

Ceremony for the award of the Légion d'Honneur by Mrs Noëlle Lenoir, French Minister for European Affairs, Speech by the European Ombudsman, Mr Jacob Söderman, Strasbourg, 3 September 2002

Speech

Madame la Ministre,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen!

It is a great honour for me personally and for the Office I represent to be here on this occasion. I am deeply grateful to the French President and Government for awarding me the prestigious title of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur and I am particularly grateful to you, Madame la Ministre, for coming here today in person to present this award to me.

A summer day, 45 years ago, a young man was sitting on a bench under a tree in the graveyard of Montmartre, looking at the tomb of Guy de Maupassant. He had arrived in Paris with his friends to visit jazz clubs in the district of St Germain des Prés. They knew that black American jazz musicians came over to play there during the summer. In Paris, they were appreciated as first class musicians and respected as human beings, which was not the case, at the time, in the United States.

This young student had gone through the experiences of his generation. As a child, he heard Hitler shout on the radio. His hometown had been bombed by the enemy and his father killed in the war. He had grown with a nation that rebuilt a society and shared the hardships and hopes of that period.

That summer day, he was a privileged man. He paid his respects to a writer that was a true master in telling recounting human aspects of life with compassion and skill. He had listened to outstanding musicians playing tunes deriving from the oppressed and bringing peace and joy to Europe. He had found a nation where respect and tolerance were put in practice in daily life and where the most beloved jazz musician was a gypsy, playing the guitar with only two fingers on his left hand, Django Reinhardt.

A passer-by might only have recognised a pale young student on the bench but it is quite



possible that something essential took place. It might have crystallised my basic view on human life and its purpose.

Madame la Ministre,

When I studied the obligations and the duties arising from the acceptance of this high decoration, I found out that the most important is to accept the values of the *Republique* . I can assure you that this will not be a burden for me. I lived them in a period of my life when the human soul is most open for experiences that have an enduring influence.

Once again, Madame la Ministre, I would like to express my sincere thanks to you on behalf of my staff and myself for your courtesy in coming here personally to present this award to me.

I am happy and honoured to accept the Award of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Thank you for your attention.