

The colleague Rotger Kindermann sent me this very interesting article from the "Rheinische Post."

I suggest reading the text and reflecting on it. *pm.*

Translated from the German original. Check against delivery.



Rheinische Post

He had a dream

In July 1985, Robert Goebbels, along with four colleagues, signed a small agreement in a village of 500 souls in Luxembourg. Today, Schengen is known worldwide as a symbol of freedom. Goebbels wonders how much longer that will last.

BY HENNING RASCHE, SCHENGEN

In one of the most famous villages in the world, on Rue Robert Goebbels, an elderly, gentle man stands in front of his red car, wearing a social democratic suede jacket. He says, "I am Robert Goebbels."

Streets are named after the deceased. So, 19 years ago, Goebbels responded to the question of whether he agreed with the naming by saying, "Well, as long as I don't have to die?" He didn't. Things might be different, however, with the project of his life, the one that brought him his own street and made the place famous worldwide.

"Schengen is alive," reads a large sign at the European Museum overlooking the Moselle River. Schengen lives. Would it be necessary to state that so clearly if there were no doubts about it?

It all started with a crazy idea. According to Goebbels' story, Helmut Kohl and François Mitterrand were sitting in a wine tavern in Strasbourg in the early 1980s, drinking glass after glass of wine. Perhaps the German Chancellor and the French President were in high spirits when they thought: we'll stop controlling the border crossing between Kehl and Strasbourg.

But when the bureaucracies of both countries got involved, it quickly became clear that this wouldn't work. You can't just give up one single border control, the lawyers must have argued. Either all or none. So Mitterrand and Kohl sought ways to turn their wine-fueled idea into policy. They first signed the Saarbrücken Agreement and later found help from their neighbors.

The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg had already stopped controlling their borders with each other for some time. Benelux was boundlessly progressive. The countries offered to include Kohl and Mitterrand in their trio and work together to eliminate borders. That's when a man who had just become Luxembourg's Secretary of State for Foreign Relations entered the scene.

Robert Goebbels is perplexed. The European Museum is being renovated, and next year marks the 40th anniversary of the Schengen Agreement, so everything needs to be spruced up for the big celebration. The museum café is closed, and Goebbels usually takes his guests there. So, what to do? Schengen may be alive, but it's not so lively that you can easily get a coffee.

After being turned away at a restaurant, Goebbels drives his red car to the neighboring village of Remerschen. It's ironic, he says. In the early 1980s, Schengen was supposed to be incorporated into another municipality, as the Luxembourg administration deemed the small village of 500 people insignificant. But after June 14, 1985, it was Remerschen that was incorporated into Schengen. By now, even people in Singapore and Ottawa know this small Luxembourg village.

On the Moselle Riverbank in Schengen, two sections of the Berlin Wall stand; on the left one, a blue peace dove is painted. It's a not-so-subtle reminder that borders can be overcome.

The September morning has brought dark clouds that intermittently burst into showers. Flags of all 29 Schengen Area countries fly along the shore. Columns with star-shaped holes stand disorderly beside them. And on information boards, one of the few photos taken aboard the *Princesse Marie-Astrid* is displayed. At the center is a bearded man in a tie signing a document. He was 39 years younger then, 41 years old.

Robert Goebbels is one of the last witnesses to a fading spirit of the times. Back when overcoming borders was associated with hope, not danger. And when the grand idea of freedom was a promise worth fighting for. But they weren't fully aware of that at the time.

Chance put the social democrat Goebbels in the spotlight of this story. In the Benelux alliance, Luxembourg held the presidency in 1985, the foreign ministry was responsible, and he was the new Secretary of State there. He invited his colleagues from the other countries to Schengen, to the tri-border area where France, Luxembourg, and Germany meet. Goebbels found the location symbolic, but hardly anyone else noticed.

Schengen had no hall large enough for the signing of an agreement back then. So, Goebbels rented a passenger ship on the Moselle, the *Princesse Marie-Astrid*.

