

Presidents of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Today we gather to celebrate the outstanding French scientist, M. Christophe Marcenat, and to honor his invaluable achievements and remarkable collaboration with Slovakia.

Regular visitors to this ceremony may notice that he is not the first French citizen to be decorated here. Indeed, Slovak–French academic connections have a long and fascinating history. Allow me to share just a few excerpts:

The first known Slovak student enrolled at the Sorbonne was *Paulus de Leucha*, who studied at the Faculty of Liberal Arts in 1359. Apparently, “liberalism” was more popular in the Dark Middle Ages than it is today.

In the early 18th century, Juraj Buchholtz — a paleontologist, geologist, and astronomer from Kežmarok in the High Tatras — visited Paris and established contacts with French astronomers.

Exchanges went in the other direction as well. The first head of the Department of Chemistry and Mineralogy at the Mining Academy of Banská Štiavnica — the world’s first technical university, founded by the enlightened Empress Maria Theresa — was Nicolas Jacquin, a world-acclaimed scientist educated in Paris. Notably, before taking his chair he requested a one-year delay in order to build a proper research institute and laboratory.

In 1794, Antoine Fourcroy, collaborator of Antoine Lavoisier, proposed to the French Convention that the newly established École Polytechnique adopt the laboratory-based style of chemistry teaching developed in Banská Štiavnica.

There are also less fortunate stories. Maximilien de Robespierre corresponded with Ignác Martinovics, professor of physics, urging him to organize revolutionary movements in the Habsburg Monarchy. Martinovics was soon convicted of high treason and executed in Budin — not long after Robespierre himself was guillotined in Paris.

Of course, I will not attempt today to speak at length about Milan Rastislav Štefánik — astronomer at Meudon near Paris and French general — without whom we would probably not be present in this palace at all.

But France is not only Paris; it is also the Dauphiné, the land of the future kings, with its center in Grenoble. And it was in Grenoble that the collaboration between the Košice Centre of Low Temperature Physics and Christophe Marcenat began more than 30 years ago.

At that time, Grenoble was already acclaimed as the European capital of solid-state physics, especially thanks to the great Louis Néel — the French Nobel Prize winner and visionary — who, after the Second World War, built the Centre d'Études Nucléaires, the Institut Laue–Langevin (one of the world's leading neutron research facilities), and the Grenoble High Magnetic Field Laboratory, a joint venture between the German Max Planck Institute and the French CNRS.

When I arrived to Grenoble in the twilight of communism, in August 1989, it was a fantastic place for research. We had access to the strongest magnetic fields in the world — so whatever physical quantity controllable by magnetic fields you measured, it was an unprecedented result. But I must confess: it was also my best skiing season. If you stayed in Grenoble for a few months, you would meet most of the world leaders and Nobel laureates in physics. I still had the chance to meet 90-year-old Louis Néel when the Institute was named after him. It surprised me — I thought that such things were only possible in the Soviet Union, naming an institution after a living person.

Soon after me, other colleagues from Košice — like Pavol Szabó, Jozef Kačmarčík, and Zuzana Pribulová — followed, coming to Grenoble for their postdoctoral and numerous short research stays. Together, we built up our own laboratory of point-contact spectroscopy there and began collaborations with Christophe Marcenat, Thierry Klein, Louis Jansen, and many other Grenobloises, mostly in the field of superconductivity.

The story of our common endeavor on superconductivity with Christophe successfully continues. Let me conclude my memories of this collaboration with a little limerick:

*What I am claiming is rather clear and fair,
Before we met dear Christophe, superconductivity was rare.
Now even diamond and silicon can superconduct,
And MgB_2 — because of two gaps, that's fact —
we proved, high supercurrents can bear.*

Vive la France! Vive la Slovaquie! Longue vie à Christophe!