

## *The Cross of the Peoples*

Birth of a friendship between France and Germany after World War II, in the Commercy region,  
1957-1970

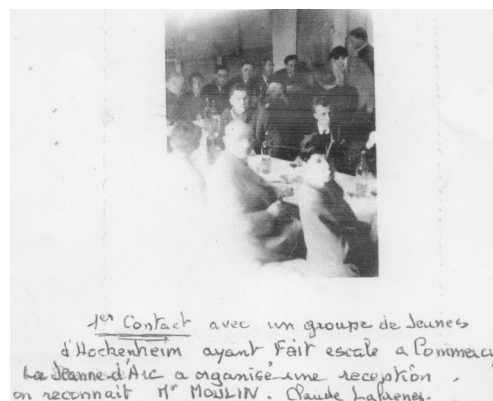
Vincent Lacorde, February 2023

In 1947, in post-war Germany, the "Junge Union" was created. This is the youth movement of the CDU, a party of the German Right. This movement is close to an ecumenical movement, the Pax Christi, a Catholic movement born in 1945 in France and Germany. These movements militate for fraternity between peoples and against war, in a Christian spirit.

### The first contacts

In 1957, members of the Hockenheim "Junge Union", chaired by Adolph Stier, and the local Catholic parish, decided to act for this brotherhood between peoples by contacting a French city to get closer. In this immediate post-war period, a certain mistrust still exists between the French and the Germans.

In this group, with Adolph Stier, is also Heinrich Schmeckenbecher (also called Heiner) and, when it comes to choosing a city to contact in France, he submits the Commercy proposal. Other cities were considered: Toul, Lunéville or Saint Nicolas-de-Port, but Heiner Schmeckenbecher during his service in the Wehrmacht had followed his training as a second lieutenant, at the Oudinot barracks, then occupied by the German army and military training center. He had fond memories of Commercy, the Poirot bakery on rue des Capucins and its smells of bread, Madame Chenel, parades in the streets<sup>1</sup>...



This is how the parish priest of Hockenheim, J. Beykirch, in the summer of 1957, wrote to the parish priest of Commercy to offer him a meeting. The parish priest of Commercy then turned to active members of the parish, in particular Pierre Malard, who contacted Jean Briot, André Oudin, René Lacorde, Emile Fonkenell<sup>2</sup>, and others, with a view to receiving this group of Germans.

### The first encounters

The first meeting took place on November 28, 1957<sup>3</sup>. Heiner Schmeckenbecher and Adolph Stier, accompanied by six other Germans, arrived in Commercy where they were received by the commercial group at the Carillier hotel restaurant where they dined and slept but above all exchanged views. The Commerciants were partly German-speaking, often following their captivity during the war. The next day, after a visit to Commercy, they go to the sites of the First World War, Ailly woods and Apremont forest, before separating in Gironville, on the way back to Hockenheim.

Following this visit, sincere friendships were born, concretized by epistolary exchanges accompanied by family photos so that the families know each other better.

A second visit takes place at the end of 1957, it is there that correspondents are already designated by family, and this time the Germans are received in the business families. The exchange groups are expanding on each side.

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1 After his stay in Commercy, on the Russian front, he was taken prisoner in Kaliningrad. Sent to Siberia, he was released when Stalin died in April 1953.

2 Emile Fonkenell was mayor of Girauvoisin where he lived, so close to the location of the People's Cross. His supply business for bakers was located on rue des Capucins in Commercy (Lucgil).

3 The 1973 "Commercy" magazine indicates September 1957.

In return, on May 17, 1958, fifteen Commerciens<sup>4</sup> went to Hockenheim and received a very friendly welcome, both from the families who received them and for the official reception.

The idea of correspondents with two annual exchanges in each direction and meetings halfway was born. From 1959, these double meetings took place with an exchange of delegations<sup>5</sup> received officially then in the families, followed by a tourist or local cultural visit.

1960 – On May 29, a delegation of 46 Germans comes to Commercy. The reception takes place at the foyer rue de la Trace in Commercy.



*René Lacorde, on the right, Hockenheim 18 May 1958*

A coach of Commerciens visits Hockenheim on September 10 and 11, 1960.

It is also the year when it is decided to mark this frank friendship with a symbol. They plan to build a cross, like the wayside crosses that adorn our roads, built to protect travelers or commemorate an event.



*Schwetzingen schlossgarten September 11, 1960*

### The location

It is about finding a place to implant this "Cross of Peace". The town of Commercy and its mayor, Pierre Santoni, are still reluctant. The negative memory of the war is still alive, the victims, the occupation and the compulsory labor service are still in the memory. The political aspect also plays a role, although the base of participants has widened beyond the CDU or the parishes. Nevertheless, individuals working on this project such as Messrs Malard, Jean Leclerc or Parmentier, could have provided private land located closer, or even in Commercy.

