
Europe: I Struggle, I Overcome • Wilfried Martens

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Wilfried Martens

Foreword by Angela Merkel

 Springer


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O Lord support us all the day long
Until the evening comes,
The shadows lengthen and the busy world is hushed,
The fever of life is over and our work is done.

Then Lord in your Mercy,
Give us a safe lodging,
A Holy rest and peace at the last.
Amen.

John Henry Cardinal Newman

(The Oxford Book of Prayer, 1988, p. 101)

Foreword



Wilfried Martens is one of the most distinguished politicians to come from Belgium in the last fifty years. In his long political career, he has always fought for the implementation of his goals with passion and deep conviction.

What has to be mentioned first in this context is his successful advocacy of federalism in his home country, Belgium. Already in his time as chair of the CVP youth league from 1967 to 1972, groundbreaking manifestos on Belgium's federalisation were written under his auspices. Later on, as President of the CVP, he succeeded in negotiating the Egmont Pact, whose essential elements form part of today's federal Belgian Constitution. He served as Prime Minister for more than a decade, and in this role he convinced the regions and linguistic groups of his country, which were often at odds with each other, of the necessity for cooperation and solidarity.

From early on Wilfried Martens has been a staunch European. The work of the great European statesmen Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Alcide de Gasperi was an early source of inspiration for him and continues to stimulate him until this very day. As an adviser to Leo Tindemans, Wilfried Martens dealt with fundamental questions of European integration already in the 1960s. His contributions to Europe make up a long list. Particularly important was his work for European and international Christian Democracy: he was a founding member of the European People's Party (EPP), President of its Programme Commission from 1976 to 1977, and he has been President of the EPP since 1990. He has also chaired the Christian Democrat International (CDI), the European Union of Christian Democrats (EUCD) and the

EPP Group in the European Parliament for several years each. Without his efforts, the EPP would not be Europe's strongest political force today.

Wilfried Martens' unflagging commitment as a Christian Democrat, as a Fleming and a Belgian, as well as a staunch European, is rooted in his constant effort to live out Christian values and translate them into politics. He himself concludes that his whole life and his entire political career actually consist in the attempt to bring people together and reconcile them in the spirit of Christian Democracy.

Although Wilfried Martens modestly asks readers to judge for themselves whether he has been successful in this, I would like to pre-empt them – and him – and say already at this point: Yes, dear Wilfried, you have succeeded, and for this you deserve our gratitude.

Dr. Angela Merkel,
Chancellor of Germany, President of the CDU

Acknowledgements



The book at hand is an updated version of my autobiography, with an emphasis on my engagement in European integration. In addition to new content, there is much that has been excerpted and translated from earlier versions of my autobiography, namely *De memoires: Luctor et emergo* (Tielt, 2006) and *Mémoires pour mon pays* (Bruxelles, 2006). I would like to thank the publishers, Lannoo and Editions Racine, respectively, for their kind permission.

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Prologue



I was born on a small farm in Flanders four years before the outbreak of the Second World War. There was nothing special about my background to suggest that I would ever play a role of any significance. But historians have shown that seminal movements often have their origins among the peasantry. Indeed, it is said that my country has long been ruled by people from the countryside. If that is true, then I am one of them. I grew up in a poor, rather old-fashioned world. The history of my family is the story of those ‘little people’ so typical of Flanders. My forebears worked as farm labourers or in cottage industries on piece wages, living a life of poverty. An exception to this was my oldest known ancestor, Jacob Martens, who was a bailiff in his commune from 1602 to 1618. But most of my ancestors belonged to the working class, had many children and lived in anonymity.

The fact that I became a politician nonetheless and devoted my life to public service can be attributed to the philosophers and politicians who, after the war, laid the foundations for the European society of my youth. My own political awakening was the result of their influence. Philosophers like Jacques Maritain, Emmanuel Mounier and Paul Ricœur gave the West a new intellectual climate. They established the foundations of Europe as we now know it. This new intellectual climate brought forth politicians of exceptional stature, individuals marked by a war that had transformed Western Europe into a heap of rubble. They included Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman, Alcide de Gasperi and Jean Monnet. These philosophers and politicians remained a constant source of inspiration for me during my entire time in politics.

The philosophy of Jacques Maritain, for instance, centres on the human person. Humans should, first and foremost, become more human(e). The process of humanisation unfolds, for Maritain, according to the Christian vision, as opposed to the atheistic humanism of socialism/communism and fascism. It is only through a synthesis of two distinct yet never entirely separable orders that one can achieve an ‘integral’ humanism. Emmanuel Mounier believed there would be a renaissance, a rebirth of person and community. He strove not for the emer-

gence of a new type of person (unlike in fascist and communist ideologies), but for a restoration of the absolute value of the human person. Like Maritain's, his thinking is Christian, but he leaves room for believers of other faiths as well as for unbelievers. Mounier was an inspiration for and friend of Paul Ricœur (1913–2005), who in turn strongly influenced my political engagement. This primarily French strand of personalism had its German counterpart in the work of Max Scheler and Romano Guardini.

