

# Weekend Review

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In his first year as French president, Emmanuel Macron has overseen a growing economy, has become de facto leader of Europe, and has even won the respect of Donald Trump. But many in France remain unimpressed by the man they see as a 'president for the rich'

## LE BIG MAC



**Lara Marlowe**  
in Amiens and Paris

President Emmanuel Macron likes to convince people. In manner and method, he is unlike his predecessors. Nicolas Sarkozy cajoled and bullied. François Hollande just gave up. Macron fixes interlocutors with his intense blue stare and builds a Cartesian argument. If that doesn't work, he starts over, patiently, but with determination.

The past week has tested the young president's powers of persuasion. Early in the hours of April 14th, Macron used his constitutional power as commander in chief for the first time, joining the US and Britain in launching cruise missiles against three chemical weapons installations in Syria. The goal, Macron said later, was to convince Bashar al Assad and Vladimir Putin that the international community was more than a "nice" and "weak" body they could push around.

In a further exercise in persuasion, Macron volunteered for a combative, 2½ hour live television interview on Sunday night, during which he made the surprising claim that, "Ten days ago, President Trump said the US would pull out of Syria. We convinced him it was necessary to stay for the duration."

The White House later issued a statement saying Trump's view had not changed, and the French president made an embarrassing climbdown on Monday, claiming he "never said" the US or France would remain militarily engaged in Syria for the long term.

Perhaps Macron, whose nickname is "Jupiter", is threatened by hubris, the sin of pride that afflicted Greek gods.

The rest of the week was one long attempt to convince Europeans and the French of the rightness of his positions. Macron – who has become the de facto leader of Europe – received the heads of the three Baltic states who have teamed up with five other northern EU countries, including the Netherlands and Ireland, to thwart his efforts to further integrate the euro zone.

Then, before a more sympathetic audience at the EU parliament in Strasbourg, Macron pleaded with proponents of liberal democracy to wake up and oppose the populist authoritarians who deny European values. Macron then travelled to Berlin in yet another effort to enlist German chancellor Angela Merkel's support for his European reform agenda.

On Monday, Macron will go to Washington for a three-day state visit, the first of Trump's presidential term. Although the two men have clashed on climate change, the Iran nuclear accord, trade protectionism and the rise of Eurosceptical populism, Trump appears to have been charmed by the young president, who says Franco-American co-operation is crucial in the fight against terrorism.

As the first anniversary of Macron's election approaches on May 7th, and a half century after the May 1968 revolution, a different kind of spring is flowering in France. For the first time in decades, the country is reversing its post second World War de-

cline, and the persuasive Macron is turning France into the world's greatest soft power.

There is, of course, discontent. It wouldn't be France if there wasn't. This week Macron also confronted striking railway workers in the Vosges, telling them to "stop taking people hostage." The country is struggling through a rolling strike over the reform of the SNCF railway company.

And despite Macron's best efforts to reassure them, many in France suspect their young president is out to destroy the familiar but dysfunctional "French social model". In their eyes, Macron is pushing France into the chasm of savage, race-to-the-bottom capitalism.

So what do they make of him in his home town? *The Irish Times* travelled there to find out.

### Jesuit school

Macron was born in Amiens, the capital of Picardy, 40 years ago and lived here until just before his 17th birthday. From age 11 to 16, he studied at the Jesuit school La Providence.

Built in the graceless concrete style of the 1950s, "La Pro" is an elementary, secondary and technical school for 2,000 pupils, spread over several acres. Aside from occasional crucifixes, calendars of Pope Francis and portraits of St Ignatius of Loyola, the religious footprint is light. The teachers are lay people. The priest visits only once a week now.

Not a single plaque or photograph records that the president and first lady of France passed through these corridors. Yet this is where Macron asked to be baptised at the age of 12, and where, at 15, he fell in love with his future wife, a French and drama teacher called Brigitte Trogneux Auzière.

Macron has always been drawn to older people. His maternal grandmother, Germaine "Manette" Nogues, died in his arms five years ago, at the age of 97. The Protestant humanist philosopher Paul Ricoeur was a spiritual father to him; the progressive socialist millionaire Henry Hermand his political mentor. "He's attracted by knowledge, by people who have experience," his neurologist father, Jean-Michel (67), says over lunch in Amiens.

### 'More mature'

At La Pro and subsequently at Henri IV, France's leading lycée and prep school in Paris, Macron often stayed after class to talk to teachers.

