Interview with Liliane Simon

Victor Fernandes Soriano (VFS)
Liliane Simon (LS)
Francesca Davanzo (FD)

Chapter 1
The institutions in the 1950s and 1960s

VFS: It's 26 May 2023 in Brussels, and as part of the Council of the European Union's oral history project, we have the pleasure and honour of speaking today with Ms Liliane Simon.

To begin, I'd like to ask you a question about your entry into European Communities. You were born in Luxembourg. Your career began before you joined the European Institutions, but in 1957 you started working for the ECSC.

LS: I sat the competition that March, I believe, and they hired me in June.

VFS: Could you tell us about how you came to start working at the ECSC? How did you find out about the job opportunities there at the time?

LS: At the time, there was much talk about it in Luxembourg, since the first – still provisional – seat was to be in Luxembourg. We heard a lot about this idea, which many found extraordinary – no more wars between two belligerent countries, etc. – while others were very sceptical. I didn't go to university; I'm completely self-taught. Back then, I was working for an insurance company, where I started early in the morning and finished at four in the afternoon. After work, I would attend a secretarial course at the Grandjean School, which was a fairly well-known school. I earned a diploma as a stenotypist. The director of the school encouraged us to look for work within the European Communities. That's how I found out one day that a competition had been organised for secretaries. I entered the competition and I passed. I began working in the secretarial pool of the High Authority of the ECSC in Luxembourg.

VFS: So at that time, you were working in the High Authority building on Place de Metz?

LS: No, it was on Rue Aldringen. A few months later, in February 1958, the first people were sent to Brussels, as in the meantime the Treaty of Rome had been signed and the common market had been established, as had Euratom. Translators were sent from Luxembourg, and they needed secretaries. That's how I ended up in Brussels along with two French secretaries, who later became friends of mine. We were among the very first members of staff at Euratom.

I was soon assigned to work for a German director, because at the time the main languages were French and German – not yet English. I worked for him for two or three years, and after that I had a Dutch director, Mr Houwink, who was a director in the Directorate for the Diffusion of Knowledge. I worked at Euratom for four years altogether.

Afterwards, I was offered the post of secretary to the Director-General for the Diffusion of Knowledge, Mr Suenner, but I chose to go to Moscow instead.

VFS: Can you tell us a bit about Euratom? Today it's a Community that isn't very well known, andhasn't been researched much either. Where was Euratom located?

LS: It was at 53 or 55 Rue Belliard. I'll always remember bumping into an acquaintance of my parents in Brussels; when I told him I was working at Euratom, he thought I meant the Atomium, because the World's Fair was being held at the time! Euratom didn't really mean anything to anyone back then. In any case, Euratom was later absorbed into one of the Commission's Directorates-General. My work there was secretarial, but it didn't last long. The merger of the Communities happened very soon after – in 1965, I believe.

VFS: Indeed, the Merger Treaty was signed in 1965 and came into force in 1967. So in 1962, you went to Moscow. Do you want to share a few memories from those two years you spent in Moscow?

LS: It was an extraordinary time, during the communist era. Times weren't easy, but it was a very interesting experience, and I have very fond memories of it.

VFS: You were working at the Luxembourg embassy, correct?

LS: Yes, I was the ambassador's secretary, and I also worked as an archivist and chief secretary. The ambassador was Camille Dumont. Working with him was a very pleasant experience, and it lasted a year. Then Mr Dumont was appointed to another post as ambassador, this time in Brussels. I stayed on another year with his successor, and then I left for personal reasons.

VFS: Was it before leaving Moscow that you had the idea to apply for the Council competition?

LS: No. You should know that when I left for Moscow, I had to resign from the ECSC. Of course, we had been assigned to Euratom, but after that we were supposed to return to Luxembourg. Work on the Staff Regulations was ongoing, but in the meantime, I had to make a decision: either return to Luxembourg, or go to Moscow – but if I went to Moscow, I would have to resign. This choice to give up my status as an official surprised Mr Dumont, who thought I was giving up my security to chase rainbows. He told me that the day I returned from Moscow, they would find me a job. And indeed, when I came back, he advised me to look into opportunities at the Council. After sitting and passing the competition for secretaries, I was hired and assigned to the press office, which was part of the cabinet.