Christian Democratic parties, which after the Second World War replaced the confessional Catholic and Protestant parties that were strongly influenced by the churches, took their inspiration from this philosophy of personalism. Various elements of Maritain's and Mounier's philosophy constitute an integral part of Christian Democracy: the integration of the spiritual or transcendental into its vision of humanity; the role of religion, and of Christianity in particular, as the final end or goal of existence; the primacy of community over the subsidiary, decentralised state; societal pluralism; the personal and social significance of labour and private property; and so on. Moreover, Christian Democracy shares the criticisms of Western rationalistic culture, materialism and unbridled capitalism expressed by the personalist thinkers.

Luctor et emergo

My aim in this book is to record how I put this inspiration into political practice: from my early days as a student leader to my time as a Flemish radical, then as President of the Christian Democratic youth movement, party President of the Flemish Christian Democrats, Prime Minister of Belgium, President of the European People's Party and chair of its group in the European Parliament.

After twenty five years of growing prosperity and political equilibrium, even Belgium, my own country, has been going through a serious crisis now for eighteen months. In this book I want to show how complex, but also how inspiring it is to lead a country that intersects Latin and Germanic cultures. Our two Christian Democratic parties have also always been at the forefront in Belgium in finding solutions that were acceptable to both French and Flemish speakers. Unfortunately, during a hard and painful period in opposition (1999–2007) the two parties have grown apart. Among many people this has provoked a nationalistic response. The futility of this has been demonstrated in recent months for the whole world to see. It has had a profound effect on me. But I am striving to the best of my ability to bring about a new rapprochement between the Christian Democrats of the north and the south. If this were to succeed, the Belgian impasse would immediately be resolved.

I hesitated to write these memoirs. It has been an exciting but all-absorbing pursuit. Every life story is a series of successes and failures. We like to remember the successes. We tend to shut out failures. Yet the two are closely intertwined. A failure sharpens the desire for battle and many a victory has been born of setbacks. *Luctor et emergo*; I struggle and I overcome. Incidentally, this is the motto of the province of Zeeuws Vlaanderen (Zealandic Flanders), not far from my native village Sleidinge. I struggle and if necessary I go against the flow. But if political life is completely governed by pragmatic concerns and *managed*, if indifference and cynicism gain the upper hand and human solidarity disappears, then personal courage is needed in order to continue to stand firm. It takes a great deal of patience and trust to endure everything, to believe in everything, to hope for everything and to persevere in everything.

I have read too many memoirs not to realise that it is a dangerous genre. The writer can choose to dredge up memories and anecdotes, as gifted speakers sometimes do in after-dinner speeches, with the principal intention of charming the audience. Some memoirs are a kind of self-glorification; others an attempt to have the last word. While some seem to have the novel as their source of inspiration, others attach everlasting value to diary notes. My own goal in this book is to give politically aware citizens in Europe – the ‘value-added seekers’ – a personal testimony and to share my experiences of more than half a century of political life at both the national and European levels.

Is this ambition aiming too high? After all, the brain works very selectively and usually becomes more feeble as the years go by. Even though I have forgotten some things, my memory of the past is crystal clear when I am confronted with parliamentary archives or tape recordings of speeches and interviews. I then relive these events, as it were: I remember the feelings I had as I stood there on the podium and all kinds of details come into my mind, and I am taken back to the events of that period. For this intensive work I have had the assistance of a long-time observer as well as young academics who have done their theses on areas of my political activity.

This teamwork of youthful knowledge and elderly experience has many times led to heated discussions, with the principal concern being to keep as close as possible to the historical truth, insofar as it actually exists. The writing of my memoirs has in this respect been an exciting journey through my own life. By reviewing documents, pictures and sound bites, I was continually confronted with my pronouncements and opinions from years ago. Even though they may have evolved since, I have nevertheless taken care to reproduce my words and deeds from those days as accurately and as truthfully as possible.

My entire life, my entire political career, has consisted in bringing people together or reconciling them in the spirit of Christian Democracy. I leave it to the reader to decide from my life story whether I have succeeded in this. As far as I

am concerned, I can testify that I always acted according to my conscience, persistently and with a deep faith.

I dedicate these memoirs to my children Chris, Anne, Sarah, Sophie and Simon, and to my grandsons, Alexander and Lucas, as well as to all those who strive to know what political commitment can mean in the life of a man.