It is a symbolic choice that guides the founders. The chosen location was proposed by a farmer from Commercy, Jean Leclerc, a "headland" at the end of a field near Gironville. It is a place that allows the group of friends to pose this symbol of "Pax Christi", mention which is engraved there.

This symbolism is based in particular on the height of this place on the edge of the forest which gives a venerable aspect to the place. It is also the place of the French lines during the First World War. It is especially the side of the road that take, when they come to Commercy, the German friends who thus see the monument. The cross is oriented with one branch towards Commercy and one branch towards Hockenheim<sup>6</sup>, the straight path called the strategic path, reinforces the symbolism of a hand stretched out towards Hockenheim.

We can also note that it was in Gironville that the first French and German participants separated on the way back to Hockenheim in 1957.

4 Three college students, three teachers, two students, a worker, a foreman, a farmer, two employees, a craftsman and a liberal profession, according to the magazine "Commercy" of April 1973.

5 In September 1959, 20 Tradespeople were enthusiastically received at Hockenheim.

6 The marble slabs marked Commercy on one side and Hockenheim on the other, were replaced and reversed in a ceremony, probably in 2011.

## Building

In the spring of 1961, the group of friends built the "Cross of Peace". It is a friendly and good-natured job, where the intellectuals take the shovel and the pickaxe, nevertheless guided by professionals, Jean Barrois, marble worker providing the stone, André Oudin, carpenter providing the wood, and also the company of André Tollini who does the masonry. The wood would come from the recovery of beams from the roof of the castle of Commercy, destroyed in 1944. A wink also, six privet are planted at the back of the cross.



*Foundations: Jean Briot, Pierre Malard, René and Damien Lacorde*

The cross was erected in 1961, mention engraved on the back. On the photos we can see Jean Briot, André Oudin, René and Damien Lacorde, with others, Emile Fonkenell, Claude Perrin but also Gérard Vivien.



*Installation de la croix avec J. LECLERC - M<sup>r</sup> OUDIN à l'arrière. C. PERRIN au fond*

It was inaugurated and blessed on Sunday May 7, 1961<sup>7</sup> by the parish priest of Jouy-sous-les-Côtes, Father Christophe<sup>8</sup>.

This weekend in May 1961 marks the fourth meeting and it was a bus of Germans who traveled for this inauguration. The Saturday evening party is made in the presence of the sub-prefect Bachaud, the general councilor Perrin, the mayor of Commercy Santoni and his deputies Gaussin and Charlier, the president of the UCIA Ulrich, the commander of the gendarmerie Jaquier, the Archpriest Gausso. Pierre Malard, Adolph Stier, Pierre Santoni and M. Bachaud deliver speeches followed by the presentation of the two plaques marked "Commercy" and "Hockenheim" to be placed on the pedestal of the cross the following day. On Sunday, after Catholic and Protestant services, the cross located on the heights of Gironville, is inaugurated in the presence of many spectators, including residents of neighboring villages. The German pastor Schreyger as well as the parish priest of Jouy-sous-les-Côtes, Abbé Christophe, bless the cross, this blessing being followed by speeches by the mayor of Hockenheim Beykirch and Pierre Malard.



*Pastor Schreyger of Hockenheim and Father Christophe, parish priest of Jouy*



<sup>7</sup> The date of May 5 is sometimes mentioned, it is a Friday, but the cross was blessed on a Sunday after mass according to an article in the Republican of the East of May 18, 1961, which seems more probable.

<sup>8</sup> Father Christophe said masses notably in Jouy, Gironville and Frémerville-sous-les-Côtes.



This initiative is concomitant with the project of the city of Hockenheim which also decides, the construction of a monumental "cross of the Peoples" located in the city center, place de la Gare. This wooden cross, 6 meters high, was inaugurated on September 3, 1961.



### The name of the crosses

*Speech by Pierre Malard*

The Cross of the Commercians, in fact located on land in the territory of Frémeréville-sous-les-Côtes, was initially called "Cross of Peace" or "Calvary of Peace". In order to harmonize its name with that of the Hockenheimring, it is renamed "Croix des Peuples". It is best known locally as the "Hockenheimring Cross". Some also called it "Cross of Hope". These two crosses still symbolize today the reconciliation of the German and French peoples after the war and we see their full value in this year 2023 when Europe is once again torn apart.

### The creation of circles of friendship

The group of friends had already begun to structure itself in 1961, notably with Pierre Malard as "general manager"; Jean Briot and J. Lehman for propaganda; Gérard Vivien as treasurer; Jean Barrois, A. Oudin, Jean Leclerc and Claude Perrin to take care of the cross; J. Thomas, Miss Rivard and René Lacorde at the secretariat. The seat of the meetings being at the Renaissance café at Henri Dangleterre.