Chapter 2
The General Secretariat of the Council: a small, close-knit team

VFS: So you began service on the 1 February 1964. Could you tell us how working at the Council was different from working for the other two Communities?

LS: It was different because I was working in the press office while at the same time on standby for Mr Calmes, whereas in Luxembourg my work was purely secretarial. Moreover, Ms Carini allowed me do a lot of things that didn't strictly fall within the remit of a secretary. We were heavily involved in European affairs.

VFS: What was your job in the press office? Did you have to draft press releases?

LS: At first, I just typed them; I didn't write them. Slowly but surely, Ms Carini put me in charge of the part of the agenda concerning items adopted without discussion – the famous 'A' items. The journalists would come to me to find out about the items on the agenda. I had contact with people and it was much more interesting. And I would occasionally prepare the press review for Mr Calmes and his secretariat. That's how things were done during missions. We were versatile and did a bit of everything.

VFS: Was everyone as versatile as you? When we were looking through some photographs together earlier on, from what you were saying, we got the impression that the working atmosphere was that of a really close-knit team.

LS: Absolutely. That's how it was in the cabinet, and I think it was thanks to Mr Calmes, who managed the whole thing almost like a family business. It really mattered to him that everything ran smoothly. He knew everyone personally and was friendly with everyone. We were a family.

VFS: A family that worked together even when working conditions were tougher, as I imagine they were during those long Council meetings, which could go on into the early hours of the morning. What are your memories of those famous late-night sessions at the Council?

LS: When I was working in the press office, there were rarely any night sessions. Every now and again, we would have to stay late to type up the press releases, but it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. For me, the night sessions came later.

VFS: Where was the General Secretariat of the Council located? Was it in the Charlemagne building?

LS: it all started in Val Duchesse. When I began in 1964, the General Secretariat of the Council was on Rue Ravenstein. It remained there until the United Kingdom's accession, and then moved later in 1972. The meetings were held at the Albertine. If you know the area, you'll know about the passage where the famous incident took place with the cows being brought up to the Council.

VFS: You were part of a team with a relatively small number of staff. Can you tell us about the dynamic at the office? So you had Ms Carini, the Head of the Press Office, who was under the supervision of the Head of Cabinet, Mr René Seingry.

LS: Yes, and then very shortly after Mr Schwaiger came, who expanded the service. Indeed, when I arrived, we were issuing the press releases, but we were a small and very modest press office. Mr Schwaiger was keen to expand the service. At first, he started attending Coreper meetings regularly, and then following the Council meetings. We didn't have a newsroom as such. Journalists would gather in the Charlemagne Hall (where people could smoke, by the way – I was left with a chronic inflammation of my vocal cords from having to strain my voice). Mr Schwaiger began planning for some small rooms to be fitted out for journalists. Really, he was the one who built up the press office, which I believe is now part of a much larger directorate.

FD: Yes, the press office still exists, but it now comes under DG COM, which also includes the archives. I can also tell you that the 'A' items still exist, and that everything that you did in the past is still widely consulted by historians and researchers today! Today, we have a website, but back then, how did communication with the journalists take place? Face to face?

LS: Face to face, yes, and over the telephone. The journalists were there during the Council session, downstairs in the hall, where they had typewriters so that they could work on site. Once an item had been approved and we were able to talk about it, we would go down to inform them. So the press was informed live or by telephone.

VFS: Do you remember any particularly striking moments in the history of the Council – with the journalists there, waiting for news – that might have been experienced in a particular way?

LS: I do, but not from that particular period. I have some highlights to share with you, but they happened when I was the press spokesperson.

Chapter 3
A few highlights: memories of an era

The first enlargement

VFS: We'll come back to that later, then. The year 1973 was a particularly important year, with the arrival of the British and the Irish.

LS: Yes, because throughout the negotiations on Britain's accession, the Irish would always come to my little office next to Ms Carini's to pick up bits of information and news from the meetings. When the enlargement finally took place, they were looking for people with knowledge of the Communities, and they offered me a position in the cabinet of the Vice-President, Dr Hillery. At the time, I held a C grade post, and they were offering me a B grade assistant position.