Brussels, 31 December 2008

Chapter I

Looking Back on My Life



I am now seventy two, and when I look back on my life, images of my youth appear very vividly before my eyes. Like many others I have come to realise how much of my life was formed during those years. My inquiring mind gathered the seeds, which later grew to maturity in my temperament and character.

I am a farmer's son. Four years before the outbreak of the Second World War, I was born in a hamlet near the country village of Sleidinge, twelve kilometers north-west of Ghent. The countryside there is flat and there are a lot of canals. The Netherlands and Zeeuws-Vlaanderen (Zealandic Flanders) are just up the road. The Westerschelde River is a five-hour walk away. Our house was halfway between Ghent and Eeklo in the middle of a triangle formed by the Leie Canal, the Ghent-Terneuzen Canal and the Leopold Canal, and I can recall vividly the country lanes from our farmhouse to the village, the colourful corn and maize fields in the summer, the white painting-like landscapes in the winter.

The Nucleus of Everything

All of us carry a little bit of our youth with us into adulthood. *You can take the boy off the farm, but you can never take the farm out of the boy.* Many of us idealise our youth, both its good and bad moments. The long walks on wooden clogs, twice a day, to the village school; rye bread and buttermilk porridge; the assault by German artillery in May 1940 and the horses gone mad, running in all directions away from the farm; stealing salted pork towards the end of the war.... These became the stories I would later tell to inquisitive journalists.

What I mainly remember is how hard life was on the farm. My father would rise at four and drive his horse and cart to the neighbouring farms to collect containers full of milk. With much effort and quite a bit of noise he unloaded the heavy containers at the dairy near our house. This noise was our alarm clock: time to get up. As a young boy I had to help feed the cows and the pigs every day, and

afterwards I headed off on foot or by bike to Mass in the village. After school and on holidays too we had to help make the mash for the animals or churn butter. We always had to go to bed early. Even during the summer, bedtime was at seven or eight in the evening. And every evening we would pray the Rosary.

All this sounds very much like a Flemish country novel. We lived our lives against the backdrop of this great synthesis, the Catholic faith. Religious belief, that great certitude, formed the nucleus of everything. Things were fine that way. Of course, my parents probably had their doubts and questions from time to time, but they had the moral strength to struggle on and even do something quite revolutionary. Despite their lack of means they gave all their children the opportunity to study. That was quite an achievement at the time. My parents also knew their own shortcomings and failings; they were not destined to be canonised as saints. But they were pious and deeply religious and lived their lives according to the strict moral principles of the Roman Catholic Church, strict to the extreme and without the slightest exception to the rule.

My father died during the war and my stepfather died only ten years later. So my mother, Virginia Estella, looked after the education of her five sons, of whom I was the eldest. My mother was a strong, active and extremely gifted woman. Unfortunately, she never had the opportunity to continue her education. Few women were allowed to do so in those days. She raised a large family all by herself: she cooked, made all the clothes for the children and also helped in the fields. Like all her sisters, my mother had worked as a young girl as a servant in the villas of wealthy families on the outskirts of Ghent. This was the same world as the one described by the Hungarian author Sándor Márai. In his *Confessions of a Haut-Bourgeois* (1934), he writes that “the servants slept in the kitchen, which was so vast and spacious it was almost like a flat. Some family houses in the countryside had as many as ten or twelve rooms. The cook and the servant had to sleep where they cooked and did the dishes” (Márai, French version, 1993, p. 64, our translation).

Being a farmer was not highly regarded those days. Most farmers were so poor they could not even afford to buy their own piece of land, although this was the most fervent desire of many. The usual practise was to rent a simple farm. My parents’ main goal in life was to buy their own farmhouse and yard. But I witnessed the deep disappointment experienced by both my father and my stepfather, who despite all their years of hard work were never able to afford to buy land.

There was little room for tenderness and affection in our farming family. I once said that my inner life was like that of a shy deer that appears only to disappear again as suddenly and as quickly into the undergrowth. My life would have been very different had I had a sister or had there been a girl in the neighbourhood. For years, I cherished an ideal image of Woman, inspired by my beautiful mother. I have the greatest admiration for mothers of large families. I am always touched when I meet them. But in the course of time I had to change my image of women. I discovered very late the world of girls and young women. I would

have become a different man had I grown up in the company of them. Gradually, I discovered that women also have shortcomings; like men, they can be lazy and messy and even untrustworthy. I met women who were as flighty as butterflies and who were very open sexually but, at the same time, were incapable of any form of tenderness.

