



# Ambassador's Activities

2013

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Speech by HE Bernard Emié,  
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

at the ceremony to award the insignia  
of *Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur*  
to Mr Leonard Blavatnik

London, 27 September 2013

*Cher* Leonard Blavatnik,

*Cher* Lord Weidenfeld,

Ambassadors,

*Cher* Alexander Yakovenko,

*Cher* Zvi Heifetz,

*Cher* Sir Michael Pakenham,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It's a great honour and a pleasure for me to welcome you here, *cher* Leonard Blavatnik – surrounded by your family, friends and so many leading figures – and present you with the insignia of *Chevalier de l'Ordre de la Légion d'Honneur*.

Receiving this most prestigious of our national orders is always a moving and important moment for anyone, be they French or foreign. This high distinction was created by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802 to reward its recipient's outstanding services to France. You are one of those exceptional figures, and your career is truly fascinating. Before I present you with your insignia, let me briefly retrace your steps.

Nearly 10 years ago you chose to settle in London, four houses away from here. In the space of a decade you've become part of the British landscape, thanks to your extraordinary philanthropy. The greatest British institutions, in fields ranging from contemporary art to education to opera, have found in you an invaluable supporter. You provided Oxford with the prestigious School of Government which it lacked and which now bears your name. And at my request, you recently expressed interest in a programme especially close to our hearts: the Entente Cordiale scholarships.

The Entente Cordiale provides one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's finest lessons in politics: that of the improbable reconciliation of two colonial powers who signed an end to hostilities in 1904 and who, at the Franco-British Exhibition of 1908, created a coat of arms bearing the letters RF, no longer signifying "*République Française*" but "Real Friends", and who entered the Great War as allies.

But if history remembers only the leaders' names, that of the Entente Cordiale recalls the public's crucial role in politics. On 31 July 1914, when the Austro-Hungarians were mobilizing and Jean Jaurès was assassinated in Paris, *Boris Godunov* was being staged in Covent Garden. At the end of the performance, the Russian tenor sang the *Marseillaise* after *God Save the Queen* and sparked a public uproar in London. Five days later, Britain emerged from its "splendid isolation".

But if this evening is to reflect the Entente Cordiale, let it also reflect the Triple Entente, which changed Europe's destiny by uniting Russia, France and Britain in a single bloc. For you – who witnessed Stalinism's swan song, found a new motherland in the United States and today rub shoulders with Europe's leading figures – there is nothing theoretical about international relations: they've deeply influenced your own career.

Born in 1957 in Odessa, in what was still the Soviet Union, you came into the world with the Sputnik and grew up under Khrushchev and Brezhnev to the rhythm of scientific discoveries and the Space Race. Under the watchful eye of your two academic parents, you picked up a master's degree from Moscow State University and, above all, met that other boffin, the mathematician and computer buff Viktor Vekselberg, with whom you would embark on your wildest projects.

You went your separate ways after your parents took a radical decision: to emigrate to the United States, leaving all their possessions behind. You were 21 when you arrived in New York and were forced to reinvent yourself.

In the space of a few years, you scooped diplomas from the best American universities: a master's in computer science from Columbia and an MBA from Harvard Business School. Meanwhile, you obtained US nationality and put the principles of the American dream into practice: while perfecting computer techniques at Macy's, you launched yourself into the property market in Manhattan.

In 1986 you founded Access Industries, laying the foundations of an empire that has never stopped spreading to this day.

In 1990, history offered you a new frontier – not in the west but in the east, amid the great plains of Siberia. The Iron Curtain came down; a new Russia emerged. Newly armed with your MBA, you were ready to embrace new challenges. Viktor Vekselberg persuaded you to join him. The new “gold rush” led you to aluminium and oil.

When the newly-elected Boris Yeltsin embarked on a vast privatization of state companies, you bought up sectors that suddenly came onto the market. The competition was fierce, but along with Viktor Vekselberg you carried out a series of successful transactions and bought up a rival, creating Rusal, which in the space of a few years would become a giant of the aluminium industry.

In the mid-1990s, you went into partnership with Mikhail Fridman and German Khan to acquire TNK, exploiting the oil reserves of western Siberia. In 1997, BP took an interest and set out on the adventure with TNK, with the encouragement of Tony Blair and Vladimir Putin. BP-TNK, an extraordinary joint venture, was born in 2003.

You would always say, modestly, “I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time”, but your bold change of direction in the “noughties” shows, on the contrary, that your success is no accident. You set off to conquer new sectors: hotels and then the cultural industries – unexpected choices revealing a very special sensitivity to European culture. France was to play a full role in this.

In 2006 you took an interest in its flagship hotels and became the owner of two addresses that make you the envy of the world: the five-star Hôtel de Vendome in Paris and the legendary, magnificent Grand-Hôtel du Cap-Ferrat on the Côte d’Azur. Since 1908, the latter establishment has seen, among others, the Russian imperial family, Charlie Chaplin and Winston Churchill pass through its doors. You carefully renovated it in 2009, expanded it and ensured it had a top-class restaurant. Thanks to you, it fully deserves its prestigious *palace* distinction and proudly ranks among the world’s top five hotels for the quality of its service.

In Beaulieu-sur-Mer in 2008, you invested in another jewel: the Villa Eiffel overlooking the sea, designed by Gustave Eiffel, who spent his family holidays there. You decided to restore the historic part of the property and create a 40-room hotel that could employ 80 people.