On board were the secretaries of state: France's Catherine Lalumière, the Netherlands' Wim van Eekelen, Germany's Waldemar Schreckenberger, Belgium's Paul de Keersmaecker, and Luxembourg's Robert Goebbels. While the countries considered the matter important, it wasn't important enough for the ministers themselves to handle.

When welcoming his guests aboard the *Princesse Marie-Astrid*, Goebbels said they were about to sign a treaty that would go down in history as the "Schengen Treaty." The guests laughed heartily, he recalls today.

Today is also September 16, 2024. On this day, Germany's Federal Ministry of the Interior and Homeland reintroduced controls at all national borders.

The responsible minister, Nancy Faeser (SPD), said, "Starting Monday, the Federal Police will conduct checks at all German borders. We aim to further reduce irregular migration, stop human smugglers, crack down on criminals, and identify and intercept Islamists early."

This step was either welcomed or shrugged off by the public, depending on one's perspective. The former German European party of former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, the CDU, which once posted campaign slogans like "With us for open borders in Europe," jubilated. The authoritarian populists from AfD and BSW applauded, as did Viktor Orbán. And the libertarian, liberal, and social parties in the federal government implemented the move themselves.

No one objects to stopping human smugglers, cracking down on criminals, halting Islamists, or reducing irregular migration. But when the five secretaries of state signed the first Schengen Agreement on the Moselle in June 1985, which indeed went down in history, they had something different in mind than Nancy Faeser sending the Federal Police to the borders.

In a wine tavern in Remerschen, Robert Goebbels gets a water, the reporter a coffee. Three men sit at the bar drinking wine. It's harvest time, and small trucks filled with grapes drive through the streets. The region is known for its Elbling wine, says Goebbels, though he prefers Pinot Gris. Schengen has such a strong name that the winemakers market their wine as "Schengen wine."

Goebbels brought a book with him that hardly anyone has ever read, a collection of European law. He's highlighted several sections. For example, Article 3, Paragraph 2 of the EU Treaty, where the Union guarantees its citizens a space of freedom without internal borders and free movement of persons. Or Article 77, Paragraph 2 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, which instructs

Parliament and the Council to enact measures for the "abolition of checks on persons, irrespective of nationality, when crossing internal borders." Since highlighting is not possible here, let me repeat: irrespective of nationality.

If one correctly understands what Goebbels says, what's in his book, what Nancy Faeser says, what the Federal Police are doing, and what was learned in European law lectures, one wonders what the European Commission, as the "guardian of the treaties," has to say about all this.

If you regularly ski in Austria or taste Welschriesling, you'll know that upon returning at the Kiefersfelden border crossing, the German Federal Police have been greeting travelers with machine guns since 2015.

If you ask the European Commission what it thinks about this, a spokesperson responds: "The Commission's position is clear: the reintroduction of border controls must remain an exception, strictly time-limited, and a last resort when there is a serious threat to public order or internal security."

What exactly about nine years of stationary border controls is time-limited, and how this constitutes an exception, is left to our interpretation. "The Commission remains in close communication with the German authorities," the spokesperson says. If their position were truly clear, this close communication between Brussels and Germany would be evident.

As a blonde, white German with a middle-class car registered in Düsseldorf, you're generally not subjected to checks at the borders even now. It would therefore be a rather privileged stance to say: nothing changes because of a few Federal Police officers.

The Commission's spokesperson leaves one last note: if the border controls introduced by the Minister of the Interior and Homeland are still in place after twelve months, they would be forced to issue a statement. Some knees in Berlin-Moabit are surely already trembling.

From the five countries in 1985, the Schengen Area has grown to 29. It's not that they can't control their borders at all, but the controls must be time-limited, justified, and proportional to the threat, as the European Commission emphasizes.

A few steps next to the European Museum lead to the Schengen tourist information center. If anyone besides the visitor were present, one could purchase "Schengen is alive" socks for twelve euros per pair or bibs for ten euros. The *Spirit of Schengen* Crémant costs 12.50 euros.

Photos of Robert Goebbels hang on the wall here, a model of the *Princesse Marie-Astrid* is displayed.

September 16, 2024