Marc Defernand (78) taught Macron history and geography here, and was principal of Macron's section. "He was more mature than other students," says Defernand. "He always asked a lot of questions. Sometimes he would pick up a conversation we'd started eight days earlier, exactly where we'd left off."

In the autumn of 2016, Defernand queued in a local bookshop to ask Macron to sign his autobiographical manifesto, *Revolution*. The retired educator is moved, recalling what happened. "He grabbed me by the hand and said, 'Monsieur Defernand! It's so good to see you!'" Macron inscribed the book: "To Marc, this 'Revolution', which owes more to him than he knows. In friendship, Emmanuel."

We visit the 700-seat theatre where Emmanuel Macron and Brigitte Trogneux Auzière adapted a play by Eduardo De Filippo together.

"He was dynamite," Defernand says. "I told him that if he continued, he would be



### Medical error

A patient and her doctors discuss the misdiagnosis of her cancer. Page 3



### Nature & Outdoors

A visit to Lough Ree, in search of the elusive curlew. Page 7



the Gérard Philippe of the 21st century. It was difficult for others to act in the same play with him. In the same way, it's difficult for his cabinet ministers now."

Defernand wasn't aware of the relationship at the time, though he knew Macron went often to Auzière's house. "I assumed there was a flirt between him and her daughter Laurence," he says.

The scandal of a married teacher with three children having an affair with a student nearly 25 years her junior has been transformed into romantic legend. Everyone would rather forget the trauma.

"Jesuits never pried into people's private lives. There was no morality investigation," Defernand says. "There were unmarried teachers living together at the time. I was more worried about students taking drugs."

The fact that Brigitte continued to teach at La Pro for years after her lover's departure, and then transferred to Lycée St Louis de Gonzague when they began to live together later in Paris, is further evidence of tolerance, Defernand says.

A tragic love story, known to most French people, occurred a quarter-century earlier and helped pave the way for Macron and Auzière.

Schoolteacher Gabrielle Russier (32) had an affair with a lycée student half her age, Christian Rossi, in Marseille. The youth's parents filed a complaint against the teacher and had their son placed in a mental hospital. Russier was given a suspended prison sentence and took her own life. The story became the subject of books, films and songs. Asked about it at a press conference, former president Georges Pompidou famously quoted a poem by Paul Eluard that was sympathetic to women accused of having slept with German soldiers during the war.

The historian Jean-François Sirinelli compares the Russier and Macron stories in his book *Les Révolutions françaises*, to show how much France evolved in a single generation. "Gabrielle Russier takes her own life in 1969. Emmanuel Macron and his teacher start an affair in the 1990s, and in May 2017, Brigitte Macron becomes first lady of France."

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Macron's parents learned of the affair by chance. "My wife was much more upset than I was," Prof Macron says. "It may sound macho, but I thought he'd get over it. He didn't... I thought it was a little early. It wasn't the way I envisioned life, but it wasn't my life. I raised my children to be free and independent."

The Macrons didn't consider filing charges against Brigitte Auzière, but they asked to meet her. "I was requisitioned to impose authority," Prof Macron laughs. "I told her, 'He's a minor. I want him to complete his studies. After that, he's free to do what he wants.'"

The president's parents have been hurt by press reports that they sent their son to Paris to get him away from Auzière. "He was going to go to Henri IV anyway. It was planned," Prof Macron says, nonetheless admitting that perhaps Emmanuel "went a little early".

At La Pro, I ask a class of 14-15 year-olds, Macron's age when he met Brigitte, if they could fall in love with a teacher. The teenagers laugh and say yes. "If it happened to someone our age, it would shock me," says a student called Grégoire. "But now that he's an adult, it doesn't bother me."

The students say it's "cool" that Macron is president. "He was elected because there was Marine Le Pen," pipes in Ayoub, of north African origin. Perhaps parroting their parents' opinions, the youths object to rising taxes and praise the appointment of cabinet ministers who are not professional politicians. For the future, they predict flying cars and tell me France will never know full employment.

On a scale of one to 10, they give the young president an approval rating of seven. "He has to prove himself," one explains. Like France, Macron's successors at La Pro are waiting to see.

### Bloodlines

The Amienois may seem blasé about their president, but his father attributes this attitude to the "taciturn, reserved" character of Picard people. The region particularly suffered in both world wars, has a miserable climate and has been decimated by de-industrialisation.

His son is an atypical Picard, "an extrovert" infused with the sun of the southwest on the side of his mother, Françoise Nogues-Macron.