My colleagues in the press office didn't want me to leave, but at the same time they encouraged me to give it a try, and that's what I did. It was difficult at times, because people saw me as an old hand and seemed to think that I should know everything. But that wasn't the case, and I didn't know anything about the Commission either. I had a role as an archivist and was assisted by a very kind Irish lady. The pace of work wasn't very intense, except on the floor where Dr Hillery and his staff worked; they were always in a bit of a panic. I stayed for six or seven months.

Then Mr Calmes left, and Mr Hommel, another Luxembourger, succeeded him. Mr Calmes's secretary didn't want to stay, and then, as often happens, the new Secretary-General wanted to bring in someone new. I was at the Commission, but they phoned me to offer me the position. I accepted, even though it meant going back down to grade C – but now I was the Secretary-General's assistant. Soon afterwards, internal competitions were held, and I sat and passed the internal B grade competition.

Mr Hommel arrived in 1973 and stayed until 1980. I was once again working closely with ambassadors and deputies, and I could also accompany Mr Hommel on missions. Usually, a Director-General from the field under discussion would take part in the mission and bring along their secretary. Sometimes we also travelled with secretaries from the pools when translators were going as well. Those trips were very interesting, and sometimes very tiring too. We weren't there for sightseeing!

The Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

VFS: Can you tell us about the time when the farmers brought cows into the building?

LS: Ah yes, the famous cows. There was also the whole business with the empty chair. In 1966, the chair remained empty for almost six months, I think, which was also connected to an agricultural issue concerning agricultural subsidies. With hindsight, you can see the excesses of the agricultural policy; small farmers receive nothing, and the subsidies go to the large farms. The farmers often expressed their anger, dumping manure, blocking Rue de la Loi, and so on.

VFS: Yes, I'd like to mention in particular that incident in 1971, where Sicco Mansholt was faced with farmers who turned up with their cows and interrupted the meeting.

LS: That was still at the Albertine. I found some photos – you must have them in your archives. The poor animals had to go up the stairs; one cow had to be put down. Some chickens had also been let loose in the meeting room. There were certainly some unforgettable moments!

The preparation of the Treaties

FD: If you don't mind, we're going to take a little step back in time to 1957, when the Treaty of Rome was signed. You weren't there then, I imagine. They say the treaty was signed on a blank sheet?

LS: Indeed, I have an article about it. It was my colleague Mr Breuer, who was there with Mr Calmes, who told us the story. The treaty was 'blank' in the sense that it had the first and last pages, but nothing in between, because the text wasn't ready yet. I wasn't there myself, but I know the story. A fellow Luxembourger who had been there from the beginning told that story to the journalists. But you know, things like that happened quite often. I'm jumping from pillar to post here, but it reminds me of a mission to Washington in 73 or 74, during the energy crisis.

We had gone to the US to work on an energy agreement . We were working at the State Department in Washington to finalise the deal. We worked day and night in the basement of the State Department. The Secretary-General, the Director-General and the secretaries were all there around the table, assembling documents and making photocopies. There were two American former sailors, older gentlemen, who ran a small office equipment business, and they were there with a small photocopying machine. In Brussels, we already had very advanced machines. So in Washington, we put so much pressure on these people that their machine ended up breaking down. They watched us working like mad and said "Our unions wouldn't allow it, they wouldn't allow people to work like that." It was a perfect example of those situations where everybody behind the scenes worked together

– stapling copies and so on – so that our senior officials could go to meet with the Americans.

You see, that didn’t only happen for the Treaty of Rome; it happened often for other documents as well. That’s why we always took staff along on missions. For the ACP agreements too, there was always something that needed changing at the last minute. I think that nowadays the missions have stopped, but back then, we had to go and work on site. They were lovely trips, of course, but we had to work hard.

Chapter 4
Three Secretaries-General, three very distinct personalities

Calmes and Hommel

FD: You worked with three secretaries-general didn't you? And you spent your entire career in the cabinet? You’ve already spoken to us about Mr Calmes. Could you also tell us about Mr Hommel and Mr Ersbøll? Did the personalities of the Secretaries-General and heads of cabinet affect the dynamic?

LS: It was really a case of three different personalities. We saw Mr Calmes almost as a father figure, and we loved him very much. He was a very endearing and capable person. He had been there from the beginning and had been involved in setting up the Communities and drafting the Treaty of Rome. I never once saw Mr Calmes stressed. Things were more complicated with Mr Hommel. He arrived at a difficult time: the trade unions were making their demands heard, and there were strikes. In the cabinet, we didn't go on strike. Indeed, I couldn't even conceive that a European official could go on strike. In any case, we would have been requisitioned.