The sexual revolution erupted in 1968. That was a time when the women's movement made great strides forward. Those were also the halcyon days of the Christian Democrat youth movement, to which I belonged; both movements left a deep impression on me and my peers. It was during these years that the stage was set for a broad, dynamic movement in which women would play an extremely active role. They fought for sexual liberation and equal rights for women and men alike. The Pill and other forms of contraception freed women from the immediate perils of intercourse, one of the great risks of the past. Making love became freer and happier. Both partners became more self-aware and equal. Many women were better off as a result.

The Patience of Job

I was married in 1962, following my studies at university. My wife and I had two children: a son, Chris, and a daughter, Anne. In 1978 our son, who was then twelve-years-old, had to have his leg amputated following a serious car accident. It took me years to come to terms with my son's severe handicap, but there was always the hope that he could live a fairly normal life. I thought at the time of the amputation that we had experienced the worst, but that was not the case.

When Chris turned twenty one he had to be treated for mental illness. It was the beginning of a long period of agony. Those who have never experienced such agony at close hand do not realise how great a trial and a tragedy it is for parents, who continually ask themselves if they are to blame. It is said that you need the energy of Prometheus and the patience of Job to live with such an illness.

My son's illness had a profound effect on my work as a politician. Initially, it was not clear what was wrong, but after a year or two it did become clear that the process was irreversible. The illness then began to weigh considerably on my work as Prime Minister. I was torn apart inside, having accepted this heavy task, but also wanting to support my son.

The wound grew deeper with the years and had serious consequences. I became less self-confident, less decisive and more vulnerable. As a young man I had never hesitated for a moment. Now I became more cautious; I began to reconsider, and reconsider again. It even went so far that I could not sleep at night. This intense pressure slowly began to recede when, in 1992, I decided to fully dedicate myself to the presidency of the European People's Party, following a period of

twelve years as Prime Minister. Slowly, I started to learn how to live with my son's illness, realising that it would never heal or go away.

However, a second tragedy was awaiting my family. Following a long and painful separation from my wife, I went to live alone in Saint-Gilles in Brussels. This was far from easy for me, as I had to overcome an enormous moral obstacle, since I came from a very Catholic background and held extremely orthodox views on marriage. It took many years before I could overcome that moral obstacle and achieve some degree of balance.

Children: The Happy Centre of Life

I got to know my new partner in 1988. That we had children together made things turn out in an even more positive sense. I was sixty when our twins Sarah and Sophie were born and sixty four when I became father to our son Simon. The children have given my life a totally different, new and positive purpose. Thanks to them, I did not fall into a deep depression.

No matter how terrible a divorce is, I had the courage to take that step. Catholics have often been accused of being hypocrites: "They do not really divorce; they do not remarry, they just have a girlfriend". Divorce seems to be an everyday occurrence nowadays. That was far from being the case some years ago. I was struck by something Mazarine Pingeot, François Mitterrand's natural daughter, once said in an interview regarding her father: "I can only guess why he never divorced. I never spoke to him about it myself. In the 1970s divorce was still very damaging to a politician's reputation, but I do not think that bothered him much".

These profound changes in my private life were not something I spoke about in public. When the twins were born, I did not feel the slightest urge to spread the news. Having children when you are sixty is life changing. You think about it a lot or, rather, you are aware that you have brought them into a world that is full of risks. I hesitated for a moment but then I found the courage to go ahead with it.

Marriage has the finality of being permanent; according to the Roman Catholic Church, it is an unbreakable sacrament. But there are situations in which a marriage ceases to exist. The other churches have recognised this. My divorce had no effect at all on my religious convictions. It has nothing to do with whether I believe in a personal God, which I certainly do. The Gospels are the source of inspiration for my political action and I read the Bible in the same way I would an exciting novel.

I do not wish to mount an apology for divorce, on the contrary. A divorce is a heavy ordeal. It is like being shipwrecked. Both partners most probably share the responsibility for the failure. The children, especially young children, are the chief

victims. Despite everything, it still remains a valuable thing to recognise the truth and to gather the courage to start again instead of continuing to live an illusion.

In the past, I used to fit the long-familiar picture of the working father. It did happen that I was so focused on my work as a politician that I did not hear what my children were saying to me. I used to try to spend time with them on weekends, when we often went to the seaside together. I agree completely with the German journalist, Sandra Kegel, who wrote that it is high time that we supported the younger generations and freed them from the pretence that they have to be perfect in their lives and in their families. Those who have children simply cannot do everything perfectly.

Children bring with them chaos, sleepless nights and total unpredictability. Children create limits for their parents but at the same time they open up horizons. Children do not only limit their parents; they focus their attention on what really matters. Perhaps they teach us to have that little spark of courage to improvise, a vital bit of fantasy that makes the adventure of family life worthwhile. Otherwise, children would no longer be at the happy centre of life – and humans would merely be living in a reservation designed to keep the species alive.

