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Connecting Cultures



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Beziehungsstatus: kompliziert

Dreißig Blicke auf die deutsch-französischen Beziehungen

(Relationship Status: Complicated

Thirty views on Franco-German relations)

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Published by Conte Verlag

464 pages, hardcover with dust jacket

ISBN 978-3-95602-119-0, €22.90

“Marriage is an attempt to solve problems together which you didn’t even have when you were on your own,” is what Woody Allen once said about marriage. And he was right, to a certain extent. It’s still only half the truth though. I mean, when you’re in a relationship, you experience things which you can only dream of when single. You can achieve goals together that would be impossible alone. Above all, you can learn and benefit from the differences the other person brings – even if it can sometimes be a bit difficult.

This also applies to the elaborate, multi-faceted, complex and wonderful relationship between the French and Germans.

I. Beginnings

I guess you could say our company is the product of this *amour fou*. My father and uncle – together with their father – founded a small electrical engineering company in 1955. Hager oHG Elektrotechnische Fabrik in Ensheim, Saarland, focused on the production of meter and distribution boards. They wanted to bring these systems to the German market.

Two months before the company was founded, Saarland voted, in a referendum, for their state to re-join Germany. This resolved the question of Saarland’s post-war status: it was first ceded to France, and was then supposed to become an independent state subject to the European Directorate. At the same time, France became a sovereign neighbouring state with all the border controls, customs provisions and bureaucratic obstacles that greatly complicated cross-border trade at that time.

Our company's founders had the choice of integrating into the German market or beginning from scratch on the other side of the border. They opted for a new beginning. It was a good decision – perhaps even the best decision in our company's history.

Their choice of location was Obernai, a town on the Alsatian Wine Route where my uncle Hermann established our company's second foothold. Meanwhile in Ensheim, my father took care of the main factory and distribution centre.

While our small business slowly grew, important changes took place on the political stage. In January 1963, the French President Charles de Gaulle and the German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer signed the Élysée Treaty – a treaty of friendship – at the Élysée Palace. The treaty guaranteed long-lasting co-operation between the former 'arch enemies'. It was a historical step – and a highly controversial one on both sides of the border. Adenauer himself was quite sceptical when de Gaulle came to power in 1958. At the time, Adenauer believed that the two of them were „so fundamentally different that an understanding between the two (...) would be exceptionally difficult“. But their first official meeting saw a surprising turn. De Gaulle proposed close cooperation over foreign policy. The Chancellor said that he was happy that de Gaulle was a different person than “he had feared”.

My uncle and father also pushed for openness wherever possible. In 1950s France, there were enough reasons to be at least a little sceptical towards Germans. However, our company's founders never met with any resentment, or at least, they never mentioned it.

II. Working on the Border

Both entrepreneurs assimilated exceptionally quickly. As fun-loving Saarlanders, the Alsatian way of life was nothing new to them. Hager was well-known at electrical trade fairs, and not just for their meter boards: guests were greeted with champagne and cognac.

Francophiles accepted them to such an extent that over the years, some even considered them to be honorary Frenchmen. This willingness to assimilate came to the fore when my father tried to win over a Bavarian wholesaler in the 1950s. The man was known for his gruff Bavarian dialect, so my father travelled to Munich a day before their meeting to get used to the local accent. Later, when the two had gotten to know and appreciate one another, the man made a confession: “You know, Mr. Hager, I’ve been thinking about where you’re from. You’re not Bavarian – I can hear that when you speak. You’re not Prussian either – you’re too nice. I’ve given it a lot of thought. You must be half French.”

This cross-cultural nature was sometimes bizarre, but useful. The fact that as Saarlanders, they were neither properly German nor French helped them a great deal at the start. As my father later explained, „We really were neither one nor the other, but we managed it so well because we knew both the French and German perspective and could act accordingly“.

I believe that this kind of openness is typical for the inhabitants of border regions. You’ll find it in other border regions such as Baden, Alsace or Lorraine. If, like in the Saarland, you’ve changed your nationality four times in the last four decades, you already know the relativeness of passports and borders. Above all, you understand that there are more important things than nationalities: understanding, for example. Open ears. And open hearts.

Being able to adapt without denying your identity seems to me to be extremely valuable. In today’s world, it’s probably more crucial than ever – including for our company. Without it, we wouldn’t be where we are now.

The headquarters of our company – now with 11,700 employees – lies in Blieskastel, Saarland, and our largest production facility is in Obernai in Alsace. There is a great deal of cross-border traffic between the two locations. On the one hand, this is very stimulating, although the travelling can sometimes be a little tiring. We are

a *Societas Europaea* (SE), a European organisation, but our market is the whole world. We produce components in 26 locations worldwide and our solutions are used by customers in nearly 130 countries around the globe.

We have our history of openness over the past 60 years – which has opened borders and brought people closer together – to thank for this. What de Gaulle and Adenauer put in motion in the fifties has developed into globalisation. The world has become smaller – more like a village. Or so it seems, anyway.

III. The Limits of Globalisation

Does this mean that we – French and German people – have become more similar? I don't think so. Two factors in particular are responsible for this.

