Chapter 18

ROOTS IN QUICKSAND

Long ago, when he was still a pupil at the European school in Brussels, he felt European. Now that he's working as a teacher at this school, he describes himself as 'a Belgian who still isn't much at home in Belgium'.

Since he's left school no day has passed without François Wathelet (42) asking himself which identity he has. He told me this when I first met him back in 2000 and he's repeating it now. 'If you don't have a clear identity you keep looking for one,' he says. 'This goes for me, this goes for old classmates with whom I'm still in touch and I see it happening with my pupils, too. The European school doesn't educate European citizens but people with a potential handicap.'

Wathelet is a slim man with short blond hair, wearing khaki trousers and a crisp cotton shirt. He has fresh, boyish features. Three years ago he sold his little apartment at the Place St.Boniface, a lovely square in the heart of Brussels, and bought an old house – one-in-a-row - in Rhode St-Genèse, a village that has become Brussels suburbia over the years. He lives there with his Roumenian girlfriend. They're renovated the house themselves. If you walk past the bakery, the greengrocer's and the church you're out in the fields already. Wathelet is not the only one who's fled the city. Lots of old houses and farms here have been bought and restored by Europeans. Early morning you can see a whole procession of them driving from here to Brussels. 'I'm lucky I'm Belgian,' says Wathelet. 'If I would have been a German or an Italian I would have paid 40 per cent more for my house. The Belgians complain a lot about the Europeans but at the same time they're making good money out of them.'

He just came back from school, ahead of the traffic jams this time. It's the end of the afternoon. He gets some water and beer from the fridge and offers me a lazy chair upstairs in his office. The floor are wooden. So is his desk, which he's made himself. Against the walls, painted in soft colours, lean rows of full book cases. One can correct pupil's exams in a worse environment.

Wathelet's father is a French speaking Belgian. His mother is Dutch. Both were European idealists. They met in Luxembourg in the fifties, where the European Community of Coal and Steel – the precursor of the EU – was established. Later, when the European Commission took over, they moved to Brussels with most of the organization. They got five children. 'We were brought up in a completely European way,' says Wathelet. 'We went to the European school. In the weekends we played with the children of Italian or German colleagues of my parents. My piano teacher was French. I only ever met Belgians at the sports club.'

Now there are 13 European schools in the whole EU with over 20.000 pupils in total. There are three of those schools in Brussels, the fourth will be opened soon – for kids between 3 and 18 years of age. The first European school was set up in 1953 in Luxemburg at the request of Coal and Steel officials, who wanted their kids to be educated in their own language albeit altogether under one roof. Soon such a school was opened in Brussels, too, and in some other European cities where European institutions were established.

When Wathelet went there, the European Community had only six member states. At that time there were already too many pupils to hold the annual Christmas party at the house of the Commission President. Still everybody knew each other. 'I loved that school,' says Wathelet. 'Every kid had its own language group. My first language was French. But the more you got classes in other languages, the more you we were mixed with the others. I had mainly French and German friends. After school we would play table tennis together. Every year we went on holidays together for two weeks. Our friendships were deep and solid. I had a real European social life.'

But after his secondary school exams (at 18) he got the shock of his life. A culture shock, he calls it. For he discovered that there was no European life at all beyond school and well-protected *l'Europe en famille*. He went to study Philosophy at the Université Libre de Bruxelles (the French version, for there is a Flemish-speaking university in Brussels with the same name), followed by two years at Yale in the US. Almost everyone he met at university had a well-defined identity. You were either Belgian or American or French. Wathelet had a Belgian passport without knowing Belgium at all. It never even crossed his mind to take the trouble of getting to know Belgium either. He had never felt at home there. But the world he did feel at home in – Europe - had all of a sudden been reduced to an air bubble. No one had ever heard of a 'European identity'. No one understood what it was about. 'It existed mainly in the minds of the founding fathers of Europe and of the small group of people who followed them,' Wathelet remarks, a bit bitterly.