I no longer run off to meetings in the evening, and this I feel as a great liberation. I did so for thirty or forty years. I sometimes ask myself in retrospect what my life consisted of. I hardly had the time to read a book then. I felt an emptiness that continued to grow, but happily I was to fill that void later on. When I meet my former colleagues from the European Parliament and see them at work, away from home week after week and always off again on some trip, I often ask if they find any time at all to be with their children. Children form the heart and the future of society. Without children there is no hope. And He said to them, “Whoever receives this child in My name receives Me, and whoever receives Me receives Him who sent Me; for the one who is least among all of you, this is the one who is great” (Luke 9:48).

A Flemish Activist

These memories and reflections come to me when I look back, as I do now, on my youth and on my parents, and especially on my mother. To a very large extent, my upbringing shaped my attitude towards women and fatherhood. My family and private life would have been completely different had I grown up in the city. My political commitment is also deeply rooted in the place I was born.

Sleidinge, my village, was very much a closed community. Each village spoke its own dialect, which could hardly be understood by people a few villages away; this was the case for all villages in Flanders. Our use of dialect was one of the many reasons why French speakers looked down on us with some disdain. The medium

of conversation between the mayor, the notary, the parish priest and the factory owner was invariably French, both in the countryside and in the towns of Flanders. This was not surprising: because of the lack of Dutch-language universities, intellectuals were obliged to obtain their academic qualifications in French until as late as the 1930s.

From my fourteenth year, I abandoned my dialect and, along with about five fellow students, began to learn standard “educated” Dutch (Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands or ABN; literally, “standard civilised” or “educated” Dutch). The adjective “beschaafd” was later dropped and the term is now Algemeen Nederlands, Standard Dutch. Our primary example was the language spoken on the radio. Many of the secondary school teachers of the day spoke a sort of “in-between” variety and certainly did not encourage the use of ABN or Standard Dutch. On the contrary, they considered it an expression of Flemish extremism. The struggle for a pure language really excited me. It lay at the root of my political awakening.

This step towards Standard Dutch was probably one of the most fundamental decisions of my youth, both for me and also for many other young people. It was a daily battle. It demanded strength of character; you had to arm yourself constantly against exclusion. Choosing resolutely for Standard Dutch was proof that you had higher ambitions, particularly if you came from a less well-off family. Anyone who articulated every word also cherished plans to leave his or her background behind and move on. This led to alienation and even to a break with family. Initially, speakers of ABN were teased by their friends, brothers and sisters. They imitated you and if they noticed that it had no effect they left you alone.

Speakers of ABN therefore sought the company of fellow speakers. In this way a language elite was formed. You felt comfortable only when you could speak your language in another province where you would be praised for your perfect pronunciation. Those who promoted the language argued that Flemish people should speak Standard Dutch; otherwise, they would remain an inferior people and would never be able to compete with French-speaking Belgians who did speak their language well. The ABN speaker made a constant effort to refine his or her language use, and that even meant speaking like people from Holland, which irritated many. “They have gotten too big for their boots”, people would say. Do not forget we were very young students at the time and, paradoxically enough, we had to distance ourselves from our own people in order to educate them.

Through ABN circles I came into contact with many pro-Flemish people. I got to know the basic elements of what was then known as the *Vlaamse kwestie* or the “Flemish question”. Despite the fact that the Flemish were in the majority in Belgium, the French speakers called the tune. This took the form of an over-representation of French speakers in the government, the administration, the army, the law courts and the diplomatic corps. Those in industry and in the arts

also looked down with pity on anyone who insisted on speaking Dutch. French was actively promoted in and around the capital, Brussels, through social pressure and also through so-called language censuses, as a result of which more and more boroughs acquired bilingual status. We called it “the Brussels oil spill”: French-speaking people moving into the Flemish suburbs of Brussels.

Some people – and there were quite a few prominent ones among them – thought that the problem would resolve itself, that the majority on the Flemish side would manifest itself in time both in the economy and in politics. Personally, I thought that our goals were unattainable by this approach, and that it might even be dangerous. I was totally convinced that the best solution was to set up a federal state with considerable autonomy both for Flanders and for Wallonia.

The State of the Union

As a student at the Catholic University of Louvain, I soon became the leader of pro-Flemish student associations that wished to exert pressure on the government through protest marches and manifestos. The high point of all this was our struggle for a Flemish day at the 1958 World’s Fair in Brussels, which landed me on the front page of the newspapers for the first time. The Fair was the first post-war exhibition of considerable standing. The whole world was going to visit Brussels, stare in awe at the Atomium and all the other technological advances on display. But the preparation was completely in the hands of French speakers. There was a clear risk that the millions of visitors would get the wrong impression of my country. As far as we were concerned, the Fair had to make clear that we no longer lived in the Belgium of 1830 but that the country comprised two communities, each with its own character, language and culture, and both linked by a common tradition and a will to live together.