Anyway, the 1973–1974 period was very difficult for him, even though he was very ably assisted by his Head of Cabinet, Mr René Seingry, and by all his staff, including Mr Gianni Fabbri. Mr Hommel was heavily involved in managing the Council and running the Secretariat. There were also more of us by then, since Greece had just joined, following the United Kingdom, Ireland and Denmark. The structure also had to be adapted. When I arrived, there were six directorates-general. The services had to be reorganised. In my time, allocating meeting rooms was one of the cabinet’s tasks. There was one person who had to take care of the rooms for Council meetings, Coreper meetings and working party meetings. The verbatim reports of the Council meetings were also produced by the cabinet. I believe that these responsibilities were later divided among various directorates. There were also many newcomers who would come to introduce themselves to the Secretary-General in the hope of being recruited.

Ersbøll

FD: And what about Mr Ersbøll?

LS: He was a very charming and very polite man, much more involved in the political side of things. Just before Mr Hommel's departure, his Head of Cabinet had passed away, so Mr Ersbøll arrived with his own Head of Cabinet, Mr Skytte Christoffersen. I hardly ever saw him. He attended all the meetings and would return to his office in the evening. Sometimes I would wait for him with files for him to sign, but the cabinet had changed. The team had grown larger. There was now Mr Skytte Christoffersen, as well as

Mr Keller Nöellet and Mr Bryan Kinns. My impression is that they were less concerned with managing the General Secretariat of the Council and more focused on political matters. I spent a few years working with Mr Ersbøll, but my work was less interesting.

Mr Schwaiger was still around, and he suggested that I return to the press office, where he needed someone. M. Ersbøll wanted me to stay because he needed someone who knew how the Council worked and who was familiar with the staff and the Directors-General. In the end, I stayed on for three years, I think, and then I went back to the press office as a B grade official, even though I was doing the work of an A grade official. Mr Schwaiger had assigned me to agriculture. I knew absolutely nothing about it. I can assure you that in those last ten years, I worked harder than in the whole of my career up to that point. I had to bring myself up to speed, analyse the Commission's proposals, know what could and could not be said, and draft the press releases myself.

I was very fortunate in my dealings with the people responsible for the various files. Their door was always open to me, both with Mr Chioccioli and with Mr Fricchione before him. Everyone knew me, as I had been at the Secretary-General's office since day one. Even though I hadn't had any initial training in the field, everyone knew that I was conscientious and always did my utmost.

Chapter 5
Working alongside the Secretary-General

FD: I'd like to ask you a question about the European Council. If I've understood correctly from the lists, you had already been there since at least 1975, and so you were there at the very first European Council in Dublin – the first that could be called a European Council in the proper sense. Did you continue to attend the European Councils for the press?

LS: For the ordinary Council meetings, we were there in the meeting room – Mr Schwaiger for foreign affairs, and Ms Cesira for transport, finance or culture, for example. So we were in the room, except when it was a restricted session, but even then, we would slip into the interpreters' booths to hear what was being said. For a European Council, on the other hand, the press wasn't in the room. Someone would take notes, and the press releases would be drafted by people who attended the Council meetings. The journalists themselves were not physically in the room.

FD: When you were Mr Hommel's personal secretary, were you there in the meeting room?

LS: Not for the European Councils, no. I would be in the room during Council meetings when I was the press spokesperson for agriculture. It also happened right at the beginning of my career, when Ms Carini would call me in for one thing or another and ask me to stay in the room. It was only during the last ten years of my career that I was really active in the meeting room.

FD: We receive a lot of enquiries about the Antici Group. This group didn't produce any documents, apart from a few notes that we keep in the archives. It was an Italian ambassador, Mr Antici, who suggested creating the group. Do you remember that time? And what was the role of the General Secretariat's representative within the Antici Group? For example, at the European Council, the Antici officials were Mr Feipel and Ms Weiss, who were also referred to as 'liaison officers'. What was the role of this person?

LS: All I can tell you is that the Antici Group would lay the groundwork. They would prepare Coreper meetings and draft short briefing notes on the items on the agenda, which they then passed on to the Secretary-General. These notes were very concise, but they made it possible to keep track of what was going on.

