup in

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the OEEC. On the American side, obviously, you had really somebody of stature in Averell Harriman. I remember him together with Dag Hammarskjöld; I visited Harriman at his splendid office near the Place de la Concorde. It was given to the American Government by the Navy Ministry of France, I believe. That was, of course, important to have -- not only a good plan by your President and Mr. Marshall, but also to have on the spot somebody who really could symbolize the work for it in the spirit that Washington intended, which was the case here. Also his successors were all eminent. Some were more on the political side, some were on the foreign policy side, and some were more purely economists, but they all were prominent and quite outstanding.

Perhaps I should not pass judgments -- it is so long ago. The other countries, I feel, also had very good representatives. The British were represented by Sir Edmund Hall-Patch, whom Dag Hammarskjöld always referred to as "HP." Of

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course Dag made it a habit to come down before ministerial meetings or more important council sessions and give more political importance and strength to our views and also to the OEEC views, than I could of course have done. And Hall-Patch was an excellent representative.

Incidentally, here is another item of political importance. Another side effect of the Marshall plan, I think, is that it contributed a lot to making Britain, the United Kingdom, more conscious of being a European power, and not exclusively to play on her special relationship with the United States, and of course with the Commonwealth, which at that time seemed probably to London more natural. It was also a sort of preparation for the integration of Europe and for what was to come later.

WILSON: Several people have suggested to me that the American representatives, the ECA people in Europe, did take this approach, that Great Britain must take a more active role in Europe, but that the

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Embassy, the political side of the American Government relied more on this "special relationship" idea. Do you recall that that was the case?

VON SYDOW: I wouldn't imagine that those politically responsible in Washington would want Britain to have any exclusive connections. Very close connections, yes, because they are the two great English-speaking democracies, but I'm quite certain that they would have sense enough to realize that it's equally important that Britain should play her role in Europe. But there are so many varying views in an enormous administration like America. I think what would prevail

was that while safeguarding their close contacts, it would be important to give consideration also to the French as they were sometimes doubtful of American intentions.

Now, Hall-Patch was a very good man and he was, I would say, already European. I suspect

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he was a little too much so to the liking of London and the Foreign Office, who were interested in this as an experience, but perhaps still not ready to get entirely European. So we had the feeling in Paris at the time that they looked at that with some criticism. His deputy and eventually successor came from the Board of Trade, and he said, I suppose, roughly the same things, but coming from the Board of Trade, Ellis-Rees -- who later became Sir Hugh Ellis-Rees -- was not suspected to have any such dark political designs.

Well, then the French also had excellent representatives from, I should say, the semi-ministerial level. They had [Herve] Alphand as the Secretary General, from Quai d'Orsay, who later became Ambassador in Washington. They had as permanent delegate, somebody who became a key person under de Gaulle in the person of Olivier Wormser who was head, for many years afterwards, of the Economic and Commercial Division of the Quai d'Orsay and Ambassador to

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Moscow. So that goes to prove what capable people you had there.

Italy had a man, whom I liked very much, and who has now retired, Attilio Cattani. He also became Secretary General of the Italian Foreign Ministry. He acted for a long time as chairman of the executive committee, and did an excellent job there. He had lots of political sense and feeling, which is very useful. My Nordic colleagues were also outstanding. The Dane was quite unafraid of speaking his mind, perhaps in the process occasionally hurting some feelings; but a very capable man too. The Norwegian ambassador was also very good. He later became Ambassador to London. Oh, yes, I know that you're going to see my Swiss colleague of that period, Gerard Bauer, who was also in advance of his time, because he was much more European than anybody in Switzerland I would say. He was an excellent speaker; he could fascinate his audience in an elegant way. He had quite

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a high standing in Berne, I think, so there again it was personality that counted.

We have sort of gone around the table with the member countries. On the German side there was a very nice and pleasant man, who nobody could ever complain about having any Nazi tendencies. He was Dr. Karl Werkmeister. He was really very nice and pleasant, an agreeable man.

An essential thing was, of course, the Secretary-General of the organization, who was, as you know, Robert Marjolin. He was an outstanding economist, had political flair, spoke English as well as French, and always referred to the French as "my French friends." He was a genuine international civil servant, as good as anybody you could find. Dag Hammarskjold held him in high esteem, too.