History and bloodlines led me to Macron père, to find out more about the family's English ancestry. In February, Macron spent an evening with the Presidential Press Association. As the representative for foreign journalists, I was part of the

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welcoming party. I gave him a sepia postcard of English soldiers in Amiens in 1918.

Macron studied the photograph closely. "You know, they found me an English great grandfather," he said with a laugh, staring at the postcard. "He was called George Robertson." The president scrutinised the English faces for a long moment. He was looking for a face that resembled his own.

Towards the end of last year's presidential campaign, Brigitte Macron mentioned to British journalists that her husband had a great grandfather called "Mr Robertson from Bristol". The *London Times*, *Mirror* and *Daily Mail* researched the story and told the Macrons more than they had ever known about "Mr Robertson".

George William Robertson was born in Bristol in December 1887, and is believed to have fought in the Battle of the Somme. Distant relatives in England have preserved his war medals.

Robertson married Macron's great grandmother, Suzanne Leblond, in the town of Abbeville, 40km from Amiens, in 1919. They had three daughters. The middle daughter, Jacqueline, born in 1922, was Emmanuel Macron's paternal grandmother.

"He disappeared from one day to the next," Prof Macron told me. "No one in the family ever heard from him. Suzanne raised three daughters alone. She kept a very modest grocery shop in Abbeville. My parents sent me to live with her and my aunts for two years as a child."

The failed marriage to an Englishman "was never, never talked about. The family kept no trace of him. I never saw a picture," Prof Macron continues. George Robertson married again, settled in east London and kept a grocery shop, like his ex-wife, Suzanne. A step-daughter told the *Mirror* that he liked to sing *Roses of Picardy*, which he had learned in the trenches.

Had a butcher from Bristol not fought in the Somme, married a Frenchwoman and fathered her children, Emmanuel Macron would not exist, would not be president of France today.

## Precociousness

Macron's intellectual precociousness and his relationship with Brigitte meant he "skipped his adolescence", his father says. In the autumn of 1993, three months short of his 17th birthday, the future president moved to a garret near the Lycée Henri IV in Paris.

He continued his relationship with Brigitte. "When I went to see him in his *chambre de bonne*, sometimes he called through the door for me to come back later," Prof Macron laughs. "I knew she was there with him."

Christian Monjou taught Macron American and British civilisation for three years at Henri IV. Though he did not know about the romance, Monjou noticed that Macron raced off to Amiens the moment classes ended on Saturday. "It was a case of 'the divided self,'" Monjou says in an interview in his book-lined study.

Macron obtained his *baccalauréat* with honours, but twice failed the entrance exam for the École Normale Supérieure, which trains French academics. It was the only failure of his life. Had it not been for the distraction of romance with Brigitte, Monjou says, Macron would have succeeded in the exam and become an academic.

Against all odds, Brigitte Macron eventually divorced and moved to Paris to live with Emmanuel. They married in 2007. "Without her, I would not be me," Macron said during the campaign.

Macron went on to earn a doctorate in philosophy, then reoriented his life towards politics with degrees from Sciences Po and the École Nationale d'Administration (ENA). "He used failure as a launching pad," says Monjou. "That is typical of a leader."

"Have you brought your helmet and bulletproof vest?" the taxi driver who takes me to the Whirlpool clothes dryer factory in north Amiens asks. It's a joke, of course, but the "Whirlpools" are notoriously hostile. A year ago, Marine Le Pen promised their factory would not close if she became president. Macron ignored advice and plunged into the crowd of angry strikers, saying, "If you listen to the security guys, you're dead."

The factory will move to Poland at the end of May. Most of the 290 workers have been promised retraining or jobs building "intelligent" refrigerators by the factory's new owner. But they're still angry. On the day I visit, management proposed a clothes dryer in lieu of a severance bonus.

## 'A right-wing guy'

"Macron, Macron. He's not a god. We're losing jobs. We don't give a damn about Macron," François Gorlia, the in-house union leader, tells me on the phone when he refuses to come to the gate to talk to me.

"He's a right-wing guy. Everything for the rich. Nothing for the poor," Sibylle (39), an assembly line worker says as she arrives for the 1pm shift. She'll benefit from Macron's investment in training for the jobless, but she isn't convinced. "Training is fine and dandy, but there are no jobs."