In 1963, Gérard Vivien drafted the articles of association "Cercle Commercys-Hockenheim" in order to formalize these exchanges and create a legal interlocutor, particularly in the towns of



*The joy of the German and French families who find themselves, here in Hockenheim in 1963, the Götzmann and Lacorde families*

Commercy and Hockenheim. These statutes were signed on May 18, 1963 and, among the founding members mentioned in these statutes, are Jean Briot, Pierre Malard, or Emile Fonkenell. The purpose of the association thus constituted is to "develop individual and collective

relations of understanding and friendship between the French and German peoples, in particular through ongoing and close contacts between the towns of Commercy and Hockenheim-im-Baden and the regions in which they are located".

The same process was carried out in 1976 in Hockenheim, which created the "Hockenheim-Commercy friendship circle" (Freundeskreis Hockenheim-Commercy).

Since then, these circles perpetuate family exchanges but also associative and denominational, the Germans participate in particular in the centenary of the Protestant temple of Bar-le-Duc. But many other exchanges had already begun: school exchanges involving colleges, high schools and the private school Jeanne d'Arc de Commercy. A whole youth discovers another way of life that enriches the lives of families; sports clubs, table tennis, boxing (of which Jean Briot chairs the club), walking, etc. initiate meetings between the two cities... The links between Commercy and Hockenheim become very strong.

### Town twinning

In December 1969, Adolph Stier, who was also a municipal councilor for Hockenheim, sent a letter to the mayor of Commercy, Pierre Santoni, to propose a twinning of the two towns. A first letter in March 1962 from the mayor of Hockenheim, Kurt Buchter, "holding out his hand" to the mayor of Commercy, Pierre Santoni, had remained unanswered. In May 1969, the municipal council of Commercy deliberated in favor of this project which materialized on April 18, 1970 with the signing, in Hockenheim, of the charter for the twinning of the two towns.

It was on this date that four hundred Commerciens went with their mayor to Hockenheim to sign this charter.

In return, fifteen German coaches came to Commercy to mark the event of the signing of this charter, on September 27 of the same year.



*The signing of the charter on April 18, 1970 between the mayors of Commercy and Hockenheim, Dr Buchter and P. Santoni, in Hockenheim*



*In Commercy, a stone in Hockenheim Park bears witness to the founding of the twinning.*

On this occasion, the city of Hockenheim offers gifts to the mayor of Commercy, but also to "particularly meritorious" personalities: Jean Briot, Pierre Malard and André Tollini.

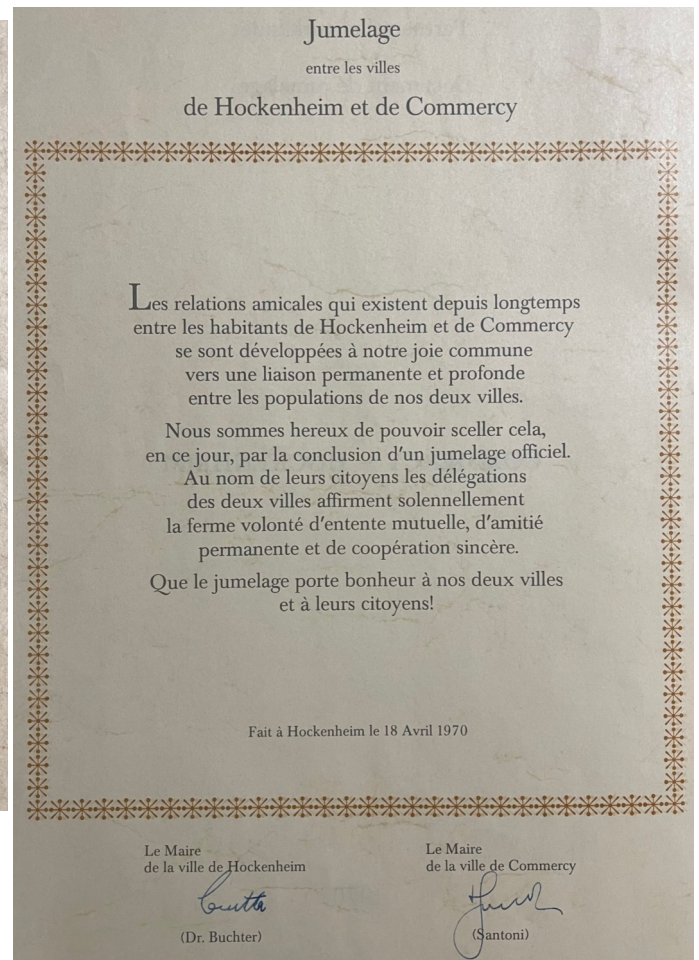
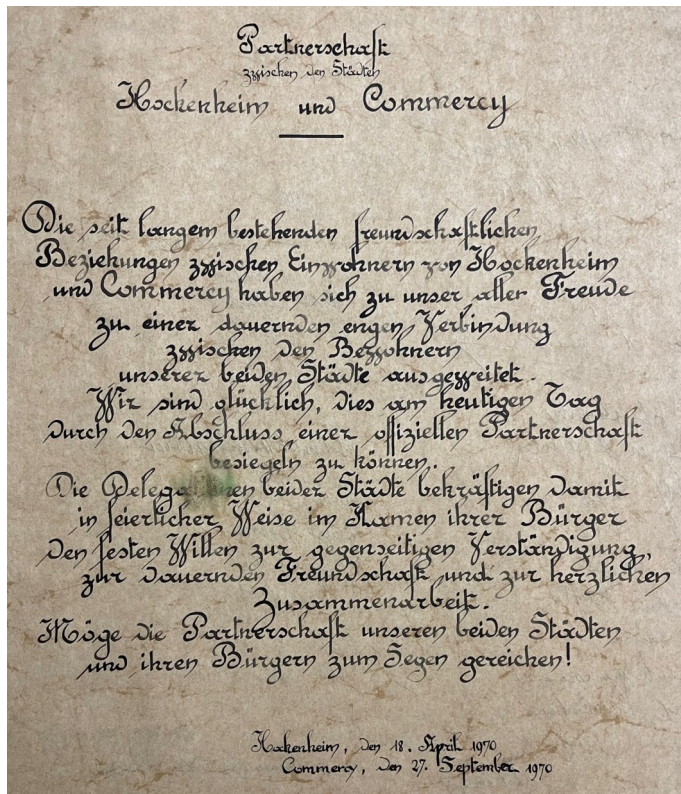