FD: You went on a number of missions abroad – many related to the ACP group – to some rather exotic countries: Jamaica in 1974, Madagascar in 1971, the Bahamas, Fiji, etc.

LS: Speaking of Fiji, I have a little story, if you'd like to hear it. I was there with the Secretary-General and, as I mentioned, we did a bit of everything on those missions.

Before I tell you that story, I realise that I forgot to talk about the files we used to prepare in the cabinet. Before the meetings, each Directorate-General would prepare notes with the Commission's proposals and the note for the President. The person responsible for the item would write a short note for the President of the Council suggesting how to lead the discussion and what the possible outcome might be. For those of us in the press office, this was very useful, because it helped us to understand how the debates were likely to unfold and to prepare our press releases.

But back to Fiji. Along with another colleague, who is sadly no longer with us, I was in charge of protocol. We had to organise an official dinner for about fifty people and prepare the seating plan. We had laid out the name cards on white tablecloths, but since we were surrounded by a lush landscape, we thought it would be nice to add some little floral decorations. So we asked the hotel manager if it would be possible to add some flowers. She told us that we could pick them ourselves, and we made some lovely little arrangements.

But a quarter of an hour later, when we came back into the room, we saw that the tablecloths were crawling with tiny insects. It was horrific! It was also very hot – the table was set in a hall equipped with big ceiling fans. We asked if it would be possible to turn them on to cool the room before the guests arrived. What a disaster! All our name cards and little decorations went flying! That's just one of many little stories from those missions.

FD: Was it complicated to organise those missions? Did you prepare them well in advance? After all, these missions involved a large number of people.

LS: Yes, you're right, though of course we had a travel office to handle things. There were quite a few of us, including translators. We even brought along typewriters and all the other equipment to some of the countries. Still, there was always something missing, and we would have to improvise at the last minute. For the dinners, we had to think carefully about who should sit next to whom – by language, for example, or by country or continent. It was complicated, but fun.

Chapter 6
Memories from the press office

FD: You returned to the press office in 1984 to work under Mr Schwaiger. What exactly were your duties?

LS: Unofficially, I was the spokesperson, without the grade to match, but I later had the chance to sit an internal A grade competition, which I passed before retiring. My main field was agriculture, although at one point Mr Schwaiger asked me to take on steel, which people were starting to talk about a great deal at the time. We were a small team, and we were all versatile. That was the period when I experienced a lot of night sessions. In agriculture, the negotiations often went right down to the wire. There would be a short break, then talks would resume, and we'd be there all night. It was the same in Luxembourg. Sometimes the journalists would get bored and take off, only to call us at nine the next morning for updates just as we were surfacing, barely awake because the meeting had finished at five or six in the morning. But at least we were treated to croissants at six!

I've kept in touch with some journalists from back then. There is one that I still see regularly, and we reminisce about old memories, like when I had to explain the compensatory amounts for farmers to the press at the end of a meeting, in the early morning. There was adrenaline, and it worked!

Chapter 7
Looking back on a career

VFS: We're coming to the end of our interview. We can say that you have been there for some of the key moments in the history of European integration, at the High Authority of the ECSC, at Eurotom, at the Council and even at the Commission, during the empty chair crisis, and through years of negotiations with Mrs Thatcher's Britain.

LS: Oh yes, Mrs Thatcher and her 'I want my money back'! We experienced some great moments in the press office, starting with the entry of the first three countries, then Greece, and especially with the arrival of Spain and Portugal. That was a big moment for the press office, because all the journalists were there, especially the Spaniards from the *El País* newspaper. I remember we even popped the champagne! After that, I decided to leave, because everything was already starting to change and I was tired. It was the right time to go. You have to know when to go.

VFS: To conclude, do you have any last remarks you'd like to share about your career?

LS: 'Career' is a big word. I feel that I've been very lucky. I'm self-taught, I didn't pursue higher education. I'd also say I'm pleased with myself. I think I steered my own course well, but I owe a great deal of thanks to a lot of people who have always believed in me. I think I met the right people at the right time, including Mr Schwaiger, and I seized the opportunities that came my way. Overall, I am happy with how my career, as you say, turned out.