As a result of the pressure exerted by our demonstrations, the memorable Flemish Fair Day was held on Sunday, 6 July 1958. The rectors of the Flemish universities, ministers and provincial governors competed with each other for a front-row seat. During the ceremony, a small group of “Flamingants” (Flemish nationalist extremists) led by a Flemish militant, headed for the French pavilion, planning to paint over the French signs. The incident was covered in the international press, especially because the French President, René Coty, was to arrive on an official visit two days later.

For a long time, and even later in Parliament, I was accused of having thrown those paint bombs at the French pavilion, hence showing my disdain for French culture. But I had a watertight alibi: that very day I was studying for my exams in Louvain and following everything on the radio. I was not even present at the Flemish Day I had helped bring about.

At the following Yser pilgrimage, an annual day of remembrance for the Flemish who perished on the battlefields of the First World War, I was allowed as a twenty two-year-old student to address the crowd with a Flemish “state of the union” speech, as it were. I delivered the speech then with all the sharpness of my youth.

Those in power are using the World’s Fair as a pretext to propagate in the most extreme way possible French-speaking centralist forces in Brussels. We now know that Brussels will become the capital of Europe. Those in power will also use this to keep the Flemish as far removed as possible from crucial areas of power. And in truth it will be easy for them: the Flemish people do not even have the apparatus they need to assert their culture and community within the Belgian state, never mind the European institutions! As long as we do not possess our own institutions, we will be doomed to remain inferior and will ultimately disappear as a people. But once the Flemish achieve autonomy and are able to provide for the specific needs of the Flemish economy and are capable of pursuing a progressive social policy in order to achieve prosperity for the whole of the Flemish community, and promote and encourage the Dutch language and culture from above, then we will be restored as a people. Then and only then will we be able to work to build a European community without fear for our own existence.

Young Flemings! We will be the first Dutch-speaking generation to be taken up into a wider Europe. And just like other European youth, we must become highly educated, complete in every human sense and convinced representatives of our culture. But unlike the youth of other countries, we have a huge deficit to overcome. Dutch, that refined and educated spoken Dutch, is something we have not yet mastered, and we often lack the courage to use these pure spoken words in our everyday Flemish lives. In addition to this education, we also have to make a concerted effort to ensure that the struggle for Flemish emancipation succeeds. We know the consequences of this struggle: persevering in our study, sacrificing our security, severe asceticism. We have expressed it differently here but it is also the motto of the Yser Pilgrimage: “All for Flanders, Flanders for Christ”. Our work for Flanders is made less burdensome by the knowledge that we have found unity and that we can work together with youth of all opinions.

Though this speech may sound romantic and flowery now, it received a lot of attention at the time. I was elected president – as the sole candidate – of the umbrella student association for Flanders for the academic year 1958–1959. The following year, I became president of the student union at the Catholic University of Louvain. My regular contacts with Flemish Christian Democrats in Parliament, who were expressly favourable to the Flemish cause, also date from that period.

Following my studies in Louvain, I was called to the Bar in Ghent in October 1960. I was then twenty four-years-old. During my final year as a student I was elected to the leadership of the Vlaamse Volksbeweging (Flemish People's Movement), an association of independent members whose cherished ambition was to act as a pluralist pressure group for Flanders. It was then that I studied federalism, my most important source of inspiration being *Études sur le fédéralisme* by Robert R. Bowie and Carl J. Friedrich (1960). The European Commission had commissioned the work, which comprised a study and comparison of various federal systems, including those of the Federal Republic of Germany, Austria, Switzerland and the United States. *Études sur le fédéralisme* helped me focus my ideas in my search for reasonable and responsible systems in order to reform the Belgian state according to the principle of "autonomy where possible, strong central power where needed".

I soon put my ideas for a federal Belgium down on paper and presented them at the congress held by the Flemish People's Movement in Antwerp on 4 February 1962. Through the years, many have pointed to this speech as a feasible sketch of how to move from a strictly unitary state to unionist federalism. For thirty years, this notion has formed the golden thread in my political struggle as a party leader and as Prime Minister. The ultimate reward arrived only in 1993, when federalism was enshrined definitively within the Belgian Constitution. Briefly, this is what I said at the time:

The political events of the past year show that the reforms carried out to the structure of the Belgian state have become of primary importance for the country, given that the partial measures taken so far have proved to be insufficient and have only given rise to confusion. The Flemish and the Walloon communities have to acquire effective autonomy in a federal state system within their common fatherland.