After lunch in a simple bistro, Macron's father Jean-Michel guides me through a maze of streets under construction, to the music conservatory where his son studied piano for nine years. When he failed the conservatory exam after his first year, Macron's mother told his biographer Anne Fulda, the boy insisted on having the same examiner the second year, an early sign of his determination to convince. He played well, Prof Macron recalls, mastering Bach's devilishly difficult *Goldberg Variations*.

Prof Macron gives me the address of the modest, two-storey brick bungalow where

Emmanuel and his two siblings grew up, and where the neurologist still lives with his second wife. "It's not Neuilly," Macron *père* says laughing, referring to the Beverly Hills-like Paris suburb where Nicolas Sarkozy came from. Though they are both doctors, Macron's parents earned low, public sector salaries. "They weren't neurosurgeons with private jets," comments a presidential adviser.

The Trogneux chocolate shop, near the cathedral in central Amiens, is where Brigitte Macron's family have made chocolates and macarons for five generations. They also own the local Renault dealership.

Black-and-white photographs of successive generations of the Trogneux chocolate dynasty hang inside the shop. There is no photograph or mention of Brigitte Trogneux Auzière Macron. Jean-Alexandre Trogneux (57), the first lady's nephew and godson, agrees to be photographed, but refuses to talk about the presidential couple. "We've made it a golden rule," he says. "We don't talk about them and they don't talk about us."

Fabien Dorémus (32) heads the political book section of a shop in central Amiens. Macron's *Révolution* sold more than 400 copies there, an "enormous" number, Dorémus says. He had no desire to read it, and dismisses the book – and Macron – as "all slogans and clichés". A former journalist whose local online newspaper failed for lack of funding, Dorémus is close to the far left party France Unbowed.

Since Macron's election, Dorémus says, "I'm not optimistic for workers, pensioners and people who need public services. I am very optimistic for the rich."

The bookseller mentions various left-wing grievances against Macron, aris-

was ruled by a communist mayor for 18 years in the 1970s and 1980s.

Macron spent less than 17 years in Amiens, Fouré notes. He "went up" to Paris nearly a quarter of a century ago. "People here don't know him. A lot of people are proud that the president is from Amiens, but that's it. There has never been a real relationship between him and the city. There is no emotional tie."

## Entourage

On a beautiful spring day, the Élysée Palace feels light years away from dreary Picardy. The top-floor office of a close presidential adviser has a view over the gardens and the Eiffel Tower in the distance.

Macron's entourage is comprised mostly of fervently devoted young men with backgrounds similar to his own. No one at the Élysée, other than the president, can be quoted by name. "Our rule is that no one gets individual credit for anything," the adviser explains.

The adviser reportedly thought up the slogan used by Macron when Trump pulled out of the Paris accord on climate change, "Make our planet great again!" But he refuses to confirm this. "We work collectively. Everything we do belongs to the president."

The adviser counts a resurgence of French pride as Macron's greatest achievement so far. "It's been a long time since the French have been proud to be French, in the eyes of the world," he says. Though it contradicts my experience in Amiens, the statement rings true. Most people in the professional milieu of Paris adore Macron and are proud of his presidency.

A few doors from the president's office,



■ Clockwise from above: French president Emmanuel Macron with his wife Brigitte; Jean-Michel Macron and Françoise Nogues-Macron at their son's inauguration; with US president Donald Trump at the Élysée Palace; Macron with former Irish ambassador to France Geraldine Byrne-Nason; a railway workers' protest in Paris; and the future president making his profession of faith, at Lycée la Providence in Amiens, at the age of 12. PHOTOGRAPHS: YORGOS KARAHALIS/BLOOMBERG/GETTY, FRANCOIS MORI/AFP/GETTY, CHRISTOPHE MORIN/BLOOMBERG/GETTY, LARA MARLOWE, ANNE-CHRISTINE POUJOLAT/AFP/GETTY, GÉRARD BANC



ing from a handful of disparaging remarks since 2014: Macron referred to slaughterhouse workers who were losing their jobs as "illiterate"; Macron told a heckler wearing an anti-Macron T-shirt, "The best way to buy a suit is to get a job"; Macron called protesters against his labour reforms "slackers" and accused strikers of wanting to *fourre le bordel*, or wreak havoc.

It's hardly "let them eat cake". But the president has been hanged and burned in effigy by protesters. "You have to put yourself in the place of the people who get told they are slackers and freeloaders," Dorémus says. "He's contemptuous of the lower classes. People started hating him because they feel disrespected."

Another criticism, made by Macron's former teachers, is that his speeches are often so long and intellectual that they can be difficult to follow.