*Jean-Marie Mathieu and Jean Briot*



*André Tollini and the Mayor of Hockenheim Dr Buchter*





### Partnerschaft zwischen den Städten HOCKENHEIM und COMMERCY

Die seit langem bestehenden freundschaftlichen Beziehungen zwischen den Einwohnern von Hockenheim und Commercy haben sich zu unser aller Freude zu einer dauernden, engen Verbindung zwischen den Bewohnern unserer beiden Städte ausgeweitet.

Wir sind glücklich, dies am heutigen Tag durch den Abschluss einer offiziellen Partnerschaft besiegeln zu können.

Die Delegationen beider Städte bekräftigen damit in feierlicher Weise in Namen Ihrer Bürger den festen Willen zur gegenseitigen Verständigung, zur dauernden Freundschaft und zur herzlichen Zusammenarbeit.

Möge die Partnerschaft unserer beiden Städte und Ihren Bürgern zum Segen gereichen.

Hockenheim, den 11. April 1970

Commercy, den 27. September 1970

### Partenariat entre les villes HOCKENHEIM et COMMERCY

La relation amicale de longue date entre les habitants d'Hockenheim et de Commercy s'est transformée en un lien étroit et durable entre les habitants de nos deux villes.

Nous sommes heureux de pouvoir sceller cela aujourd'hui en concluant un partenariat officiel.

Les délégués des deux villes confirment solennellement au nom de leurs citoyens la ferme volonté de compréhension mutuelle, d'amitié durable et de coopération cordiale.

Puisse le partenariat bénir nos deux villes et leurs citoyens !

Hockenheim, 18 avril 1970

Commercy, le 27 septembre 1970

« Partnership between the cities of HOCKENHEIM and COMMERCY

The long-standing friendly relationship between the residents of Hockenheim and Commercy has, to our delight, expanded into an enduring, close bond between the residents of our two cities.

We are happy to be able to seal this today by entering into an official partnership.

The delegations of both cities are solemnly affirming, on behalf of their citizens, their firm will to mutual understanding, lasting friendship and cordial cooperation.

May the partnership of our two cities and their citizens be a blessing.

Hockenheim, April 11, 1970 Commercy, September 27, 1970 »

Since its establishment, this charter has been regularly confirmed by the successive mayors of the two cities.

After 1970 and the signing of the twinning charter, exchanges became very intensive and regular, with towns exchanging with their associations and schools in addition to exchanges between families. These exchanges continue to this day.

To be continued...

*Remerciements pour leurs contributions à Pierre Briot (fils de Jean Briot ayant pour correspondant Heinrich Schmeckenbecher), Didier Iotz (membre du cercle Commercy-Hockenheim), Dominique Lacorde (fils de René Lacorde ayant pour correspondants Alphons Gärtner et Ludwig Götzman), Gérard Vivien (correspondant : Roland Brandebourger, neveu de Heiner Schmeckenbecher), Birgit Shopphoven pour les traductions,*

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