Firstly, the territories of the Flemish and Walloon communities have to be separated by a language border and recognised as separate homogeneous cultural areas. The territory will form the infrastructure of the federal states of Flanders and Wallonia, as it were. If the Flemish People's Movement has been conducting a campaign for the maintenance of something that has been recognised for centuries as Flemish soil, it has not been doing so because it considers that soil as something holy but rather because that soil is needed as a foundation upon which the Flemish community can allow its own institutions to function.

The undermining of the cultural homogeneity of Flanders has to be resolutely stopped, which is why the language border has to be drawn. In a federal system, the language border will function as the border between the members of the federation. The language border will be written into the Constitution and will be part of the fundamental agreements upon which the federal state will be built.

Secondly, the Flemish and the Walloon communities should acquire their own legally recognised assemblies, governments and judiciary.

In this way, the will of the Flemish people will be heard for the very first time in such an assembly, following general and local elections based on absolute proportional representation. Each assembly will hold sovereignty over the territory it is empowered to govern and the sovereignty of each member of the federal state will be enshrined in the Constitution. The federal government shall see to it that each separate government carries out its policies according to the law.

Furthermore, the institutions of each member need to be complemented by the establishment of a social and economic council which will exercise advisory and possibly mandatory authority, whose purpose will be to involve workers, management and the self-employed more closely in economic policy.

Thirdly, the Flemish and the Walloon communities should each acquire a proportionate degree of political autonomy. The Flemish People's Movement does not foresee complete political autonomy for either Flanders or Wallonia. This would only undermine the very foundations of the federal system, which is essentially a system designed to distribute political power between the federation and each of its members. Each member should have complete cultural autonomy, that is, its own policy and legislation under effective supervision, which may or may not stem from a vote of agreement on the budget. This cultural autonomy will comprise education, in complete accordance with the language laws, culture (in all its forms), tourism, physical education and sports, radio and television. This political power is essential. In this respect, Flanders has to overcome a deficit in higher and further education and also with regard to a more rapid completion of the process of democratisation. It urgently has to change its educational programmes, which till now have been moulded according to the French mindset and which have not been adapted to the specific nature of Flemish youth.

This same necessity, which is also informed by the need to develop a separate policy on population and housing, for example, also applies to competence in public health and family life. As far as internal affairs are concerned, such matters as the running of borough and provincial councils in their totality, the structure of constituencies, borough financing and the application of language laws in all areas of governance are essentially all aspects of independent Flemish and Walloon political power.

Finally, the members should avail themselves of the broadest possible competence in matters of regional socio-economic policy, agriculture and public works.

“Give Us Weapons!”

On 8 November 1962, a few months after this speech, the first bill on language was passed in Parliament, which fixed the language border definitively. A year later a second proposal, which settled matters of language use for the capital, Brussels, was placed on the political agenda. The paper proposed that Brussels Capital Region should become officially bilingual. The region comprised the nineteen Brussels boroughs and six other Flemish boroughs bordering on the capital that would become bilingual from then on: Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Wemmel and Wezembeek-Oppem. This compromise proposal was rejected, however, by the Flemish Group of the Christian Democrats, placing Prime Minister Theo Lefèvre’s government in serious difficulty.

It was in one of these contested boroughs that I delivered a true war speech:

What we are witnessing here is a poker game by property developers. They want to sell the land to the highest bidder and that bidder is a French-speaking capitalist. But there is more at stake than that. The government wants to set up schools and services in Louvain and in the other Flemish cities that house our national institutions. We will have to go on the offensive and demand that all companies in Flanders – no matter how small they are – become Dutch-speaking. We reject out of hand any special allowances for French speakers in the Flemish boroughs. The Flemish members of Parliament should also reject the Lefèvre government’s policy and the Flemish ministers should resign.

I gave this speech on a rostrum in the open air to a crowd of pro-Flemish protesters 8,000 strong. The protesters immediately began to chant, “Resign, resign”. I continued: “If the conspiracy against Flanders does manage to succeed then we will let the Walloons and those in Brussels know that there will be a final march on Brussels, and its aim will be to overthrow unitary capitalist Belgium. We will organise that demonstration at an embarrassing moment for the parliament”. There was a resounding applause. “If your dictate should become law then, Theo (Lefèvre), there will be a revolution!”

While the protesters were cheering me on, a group of Flemish militants off to the side of the rostrum began to chant, “Give us weapons!” Though the slogan never came from my mouth I have been accused by many for a long time of having said it, even by those in Parliament. It certainly was not a slogan the organisers approved of, because when various groups of protesters also began to chant, “Give us weapons!” after an altercation with the police, one of the organisers jumped onto the rostrum and shouted, “We have a weapon! Our weapon is more effective than stones. We have the people behind us and with the people we will cast aside each politician who betrays us!”