This is the handicap he mentioned earlier: 'It means that you don't have the right equipment to function well in the real world.'

Nevertheless, when he got back from Yale he plunged straight back into this imaginary world. He wanted to go back to Brussels. His friends from Yale had fanned out over the world. He didn't want to go and live in a strange city once again in order to see his new friends disappearing one after the other. In short, he wanted a base. The only place that qualified more or less was Brussels. If he had roots at all, they would be there.

First he had to go into the army. He did it reluctantly but at least it was a *Belgian* institution. Afterwards he became a trainee at the Education department of the European Commission. 'The Commission paid far higher salaries than the Belgian state,' he says with a knowing smile. But there was another reason. Because of his personal quest he had gotten interested in European education. Which role, he asked himself, could European schools play in the establishment of a European identity? In h*is* experience the European school did not provide the best model.

First he needed to know what had become of his old schoolmates. Was he the only one who had these kinds of experiences? He wrote a research proposal for the European parliament, which financed the European schools together with the European Commission and all EU member states. Parliament gave Watlehet the go-ahead. His first problem arose immediately: he didn't know how to approach his old schoolmates because the school kept no records of them. Nobody at the school knew where they had gone to. So Wathelet wrote to most of the Commission officials, asking them to send his questionnaires on to their grown-up children. He got as many as 620 answers back. The results, which he wrote down in a report for the Parliament in 1994, aren't very surprising. The ex-pupils turned out to speak 4,4 languages in total and to have lived in 3,5 countries on average. 84 percent studied at a university or had graduated already. 20 percent of those who were working, had become national or international civil servants. 14 percent had gone into business, 13 percent were doctors, and 12 percent were teachers and academics.

Wathelet admits he was disappointed: 'I only got a lot of dry facts. Actually I wanted to ask questions about identity, psychological wellbeing and so on. But to do this well you need to work with control groups, so as to be able to compare the ex-pupils of the European school with people who have gone through a national curriculum. But parliament thought this became too expensive. Hence the pile of facts.'

Wathelet is teaching ethics, a sort of philosophy. I had met him in 2000, when I was working on an article about the so-called eurokids: children from mixed European parents who grew up in Brussels. I wanted to know if eurokids were different from other children, and to which extent. A student counselor advised me to talk to Wathelet who, apart from having been a pupil himself, had set up a club for ex-pupils in 1993. Moreover he also taught at Belgian schools, so he could compare.

Wathelet immediately understood what I was talking about. European identity and the role education could play in this – those were his pet subjects. He took me to the school a couple of times. I sat in his classes; he introduced me to pupils and other teachers. One thing struck me immediately: the European school is not an elite school, but the level is quite high. Children of European officials have preference status; their employer pays the fees. Children of outsiders are equally admitted without any admission exams, albeit only if there is enough place left for them. Those parents will have to foot the bill themselves – which is considerate (Belgian schools are normally free of charge). So apart from eurokids there were diplomat's children at the school as well as children of expats who had been sent to Belgium by a multinational company for a few years. For them the system was ideal: after a while they would go back to their own country without having missed anything of the national curriculum. To make sure it worked well, most of the teachers at the European school are 'on loan' from national ministries in the member countries. During their stay abroad the ministries keep paying the teacher's salaries.

All the children get the same level of education at the European school, whether they are gifted or not. But ex-pupils are saying that the level is so high that in the first years of university (all European universities have their doors wide open for those who've managed to get the European 'baccalauréat') they don't need to work much. Most pupils have well-educated parents. Knowledge and ambition are in their mother's milk. When you walk into a class and listen to them, you can smell it. The pupils I met in Wathelet's class were intelligent and eloquent. At the schoolyard - well maintained – little kids played hide-and-seek in several languages. On lowish walls around it older girls with long blond hair and jeans whispered in Irish or Danish or Portuguese about boys with short hair and jeans. If someone joined such a group, the rest would effortlessly switch to another language.

