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Talking with one of the Founding Fathers, Max Kohnstamm:

“Values by themselves don’t mean anything. They must be translated into legislation.”

He was a busy man at the time of the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Treaties of Rome on 25 March 2005. He was interviewed by the media, he attended the official event in The Hague hosted by the Dutch Queen, and he addressed the European Economic and Social Committee of the EU as a guest of honour. The Dutch economist, Max Kohnstamm, now 93 years old, was one of the architects of European integration, together with the other ‘Founding Fathers’, Jean Monnet and Robert Schuman. Rüdiger Noll (Director of CSC) and Laurens Hogebrink (former CSC Commission member) visited him in May in his rustic home in the Belgian Ardennes where he lives with his wife, Kathleen, when he is not on the road.

As early as May 1940, during the German occupation of the Netherlands, Max Kohnstamm, still a student, was imprisoned in the Dutch concentration camp of Amersfoort. “There I learned the lesson: where the law ends, hell begins”. Later he spent more than two years in a hostage camp. After the war, he was the private secretary to Queen Wilhelmina, until her abdication in 1948. At the same time, he became very involved with Germany. The Netherlands Reformed Church had established a ‘Germany Commission’ to aid war victims and to work for reconciliation. Its secretary was Hebe Kohlbrugge, who had been in the Dutch resistance and had survived the terror of the Ravensbrück concentration camp. Kohnstamm was a member of the Commission.

During his visits to Germany, he saw children crawl out of the rubble in German cities and asked himself whether these children really were guilty. In 1948, Kohnstamm became involved with the Marshall Plan, and recognised that it would not make sense to rebuild the Netherlands if Germany would remain in ruins. He wrote a policy paper arguing that Germany should be dealt with on equal terms. It did not make him popular in the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but today, looking back on his lifelong commitment to European integration, he says, “Two things are essential for any community: Equality and solidarity. The only alternative to equality is wilderness.”

Back in 1948 the question was how to restore the industries in the Ruhr area without running the risk that some day again German bombs would be dropped on Rotterdam. Then in 1950, Kohnstamm heard Jean Monnet speak during a conference in Paris about the idea of putting the German and French steel and coal industries under a supranational authority. "It was like being struck by lightning", he says today. For him, there was a direct link with his experience that the end of law means the beginning of hell. Monnet's vision of an international community of law came from the same insight. Monnet did not only think of Europe; such a community should be established worldwide. It could only be done by small steps, but this was the right direction.

Kohnstamm became the first General Secretary of the European Coal and Steel Community (established in 1951 and operational in 1952). This predecessor of the EU was revolutionary, because the six member states (France, Germany, Italy and the Benelux) had really given up some of their sovereignty. Kohnstamm argues that also today the core of the EU is the part where the Member States have given up their sovereignty. And for Kohnstamm the most important European institution is the Court of Justice in Luxembourg. "No Member State has ever ignored a verdict of the Court".

The moral imperatives of reconciliation and establishing the rule of law, and the practical requirements for rebuilding a destroyed country, formed the basis of a lifelong combination of idealism and pragmatism, which were also characteristics of Monnet. Monnet's vision of a community of law is still relevant today, Kohnstamm says. "The danger today is a return to 'balance of power' politics, a combination of globalisation and re-nationalisation." This is why the EU needs strong institutions. "Monnet used to say: everything will be forgotten but institutions remain". With reference to the current values debate in an EU in crisis Kohnstamm states: "Values by themselves don't mean anything; they must be translated into laws, into legislation."