

**Speech by Vera Michalski-Hoffmann  
at the laying of the first stone of the *Maison de l'écriture*  
on 10 September 2009 in Montricher**

I would like to start by extending to you all a warm welcome and thanking those who will speak after me, in the order in which they will take the floor :

- the Mayor of the Commune of Montricher, within the confines of which we are here assembled, Michel Desmeules, who at the crucial phase spared no effort to ensure the success of the application for the construction permit,
- Mr Vincent Mangeat, architect of this innovative project, to which he has wholeheartedly dedicated his knowledge and vast experience, and
- Mr Hervé Corne, Commercial Director of Losinger Marazzi SA, Suisse Occidentale, who is replacing Mr Vaultier, retained by other obligations, and whose company will be responsible for the implementation of this complex project.

I also welcome the representatives of the communal and cantonal authorities, of the Polish Embassy, the press, the various building enterprises and professionals who will intervene on the worksite, the neighbours who may have to suffer a little over the coming period, and my friends and Swiss and Polish family.

I would also like to take this opportunity to present to you Ms Ann Bandle, the new Director of the Foundation, who joined us on 1 July last. She will be able to answer all the questions that you may wish to raise today or later. She took up her post just as a very active phase was being implemented, in which her efficiency has been outstanding.

The ceremony will be simple. We have planned it, admittedly, as an occasion that is slightly solemn, but also festive. Following the inevitable speeches, we will follow the stone and we will together walk along the « *Grand canal* » (as we have been familiarly calling the central alleyway) to lay the stone. We will conclude with a hearty aperitif accompanied by a country buffet.

As the President of the Jan Michalski Foundation, I am delighted that you have been able to be here today for this highly symbolic act. The laying of a first stone in practice means that the project, at a stroke, takes on concrete form. Seven years, nearly to the day, after the death of Jan Michalski, this means that we can see the building dedicated to him really taking form. The stone, which weighs over 100 kilos, and in which we will deposit a cylinder containing a blank page, the symbol of the writer's anguish faced with the empty page, as well as the fact that we are today writing the first page of this project, will be held in a very central place of the future *Maison de l'écriture*, the wall of the library. I am well aware that, at this stage, a certain amount of imagination is needed to visualize the site!

After over five years of conceptual work, reflection, administrative battles, discussions, principally with Vincent Mangeat, Pierre Wahlen and their team, and nearly two years after the evening on which the Foundation was launched, when we had the pleasure of gathering together on this very spot many professionals from cultural circles, all of the communal authorities and many friends who witnessed an amusing show of Polish musical cabaret, we are finally attaining our objective and we are entering a constructive phase, in the true sense of the term.

Far from being lost, these years have been rich in discussions and have allowed us to refine the project, to see it mature and to adapt it more fully to the needs of the Foundation.

Before returning to the spirit of the Foundation, the new and future occupier of this site, I would like to say a few words to you about the *Bois Désert* holiday camp, which holds a special place in the life of Montricher, and even the Canton de Vaud. Those who have celebrated their marriages here, their baptisms (as my two daughters did !), participated in nature discovery camps and training courses, will understand me. This site gives off a special charm (perhaps it is the vast panorama, its proximity to the forest, or perhaps its discreet distance from the village). You feel a special atmosphere, which might almost be called a micro-climate, a bubble outside the world.

This was one of the reasons which lead Jan and I to accept the proposal made to us by Father Gabriel Pittet in 2001 on behalf of the Parish Council. The Parish of St. Joseph in Lausanne needed to give up the building and was seeking a purchaser. We therefore bought the building without as yet having any specific plans for it. As the months went by, we thought about its future and considered a few possibilities. After Jan's death, the idea of creating a Foundation to perpetuate our joint work suddenly seemed logical.

Now work has started on the *Maison de l'écriture*, and we have begun by knocking down the existing buildings! We will replace the former destroyed chapel with an assembly space at the centre of the building. And it is useful in this respect to come back to the purpose of the Jan Michalski Foundation for Writing and Literature. What sort of animal is it, and why does it need so much space for its activities ?

The objective may appear vague: to create an environment conducive to writing. How is this to be done ? By making available to writers comfortable individual lodgings (in practice, suspended cabins, which for some of us are a childhood dream) where they can write and eat alone, a dining room to take meals in company, a lounge where they can relax, meet and share their impressions, a library for documentation, a scriptorium where several people can write at the same time, meeting rooms where they can meet colleagues or organize writing or translation workshops, reception areas, offices for the Foundation, accommodation for the couple who will be responsible for running things on a day-to-day basis, an auditorium in which all types of shows, projections or concerts can be put on, a modulable space intended for exhibitions. A carpet of vegetation, like a sort of garden, will cover the earth. The ground structure will be reflected in the sky by a sort of canopy, which will cover the ensemble and bring

together its various elements, offer protection against the sun's rays and the snow, but also fulfil a structural function, as the suspended cabins will be attached to it.

The programme is therefore extensive. We are speaking here, in the words of Vincent Mangeat, of a « *small city* » intended for writing and partially open to the public, which constitutes a manifesto in the literary world and which is intended to be generous in its proportions and well integrated into its environment.

The Foundation will also pursue other activities outside the walls of the *Maison de l'écriture*: the award of an international literary prize by a prestigious jury, which is now being formed, the allocation of subsidies and grants for writing and publication, support for projects related to writing, such as exhibitions, workshops, research, book fairs, the purchase of writers' archives, etc.

It is also important to emphasize that this cultural centre should not be seen as a closed and austere place to which writers would come to withdraw from the world, a type of retreat. Quite the contrary. The site is intended to be open, joyous and abreast of the world's trends and tendencies, while at the same time respecting the freedom of each individual to be alone in accordance with their wishes. From our vantage point high above Lake Geneva, we want to observe the world in movement.

It is the clear ambition of the project to constitute a centre of exchanges with a view to contributing to the cultural influence of this part of the world. Or in other words, a cultural utopia in a world that is losing its cultural references !

There is an old Soviet joke in the form of a riddle: what are the four main problems of Soviet agriculture ?  
Reply : spring, summer, autumn and winter.

All that remains is for us to hope that this problem will not apply to our worksite and that it will progress without too many concerns until the planned handover in 2013 !

Thank you all for being here today, which I take as a personal encouragement. I will now pass the microphone to Mr Michel Desmeules, Mayor of Montricher, who will say a few words to you.