There's a big stone on that schoolyard with an engraved quote from Jean Monnet, the (French)man who did more than anyone else to get the EU on its feet after the Second World War. The text is about the pupils. Liberally translated: 'While they will keep loving their own countries and be proud of them, they will become Europeans in spirit, educated to finish and solidify their father's works: the establishment of a unified and prosperous Europe'.

'It's beautiful, don't you think?' Wathelet said when he showed me the stone back then. At the end of his yearly visit to the school the educational inspector always tells the pupils: '*Vous êtes la crème de l'Europe'*. (You're the very best of Europe)

But socially some children pay a heavy price for this. A student counsellor told me: 'Many of these children are too ambitious . They play the violin and ride horses and have ballet and rugby classes and god knows what else. Everything has to be perfect. They have to perform all day long. There's often no one at home. The parents both work long days. The children live in villa neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the city. Their friends' houses can be kilometres away. So many of them stay at school till we close the gates. Often we literally have to send them home at the end of the day.'

Another teacher remarked: 'It seems to me that these children have no roots in a country but in a school instead.'

In quite a monomaniac subculture like this the ranks of so many parents working for European institutions cast shadows on the schoolyard. According to Wathelet there are children who are actually boasting that their fathers are very important at the Commission. Some parents call him at night at home using their position to get things done for their kids: 'Listen, I am a director at the Commissoin and I demand…' A former director-general from Italy told me once that his son had come home complaining about a classmate whose father 'is only an A7' (meaning a nobody, at least compared to the Italian who had A1 or the highest rank a European official can ever get). The next day the Italian took both his boys out of school and sent them straight to a Belgian school. ‘That will teach them not to behave like snobs any more,’ he commented.

Wathelet thinks that the school was nicer in the old days. There were fewer pupils from fewer countries. Classes were much smaller. There was unity, in a way. Now the kids tend to hang out more with their own language groups. In the canteen the German-speakers all eat their pizzas in one corner and the English-speakers occupy their own long table. In the teacher’s rooms this isn’t any different, by the way. In the seventies, when Wathelet went to the school, the parents were different, too. They felt like pioneers. They passed it on to their offspring: a European spirit, ‘let’s make the world a better place’. Nowadays Europe is more an institution than a philisophy for most. ‘Many officials work in Brussels because of the money,’ Wathelet says. ‘I’m not saying they’re doing a lousy job but the ideal is petering out. Some complain about this and want to leave, but they’re stuck: they have families here and mortgages and comfortable lives. It’s one of the many symptoms of the political crisis in the EU. No one thinks of the common interest any more. Of the reason why we’re all here.’

If it’s true that there is less and less vision guiding Europe, ‘being European’ won’t have much meaning any more either. In this sense the European children in Brussels are starting to resemble the second generation (or the third in some cases) Moroccans in the city: tourists in Morocco, migrants with an identity problem in Belgium. Wathelet knows them well. He’s teaching at two Belgian schools downtown. In one of them 85 percent originally comes from the Maghreb. There are hardly any Belgians there any more.

The reason he’s started working at those Belgian schools a couple of years ago is financial. Ten years ago, he says, he earned 70 percent more at the European school than now. In recent years most EU member states have stopped contributing altogether, he says. They only still pay for the teacher’s salaries and some teaching materials. Belgium offers the buildings and the infrastructure free of charge. The European Commission and the Parliament have to cough up the rest – more than ever in fact, because the schools in Brussels continue to grow. With every enlargement the amount of eurokids in Brussels rises. The expansion of European competences (such as consumer’s safety issues or the environment) has attracted more officials. The canteen, the homework classes after school and the increasing amount of non-national teachers also make it more costly to run them. These services are needed. But those were the first that got sever cuts.

‘First the common holidays were done away with,’ Wathelet recalls. ‘They weren’t really needed, they said. Then they started eating away at employees’ rights. For starters, we lost our European pension. Then we lost the insurance that all European officials benefit from. We have to pay that out of our own pockets now. Our salaries are slowly going down while the classes are getting bigger. I used to have 20, 23 pupils per class. Now I get 32. They’re nice, but they’re assertive as hell.’

