

Speech by H.E. Sylvie Bermann
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom
at the centenary of the Lycée Charles de Gaulle
London, 21 May 2015

Your Royal Highness,

Madame la Directrice de l'Agence française de l'enseignement à l'étranger,

Monsieur le Proviseur,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Lycées are the places where all our happy childhood memories are concentrated, the theatres where our youth was played out, the classrooms where – day after day, year after year – we grew up. For pupils who studied in French *lycées* abroad, what greater fondness could there be than for the schools they attended from the age of four to 18?

Every French *lycée* abroad has its own identity: the one in London was built from 1915 onwards, when Marie d'Orliac founded what would become the Lycée Charles de Gaulle.

The Lycée was originally intended to take in the children of Belgian and French refugees from the Nord department, occupied by the German army. This Franco-Belgian origin deserves to be emphasized, and your presence among us, *Monsieur l'Ambassadeur*, testifies to that shared memory.

Its creation was an act of faith in the dissemination of French teaching and culture: Marie d'Orliac, who had also created the *Institut français* five years earlier, laid the foundations for

what would, in the course of the 20th century, become one of the most emblematic of all French schools abroad.

The Lycée Charles de Gaulle was infused with the vitality of the exceptional figures who developed it. After Marie d'Orlac, another woman of strong beliefs, Thérèse Oakeshott, ran the school, turning it into one of Europe's very first mixed *lycées*. She set up commercial classes to train totally bilingual secretaries; pupils from them went on to become formidable spies serving in the Special Operations Executive, the British secret service created by Winston Churchill in 1940.

Indeed, the Lycée's destiny is profoundly tied up with the history of the 20th century. During the dark hours of the Second World War, the first building erected on the current site was occupied by the Free French Air Force, and the Lycée transferred to Cambridge and then, very quickly, to the magnificent Lake District. There, a generation of pupils and teachers forged unshakeable relationships, united by difficult living conditions. Those relationships endure to this day, and I welcome those *anciens du Cumberland* present here; I know they've been closely involved in preparations for this centenary celebration, particularly by meeting the younger generation. The pupils who shared classroom benches there included Romain Gary, Pierre Mendès France and the late Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, to whom the President paid tribute.

Under the leadership of Augustin Gaudin, between 1948 and 1965, the Lycée underwent an exceptional renaissance: many artists, journalists, political figures, aristocrats and British Francophiles were to choose the Lycée's distinctive, international education for their children.

Your Royal Highness, it was then that your parents chose a primary schoolteacher from the Lycée, Mlle Jossieron, to teach you French.

To Headmaster Gaudin we also owe the creation of the British section: English-language education in a French setting, aimed at keeping British children at our Lycée until they went to university. The section took in generations of young Britons who subsequently became ambassadors for French culture. I know that some of them are among you, and I pay tribute to them: they are witnesses to this curious and quite unique adventure.

As more and more pupils arrived, it proved necessary to build extensions, move the Lycée to South Kensington, construct new buildings and carry out refurbishments. The French Embassy put extraordinary energy into acquiring the necessary land, because what is known today as the *Carré Français* wasn't built in a day! The French network thus strengthened its position at the heart of one of the capital's most coveted neighbourhoods.

In the 1980s, the Lycée adopted the name "Charles de Gaulle" in tribute to the man who set up resistance from London during the Second World War, then presided over France's destiny.

And the number of pupils has constantly risen: those from French families in particular, with London holding such a strong attraction for them. So with the Wix and André Malraux primary schools opening their doors in the 1990s and the Marie d'Orliac primary school in 2008, the Lycée has expanded "beyond its walls" to accommodate young French children who are still flocking in their droves, thanks in particular to the essential role played by the parents' association, especially at Wix.

There is still a growing demand for school places today: I pay tribute here to the representatives of London's French schools, who are skilfully handling this demand. The school programme was introduced in 2008 and is supported by the Agency for French Teaching Abroad and co-managed by the French Foreign Ministry, parents and elected representatives, and as Ambassador I'm very keen that it should serve as an example for the structured development of our French model.

So we've come together today to celebrate 100 years of the Lycée Charles de Gaulle, and also its development, its ability to adapt and transform itself when confronted by the challenges history has thrown at it.

I'd like to thank the Lycée's centenary committee – which involved the Embassy –, the Lycée's senior management team and other staff, the parents and the pupils. And also, of course, the Old Students' Association, which, incidentally, was behind the plan to publish the book about the centenary.

My thanks also go to all the teaching staff and pupils, who have spent the past year preparing for this celebration by delving into their school's history.

On the Lycée's behalf, I'd like to thank the generous public, institutional and private donors who have helped give special prestige to the festivities, which are taking place in all the teaching establishments connected to the Lycée over these three days and throughout the rest of May and June.