We still haven't reached the culmination of this, but I think we did a good job during what I always called "the pioneer years" of the OEEC. It involved a good mixture of national

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sovereign governments cooperating and working with an international secretariat. It wasn't supranational, but it was international in a very good sense. That goes for many other organizations here in Geneva, too, where the Secretary-General does play a role and can act as a go-between. I may be prejudiced, but I always felt that Dag Hammarskjold did a wonderful job at the United Nations. It's a terribly difficult thing, because there, everything, every word is political. It is obviously much more difficult to be the Secretary-General there, than of an economic organization.

What have I forgotten? You better ask me some questions now, because I talked too long.

WILSON: Well, what you've said has been very interesting and it has raised several questions. If I may go back to the early days, one of the questions which I've been most interested in asking persons from Sweden, because of your situation -- the opportunity you had to approach participation in an

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organization such as this in an objective manner -- is what were the chances of using the then-existing Economic Commission for Europe? There was some talk in the United States about using that U.N. organization as a means for funneling aid to Europe. There was of course, Gunnar Myrdal, who took a very active role for a time in the ECE. Most people have told me, "Well, it was because the Russians and the Eastern bloc were there, and they wouldn't cooperate; so we just had to try something new." Was that the Swedish view at the time?

VON SYDOW: Well, frankly, perhaps I wasn't informed about what the Swedish Government's consideration might have been at that time, because that wasn't my job. I came in a few years later. But I would say that, ideally, one should start having all of Europe in. Yet, considering the political climate after the war, I think it would have been, unfortunately, impossible to

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start with sort of the end product, which is, after all, what we are still working towards, but have not quite achieved. ECE is an excellent meeting place, and a forum between the market-economy countries and the Socialist economies. But you have there already a specific point, that after the war it was political considerations that made it difficult. Especially important, at that time the differences of views on economies, between the Eastern countries and the Western, were very radical. It still is a basic difference, but they are approaching each other somewhat. The West has gone in for planning much more, even in the United States, and the Eastern countries are cautiously introducing some market-economy considerations into their system. It is impossible, secondly, for purely economic reasons. Those are the two reasons in my view, but this isn't necessarily the official Swedish view. However, I would suspect that they would agree with me.

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WILSON: That's very interesting.

VON SYDOW: There are still some problems left in ECE as you know, of a political nature. The curious thing is that meanwhile one has solved so many problems bilaterally in trade relations, so the ECE is more a forum, well, to improve trade generally. But it's a good meeting ground and it's a good place for the Soviets and other Eastern European countries to send very high level representatives. In the technical committees, timber, wood, iron, steel, coal and so on, it's very useful to talk about market conditions and get to know each other, and so on.

Now we, of course, hope -- and I think that is shared by very many, for instance, the French -- that an enlarged European economic community will not mean that Western Europe takes a stiffer attitude either towards the Western world in the form of the United States and Canada, or to the developing countries, or indeed to the Eastern countries. One mustn't forget about

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this, otherwise you tend to get a closed society there.

So I suppose it was the correct way. It wasn't a matter of dispute in Sweden, either in public or in Government circles, as I recall it, to join the Marshall plan, or that it should be done in another way.

WILSON: You were particularly interested in trade questions. Was there any difficulty -- and I'm speaking of the American approach now -- between what had been this global push for trade liberalization in the Cordell Hull-State Department approach, and what had to be done in the regional approach which did develop in Europe? I think the documents show the ECA came to champion the latter. Was there a conflict at all, while there was a shift? It's been said to me that the British always used the American, the GATT approach, as a means of slowing down trade liberalization. Was there anything to that?

VON SYDOW: There, again, it's another aspect of the

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same problem. One should have, of course, a global approach and a global outlook, but when you attack it you can't solve it in one big stroke. You have to start at the beginning. That's being done now again, but on an entirely different level. After the war it was in response to the level of destruction and disorganization of the economy. It's being done again, now, but on a much higher level. Now it's a matter of economic, monetary, financial and all sorts of real integration. Yet you can't do that worldwide at the onset. The important thing, as I said, is to keep in mind that in attacking the problem that way you don't lose sight of the ultimate objective which is, of course, global. That is a very strong Swedish policy view -- and mine too. Otherwise, we would create differences of position with the United States, and you can't do that because Europe needs the United States politically, too.

WILSON: You did not have the feeling that the American

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representatives here in Europe had perhaps lost sight of the global considerations?

VON SYDOW: At that time.

WILSON: At that time. Some people have suggested that Americans ironically became too Europe-centered, because of the aid programs and because of their involvement, and they forgot about, in a way, for a time the rest of the world.