Finally, in 2003 you embarked on an extraordinary property project which, I believe, is due to open its doors shortly: you purchased the hotel at 140 rue de Grenelle that housed the Institut

Géographique National and called on an excellent architect, Jean-Jacques Ory, to create 16 luxury flats surrounded by green spaces.

More than 350 people in France work directly in your establishments, and I believe you're not short of ideas for certain plots on the Côte d'Azur. Of course I encourage you to invest ever more in our attractive, fascinating country, which is so open to foreign interest.

Judging by the choices you make – in Paris, on the Côte d'Azur or in Mégève – I like to think you share our commitment to our proud cultural and natural heritage. Everywhere you go, you manage to recreate the French way of life with an attention to detail that does you credit.

*Cher Leonard Blavatnik,*

While you're committed to heritage, you don't neglect the industries of tomorrow.

In 2004, you were one of the first investors to support Edgar Bronfman when he bought Warner Music Group. For four years, while on the board of the world's third-largest record company, you oversaw his efforts to give the company new impetus by boosting digital sales and attempting a merger with EMI.

And even though you prefer the shadows to the spotlight, you yourself hit the headlines when you bought Warner Music Group on 6 May 2011.

It was a striking move, Warner Brothers being valued at several billion dollars.

But there's more. Your choice wasn't an obvious one: in the past four years, Warner Music's profits have fallen by 15%. It may be a platform for the greatest talents of the past and present, from The Doors to Muse, but it couldn't escape the crisis affecting the whole recording industry.

You're convinced the industry is making a successful transition to the digital age. Plummeting record sales and illegal downloads have cost it dear. But you see the big picture and believe in the future of streaming, which responds to the new patterns of consumption.

Within two years, history proved you right: in the first half of 2013, for the first time, digital music sales caught up with CD sales in several European countries.

If your success can partly be explained by a visionary approach, your personal commitment also plays a key role. You love both central European Romany music and Leonard Cohen. You meet Madonna and congratulate all the great artists produced by Warner. They include many French artists: icons who have passed away like Michel Berger, enduring stars like Johnny Hallyday, Lara Fabian and Jean-Jacques Goldman, and young idols like Phoenix and Christophe Maé.

With your modest humour you like to say that, when it comes to music, you're an expert in the sense defined by Mark Twain: just some guy from out of town.

But after two years at the head of Warner, no one believes you're an outsider any more. You recently bought the Parlophone label, and in October 2012 you invested in one of France's most promising companies, Deezer.

We deeply appreciate that choice.

Through Deezer, you're investing in the future of French technology. Present in over 100 countries, boasting 18 million accounts and closely linked to the dynamism of Facebook, it has huge potential. Deezer has begun to establish itself in the South American market, but the United States has yet to be conquered. Because that market has until now been deemed too competitive, its Swedish rival Spotify has been able to reign there unchallenged.

Your acquisition of a 30% stake in Deezer is a game-changer. Along with Orange – the French telecoms giant that owns 11% of the streaming site – Deezer's future is in your hands. The challenges are great: in particular, the number of paid subscriptions is still too small and will need to be increased.

But by banking on Deezer, which gives pride of place to French artists, you're also helping raise awareness of our music beyond our borders.

It's not easy to do justice to your many commitments. Together with your wife Emily, you've extended your support to opera and cinema. You generously back the Paris Film Festival and the Paris Opera and Ballet, who, through me, reiterate their gratitude to you this evening.

I mentioned the School of Government in Oxford, to which you're so committed, and also the Entente Cordiale scholarships. For the past 20 years, this programme has been inviting young French and British researchers to shape their thinking through contact with the neighbouring country and by studying in its best institutions. Thanks to your generous support, four

generations of students will benefit from this encouragement, and you'll be an ideal sponsor for the scholarships.

It's only fair to say that the philanthropic energy that drives you is a joint venture. Very early on, together with Emily, you lent your support to causes you're passionate about: first and foremost, many New York-based Jewish charity institutions like the Colel Chabad food bank, 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y, the Mariinsky Foundation of America and the Center for Jewish History. So this evening's decoration, *chère* Emily, is also for you.

For the past few years your sponsorship activities have been focused on the future: you've been founding institutions that will pass into posterity while supporting tomorrow's talents.

In 2006, following the Nobel prize ceremony in Stockholm, you expressed to Ellis Rubinstein, President of the New York Academy of Sciences, your wish to make yourself useful. The next year, the Blavatnik Awards for Young Scientists were created. An annual prize now goes to the best scientists working in areas as specialized as black holes and particle physics.

Soon afterwards, in London, you expressed the same wish to the editor George Weidenfeld, a member of the House of Lords: you wanted to be of use in the cultural field. In 2012 the Blavatnik School of Government opened its doors in Oxford, with about 100 students preparing for the ethical and intellectual challenges to be faced by future heads of public policy. Your exceptional donation was one of the largest the university has received in its 900-year history.

*Cher Leonard Blavatnik,*

What a dazzling record! What commitment to the service of others and to the noble causes of education and culture!

For this impressive career, and to thank you for the exceptional figure you are, for your economic engagement in France and your generosity towards our educational and cultural diplomacy, France has chosen to pay tribute to you this evening, through me, and award you our highest distinction.

*Leonard Blavatnik, au nom du Président de la République et en vertu des pouvoirs qui nous sont conférés, nous vous faisons Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.*