Globalisation, such as we have seen in the last few decades, has mainly seen goods crossing borders. I can get a Hanuta chocolate bar – manufactured by the Italian company Ferrero – all over France and I can get a Danone yoghurt, originally from France, anywhere in Germany. This is a bit of a shame. In the past, you could look forward to a bit of cross-border shopping. Nowadays, everything is at your fingertips.

What was an enormous effort for our parents' generation – travelling over the border for some shopping – can now be achieved with just a few clicks.

It is true that in addition to products, we as people travel more frequently and further than in the past. However, truly cosmopolitan people are – today just as in the past – a comparatively small group of expats and commercial travellers who, in any case, have existed since antiquity and the Middle Ages. Most people stay true to their roots their entire lives.

But digitalisation has, in theory, made it possible for everyone to communicate with one another. We use the same programmes,

we read the same news feeds, and we network on the same social media platforms. Therefore, we consider ourselves to be part of a global community that thinks and feels the same way.

But in reality, our global village has neighbourhoods and groups neatly separated from one another, each preserving its own local peculiarities. Here's a mundane example from our own industry: to this day, almost every European country has its own standards when it comes to sockets. And consumer cultures differ, too. When it comes to alarm systems, the French prefer to subscribe to a service, while the Germans prefer to purchase the system. When it comes to homes, however, the reverse is true: Two-thirds of French people are homeowners, whereas only half of Germans are. You need to know, understand and consider all of this if you want to set up and be successful in other markets.

My French and German colleagues discuss these things every day. We speak the same languages – namely French, German or English – but by nature, we approach things from a different angle. Even if we use the same terms, we sometimes mean something completely different.

And this is the greatest difference which makes our relationship status so complicated: our way of communicating.

IV. Or Parlez-vous Deutsch?

We see it every day in the company: German communication is more explicit than French. There's less rhetoric in German communication; we prefer to communicate in facts and figures, expressing precisely what we want and how we want it. Then we go do it. When Germans envisage a project, they forge an idea immediately and iron out every detail.

In French, on the other hand, things are much more implicit. An 'idea' in French is fundamentally different to an idea in German. It looks more like a sketch that specifies a general direction to

explore. In our meetings, we sometimes jokingly ask one another: “Is this a German ‘Konzept’ or a French ‘concept’?”

You can imagine what happens when French and German colleagues – and their different ideas – meet. The French want to have a discussion, whereas Germans expect decisions to be made. The French tend to find Germans to be blunt and direct. They do not understand why the Germans even want to have a meeting when they already seem to have a solution at hand. The Germans, on the other hand, get the impression that the French don’t really know what they want (although in reality, they know exactly what they want, they just don’t express it).

In Japanese, there is the expression ‘Kuuki Yomenai’. It literally means, ‘can’t read the air’, i.e. unable to read between the lines, unable to interpret that which is implied, but not said. And of course, this can frequently lead to a fairly heated atmosphere.

I experience this not least in my home life. My French wife and I have, over the course of our years together, worked out how to decrypt what the other is saying. For example, when she suggests that someone needs to have a word with the children or that someone needs to walk the dog, now I know exactly who that ‘someone’ is. Her indirect instructions always drive me crazy.

The most curious thing of all is that our assumption that German and French people are similar to each other is often the cause of the biggest misunderstandings. The fact that we believe that we think the same – and obviously therefore understand each other – means that we actually don’t. As Mark Twain said, “It ain’t what you *don’t* know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so”.

But then, what do we know about each other?

V. (Pre-)Judgements

Many of the supposedly well-known certainties about the French and Germans don't really hold true. Take, for example, the belief that Germans are more environmentally conscious than their neighbours when in fact, the average German produces more waste than the average French citizen. Or that when buying a car, we are strictly patriotic and buy an Audi or Volkswagen over other brands. In reality, the market share of domestic car manufacturers is higher in France than in Germany at 57.2%.

Conversely, it is often said that the French don't work as hard or that they go on longer holidays. In 2009, however, the average annual working time in France was 1,469 hours, while in Germany it was just 1,309 hours. And what about the world's biggest cheese producer? Surprisingly, it's not France – it's Germany.

These may be banal examples, yet they point to something fundamental. First: we are in fact different, but not in the same ways that we may think. Therefore, the reason our relationship status is so complicated is because we think we know in advance what the other one is thinking and going to say. And we are often wrong.

Second: it is therefore worthwhile to listen more carefully and look more closely. To have a humorous outlook on the differences between the French and Germans and to view these differences as valuable and profitable is something that can be very useful if you want to reach people who see the world differently.

Woodrow Wilson said, "I not only use all the brains that I have, but all I can borrow". In other words, he consulted with people who might have had a different outlook than him. Not only was he the President of the United States, he was also the initiator of the League of Nations, a Nobel Peace Prize winner and a visionary.

VI. What Does the Future Hold?

Wilson thus anticipated a concept that we now call 'diversity'. In a world in which walls are suddenly being built, borders are being closed and one's own interests are being placed above the interests of others, it is more relevant than ever.

I therefore hope that we French and Germans can find another joint project, just like de Gaulle and Adenauer did after the war. To do that, we have to be aware of Europe's lack of knowledge of other cultures and remember that we can only be strong together. We must remind ourselves that our different points of view, though sometimes exhausting, are ultimately enriching.

As for the status of our complicated relationship, I think it's time to start a new chapter.



*Manufactured with kind support from
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