VON SYDOW: Do not forget that had receded a little in the background, because obviously you had to concentrate your efforts. The urgent thing was too that there shouldn't be social upheaval in Europe, with perhaps very serious political troubles following it. So you had to attack this, and if you do that, conscientiously, it's difficult to be as active globally. But I wouldn't criticize you for that. It was sort of natural.

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We never felt in Sweden -- I feel personally -- that the strict policy of strategic embargo had much sense. We felt, and Dag Hammarskjöld I remember felt, that you should only do such a thing if you expect a war to start again shortly. Otherwise, the only result is that you encourage the other side to develop its own industries. There I have a criticism, because that was when you were against the global approach and gave the Soviet Union, and others a line of attack. All countries have their own internal problems, and you were sort of sad about having been allies in the war and awhile afterwards, but then you sort of reacted rather violently in this way.

WILSON: Yes.

VON SYDOW: So that I think was a problem.

WILSON: You thought at the time, though, or you recognized that it was a kind of obsession or psychological reaction?

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VON SYDOW: Yes.

WILSON: I, as an historian, am trying to write this from mid-Atlantic somewhere, not from the point of view of an American. There has been some suggestion that this issue of East-West trade, which was so important, is an example of the United States trying to tie Europe to itself, or some Americans, at least, trying to tie Europe to itself. The argument goes this way: East-West trade had been so important before the war and there had been the expectation that it would revive after the war, and that it did not revive in part because of policies adopted by the United States.

VON SYDOW: I'm afraid that is true to some extent. You certainly were trying to influence us. You're right. But strongly influencing European countries to follow your lead in not having trade with the Eastern bloc was a mistake, I think, because it wouldn't serve the economic purpose, and certainly not the political

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purpose, unless you wanted really to have the world divided. I'm sure you didn't want that, really. You did want to prevent the countries from coming over to the wrong camp -- that I can see -- but this way, I don't think, was a good one. And you attached conditions to selling certain equipment to European countries, as you know, and you followed it up very closely. I think it was an unfortunate policy. I can respect it as such, but I don't think it was a good policy, or a wise one.

There was another and more dangerous organization, a special coordinating committee to deal with. We always refused to be members of that.

WILSON: COCOM [Coordinating Committee].

VON SYDOW: Now you have modified the committee to such an extent that it would be much more simple to abolish it altogether.

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WILSON: Yes.

Well, if I might just pursue that one moment. Did you have any feeling that the ECA people with whom you dealt were less...

VON SYDOW: ECA?

WILSON: The Americans here in Europe, the Economic Cooperation Administration.

VON SYDOW: Oh, yes.

WILSON: Were they somewhat embarrassed about this, or did they pursue this policy of holding down East-West trade sincerely? There has been some suggestion that this was a push on the part of the United States Congress, and that it represented domestic political considerations more than anything else, and that people here were more realistic about what had to be done.

VON SYDOW: I think that American officials that I met felt very loyal to their government, but we felt that they carried out their instructions

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much too energetically, sometimes; they could have modified it and adapted it to circumstances occasionally.

But happily, this was not an issue in the OEEC, as far as I can remember. I don't have any memories of that. I have much more memories from Stockholm and from Washington about this difficult issue. And it didn't spoil cooperation in the OEEC.

WILSON: I suppose the most famous case was the Danish tanker. That is the one that received the most attention, and that was directed through Harriman, here, but not through the OEEC directly.

VON SYDOW: What officials in Paris at the time thought about it I don't really know.

WILSON: In general, what was your attitude toward the United States Congress? There were several conditions imposed on aid which might have caused difficulty for Sweden. One was what

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eventually became the Battle Act -- this business of restricting East-West trade; and there was this business of 50 percent of the aid must be brought in American shipping, the "Buy American" act. Did you respond forcefully to these?

VON SYDOW: Yes. We could see that, looked at from the American point of view, you were the donor; you were helping to reconstruct, and you should have some benefits inasmuch as you could use that opportunity for shipping it on American ships and so on. But I wouldn't go much further than that, because otherwise we certainly objected and continued to object strongly to such measures because we felt it was not useful. And it has been proven that it couldn't be carried out in the long run. Normal economic factors should prevail after all. Norway and Sweden for instance were shipping nations well-equipped for it. Not being any sort of low-salary country at all, particularly not Sweden, if we can do that

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more economically, why not leave it to us to some extent. There's always this strategic argument, which I accept. Apart from the strategic argument I don't think that it's a very sound proposition. Understandable, yes, but not sound or acceptable to us. And we did complain about it, very much.