He tells me that he’s part of a group of 50 teachers that has just sued the European Commission for breach of contract. These teachers all work locally and directly for the schools; they’re not sent and paid by national ministries. But if the problem is that member states don’t pay their contributions any more, I ask him, why not take the member states to court instead? It’s not the Commission’s fault, after all. ‘You’re right,’ Wathelet says, ‘but our contract is with the Commission. So we can only sue the Commission.’

The Commission is very embarrassed by this situation. On the one hand they have to honour the contractual right of every European official to send his kids to the European school for free. The Commission is obliged to keep supplying this service. On the other hand it doesn’t know where to get the money from any more. Wathelet says that ‘no one at the Commission dares to challenge the member states about this. ‘Politically the timing is so bad that it's better not to attack them,' they say, 'it's useless now.' So they cut into our rights instead. Some parents even took to the streets recently to protest the cuts. Some of them care about us. Others sit in parents' committees and are getting fed up that all they ideas and proposals are being vetoed by the Commission for lack of funds – meaning, those committees are becoming useless themselves. Can you imagine: all these neat middle class people, getting to the streets?!'

Once the teachers went on strike as well. They were supported by several unions for European civil servants. But on one condition: the teachers were not supposed to contact the press. The unions feared any publicity would backlash, and that many journalists would write articles about 'rich Europeans want to earn even more' (a genre many are indeed quite good at and is well received in several European capitals). According to the unions this would not be the way to change minds in national ministries. A typical Commission attitude, Wathelet thinks: 'It always complains about member states bossing them around or not honouring commitments. But it will never fight them openly.'

Meanwhile, Wathelet goes on, not many people at the Commission really care about the philosophy of the school, let alone the question how education can help fostering a European identity. Wathelet and his girlfriend have no children. But he knows as many Europeans in Brussels as I do who are constantly debating thew choice of the best school for their kids. All these debates stem from one single question: which identity should the children have? The choice between a Flemish school, a French-speaking Belgian school, the international school, the European school or one of the many national schools that have branches in Brussels (the French *lycée*, a Dutch, a German and a Swedish school for example) – that choice will be defined by the quality of the schools of course but equally by the future that you see for your children. Do you want to give them a national anchor or an international one? In which culture, in which country do you want them to feel at home? 'There are more and more Europeans in the city,' Wathelet remarks. 'The amount of children from mixed marriages is growing. Hence there are more and more people here for whom the link between education and identity really matters. And what does the Commission do with it? Nothing, absolutely nothing. The only European project that I've heard of is called 'Cuts'.'

It is undeniable, Wathelet says, that the European school provides many children with certain 'codes' that will benefit them greatly in the future – whatever else will happen to them. They easily connect with strangers. They tend to be well-equipped verbally, and have always been encouraged to actively use languages even if they're not fluent in them.They also tend to identify strongly with minorities. They know exactly what it is like to be the only German in a history class where a Frenchman teaches the *Anschluss:* you better keep your mouth shut and listen. At the European school everyone is a minority. Old pupils all say that at this school you learn to be tolerant and never to criticize groups.

'Those are big advantages,' Wathelet acknowledges. 'But they don't form a European identity. Such an identity only exists in a small circle of people in Brussels. For them it's a political choice to feel 'European'.'

But what about him? Wathelet used to feel European himself. Is he now saying that this was a political sentiment? No, he says, 'but I grew up in a very protected environment, shaped by idealistic adults who *did* have that feeling. I've never learnt Dutch from my mother for instance. And at home we spoke French without the strong Belgian accent. My father didn't follow Belgian politics. He never told us much about Belgium. We were beyond all things national. I thought I was European. That's what we were told, at home and at school: 'Your roots are European'.'

It’s getting dark. He gets up and switches some lights on. Then he says: ‘But when I left the protected environment of my childhood, I realized that I mainly had roots in quicksand.’