On 2 July, two days after the demonstration, Prime Minister Theo Lefèvre handed in his resignation, which was not accepted by the King, however. This was followed by the famous conclave of prominent members of the Christian Democrats and Socialists at Val Duchesse castle. On 5 July a new compromise was reached at the historic castle. From then on, the six Flemish boroughs would form a separate administrative entity with its own constituency commissioner answerable to a new – yet to be appointed – vice-governor of Brabant, who would watch over the application of the language laws. A form of administrative bilingualism was installed in the Flemish boroughs bordering on the capital: French-language kindergarten and primary schools could be set up if at least sixteen parents should request this. No French-speaking secondary schools were allowed, however.

The new laws were passed by the Chamber and the Senate a few weeks later. Many Flemish Christian Democrat MPs said afterwards that it was with utter despair and totally against their will that they pressed the voting button on that day. It was felt to be a defeat for Flanders and provoked bitter argument and vicious reactions. I reached the conclusion then that this defeat would determine the rest of my life. During one of our debriefing sessions I stated that “action outside Parliament has proved insufficient. We can only achieve something through power, so through a large party. There is no point in our rummaging around in a nationalist opposition party. That will get us nowhere. If we were to take up the cause within the Flemish Christian Democrats, then that party would have to change. The pressure would be unbearable”.

In the course of time, about five of the leading members of the Flemish People’s Movement followed my advice and together we managed to gain a foothold for our federalist views within the largest party in Flanders. In fact, it would become apparent from this and other events that the defeat formed a pivotal moment in the story of my life.

King Baudouin

One of the other memories of my youth is of an event that occurred in 1950, which would continue to have an enormous influence on my life. I had been confined to bed since Easter with a serious infection of the joints. I suffered severe bouts of high fever and people even feared for my life. A professor from Ghent prescribed penicillin for me, and my godmother Emma came to give me injections three times a day and sometimes even at night. The local doctor issued this ominous judgement at the time: “Wilfried has a weak heart. His aorta valve has been damaged as a result of his illness. Wilfried can finish secondary school but after that he should only do light office work, at the very most”.

Around that time, I often sat listening with bated breath to the little radio my mother had been given. On the morning of 1 August 1950, the national news carried a huge story. The royal question – should King Leopold III, who was accused of collaboration during the German occupation, return to the Belgian throne? – had taken a dramatic turn in the course of the night. In order to prevent further unrest, Leopold III had expressed the wish that Parliament should pass a law to the effect that his powers be delegated to his son, Crown Prince Baudouin. Leopold III hoped that the long-promised reconciliation would come about in the presence of the young prince.

Even though I had little education in politics at the time, I felt that this event would be of enormous consequence for the whole country. A few months previously, on 12 March 1950, 57.68% of Belgians had voted in a referendum in favour of the return of the controversial King from exile. In Flanders the figure was as high as 72% whereas in Wallonia it was only 42%. Only when Leopold III returned to his castle in Laeken on 22 July – at the crack of dawn and flanked by rows of policemen – did unrest break out in earnest, followed by many strikes, particularly in Wallonia. During a turbulent demonstration at Grâce-Berleur, the police shot three demonstrators dead. The Socialists and Communists threatened to march on Brussels.

I had been following the political events closely on the radio for weeks. “Leopold’s thrown in the towel”, I heard someone shout to my stepfather in a sharp voice. I tried to imagine what the young prince would feel like in such a big palace. I could not imagine then what a prominent role he would come to play in my political and personal life. On 1 August 1983, thirty three years later to the very day, I sat as Prime Minister facing King Baudouin at Laeken Castle. I had just learned from the doctors that I would have to undergo an urgent operation on the damaged valve in my heart: they planned to replace it with a new synthetic valve. The King was greatly concerned and tried to give me courage. Following a successful operation by the highly reputed heart surgeon Georges Stalpaert from Louvain, the King invited me to spend a period of convalescence at the royal residence of Opgrimbie in the woody Kempen.

Ever since my youth I had followed the work of the young Baudouin with undisguised sympathy. That feeling has remained with me all my life. My experience of King Baudouin is one of a man of great integrity, high moral standards and an extreme sense of the importance of the state. Within the Belgian system, the king is the final protector of the Constitution; he ensures continuity and also the maintenance of balance between the various institutional powers. Baudouin was King of Belgium for forty-three years. As holder of the institution, his power and influence was a lot greater than ordinary citizens might realise.

The monarchy had become so obvious an institution to the Belgians that its importance as mediator and ordering factor is often underestimated.