WILSON: The general question, of course, is this: Did you find that the Americans had some anti-socialist bias? That is, in giving aid and in placing restrictions on aid, did they tend to confuse socialism, as a means of organizing economic activity, with communism, or with some sort of an un-American activity? Was that an important issue?

VON SYDOW: Well, I can say frankly that very likely there was a lot of genuine anti-Communist feelings, although in Sweden we felt you exaggerated it largely. It was probably not wise, looked at politically, to sharpen the differences between

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East and West. But again it didn't become an issue in the reconstruction of Europe as carried out within the OEEC. American officials refrained from burdening the already-difficult economic issues here, by this. I would suspect that in the back of their mind they said, "Well, this is very good that we rebuild Europe, because it will automatically be a war against communism." Well, you should combat misery, because it leads to Communist or other sorts of social upheavals. It's inevitable.

WILSON: You didn't have pressure to have the little aid that was given to Sweden used specifically by private industry? And there was this business of offshore procurement at a later stage by private industry rather than by a public sector. Was it an issue?

VON SYDOW: Well, in Sweden, as you know, more than 90 percent is private industry and the rest is transportation and such things. Therefore, that

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wasn't any problem for us.

WILSON: If I may ask just one additional question. I've gotten the impression more sharply since I came to Europe -- it's been very useful in this way -- that with NATO, the United States turned its attention away from the OEEC. Also, sometime, say in 1949, this rearmament mystique, this rearmament activity, became very dominant in the American approach to Europe. Perhaps you might comment on this.

VON SYDOW: Well, I really can't judge that because if I had represented Norway, for instance, in both NATO and in OEEC, it would have been easier to see that. I don't think that I personally saw any problems caused at all. It's a little like now in Europe; we have NATO and we have the integration, and they are parallel. At some time I suppose the one attracts more interest than the other, but it was never to the extent of making cooperation in OEEC painful or difficult. But as I say, I'm not a very good judge

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of that balance.

WILSON: Was there hope at the time and perhaps even confidence at the time in the early days, '48-'49, that the OEEC would quickly develop into a supranational organization? Or was the approach that you described earlier, that is, that this is international, and it could do limited things but do them well? Was that kept in mind?

VON SYDOW: After all, to reconstruct Europe was a handful, and it couldn't be done really on a purely international scale. You had to engage the responsibilities of national governments, although later on I think it had the effect of facilitating progress towards greater integration and something approaching supranationalism too. At the time, we had our hands full and we felt that it was already quite an achievement if one could cooperate in this way. The French rather obviously had the same position that they hold now.

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For Sweden, the only possibility, as a neutral country, was to cooperate. Again, perhaps we should have discussed it. As a matter of theory or philosophy, or what it might lead to eventually, we did discuss, on the Swedish side, the role of an international civil servant. Dag Hammarskjöld thought a lot about it and wrote about it; that is, to what extent we can really act independently of governments. Dag Hammarskjöld had the same problem internally in Sweden when he became a Minister; that is, to what extent he would be bound by political decisions. He joined us more as a technocrat, as a specialist.

No; I can't really say that we had those visions already. On the other hand, further progress would not have been possible, from the philosophical or the practical point of view, unless OEEC had started it. That is a negative way of putting it.

WILSON: Yes, I see.

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I'm fascinated by what you've said, and what so many others have said, about the development of a class of international civil servants. And it in part does come back to this experience, at least to the crisis of this period. So many people, you and people with whom I've talked here, and elsewhere, became involved in international activities and have continued them. Would you agree that there is such a class, or a corps of people, who have both the interest of Europe as well as the interest of their own country in mind?

VON SYDOW: Yes. Class is not the best word, but there is a category of something in between politicians, and nationals, and economists, who are playing quite a role I would say. Speaking of international civil servants, the deputy to Marjolin was Guido Colonna who later became commissioner in Brussels. So you see, they learned from the OEEC cooperation and it

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certainly broadened everybody's vision. And it is still in the early stages.

WILSON: Yes.

You did not expect then, though, that you would be doing what you are doing today?

VON SYDOW: No, certainly not. Certainly not.

WILSON: Nor did many people, but it has worked out quite well.

VON SYDOW: Yes, and it was excellent training, wonderful training. I love the work here in Geneva, too, because it's rather fascinating and you can do it without a lot of unnecessary diplomatic protocol. It's really active, and it's a negotiation. You don't report about the composition of the government, or the new bill introduced at a ways and means committee, and so on. But you are active, and you try to further broaden cooperation.

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