## Image

And attempts to control the president's image can be counterproductive. The novelist Emmanuel Carrère was given exclusive access to the president and first lady. In two interviews with Macron, there was "one really strong, beautiful sentence", Carrère wrote in the *Guardian*. "And this really strong, really beautiful sentence was off the record. In its place I was given permission to use a perfectly dull, perfectly formatted variant."

In the course of a day in President Macron's home town, there is not a single photograph of him to be seen.

Brigitte Fouré, the city's mayor, tells me the poverty rate is two percentage points higher than the national average, and 80 per cent of inhabitants qualify for social housing. Amiens is divided between disadvantaged north and middle-class south. It

the adviser lists Macron's "important victories": the revision of the labour code and the taxation of capital investments; the overhaul of the country's education system; changes to the EU's posted workers directive; ending the giant squat at Notre-Dames-des-Landes and dismantling the nuclear reactor at Fessenheim. The last two issues had festered for decades. "They seemed impossible for any preceding majority," the adviser says.

Macron is doing as much for the disadvantaged as for the rich, the adviser insists. "We have increased basic payments to the poor, the disabled and the elderly. We're decreasing social charges on lower salaries. The pendulum has swung much more towards the least advantaged than the most privileged."

So why isn't that message getting through? Why do polls indicate that a majority consider Macron the "president of the rich"?

For one reason, the adviser says. "He was an investment banker. What's more, at Rothschild; the most symbolic bank in the world. For many people, that proves his competence. The thing that makes him hated by some is the reason why he is respected by others."

Because Macron worked for four years as an investment banker, "everything he does that is perceived as right-wing or for the rich is blown out of proportion", the adviser says.

"And everything he does for the underprivileged, that would be seen as left-wing, is discounted. It's a problem of perception."

Opinion polls can be read two ways. An Ifop-Fiducial poll published on April 10th gave Macron a 55 per cent approval rating, high for France, 11 months into a presidency. But a BFM poll published four days later showed that 44 per cent of voters are "disap-

pointed".

Nine years of piano and the rigour of France's best schools have honed Macron's powers of concentration. On April 17th, he took questions from MEPs in Strasbourg for three hours, without notes, without so much as jotting down a question – a regular performance for Macron.

"He is someone with a great capacity of attention and concentration," says Monjou. "People who've met him often tell me they were struck by the intensity with which he looks at them, as if, for the time they are with him, they are all that matters."

"When you talk to him, it is as if he is downloading your brain," says a former cabinet minister who sometimes advises Macron.

Geraldine Byrne-Nason, now Ireland's Ambassador to the United Nations, is doubtless the Irish official who knows Macron best. She became friends with the future president when both were "sherpas", responsible for briefing and accompanying Irish and French leaders to EU summits, between 2012 until 2014. Byrne-Nason represented the taoiseach's office, Macron the Élysée Palace.

"We spent hours and hours in corridors through the night while the heads of state and government were locked in meetings," Byrne-Nason recalls. "Emmanuel would be one of my first points of repair. If you're going to be there for seven hours, you want someone interesting to talk to."

Byrne-Nason calls Macron "an insider-outsider" who has mastered the system but is able to regard it with detachment. "He has a healthy disrespect for bureaucracy, and Brussels is the home of process and procedure," she says. "In that regard, we were kindred spirits. There was a slight im-

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patience with the weight of slow-turning wheels."

Macron was particularly understanding of Irish difficulties during the bailout, Byrne-Nason says. She believes he was responsible for support offered by then president François Hollande.

Byrne-Nason sent glowing reports about Macron's potential to Dublin, long before he became a presidential candidate. Last September, she listened to what she calls his "extraordinary speech in favour of international co-operation and law" at the UN General Assembly. "It was poetic. It was powerful. It lit up the place." Ireland could have signed off on every word, Byrne-Nason says, calling Macron "a superstar president who generates both respect and influence here amongst the 193 countries of the UN."

If Macron were Irish, he might be a hybrid of President Michael D Higgins and Taoiseach Leo Varadkar: part poetic intellectual, rooted in left-wing Christianity and fascinated by ideas; part dynamic young liberal, determined to make the economy flourish.

When Christian Monjou was Macron's teacher at Henri IV, he says Macron talked a lot about the Fabians, the centre-left British intellectuals who founded the London School of Economics. The Fabians believed in "the inevitability of gradualness, the idea that everything that is gradual you won't be able to go back on," Monjou says. "It is totally anti-French, with our tradition of revolution, not evolution."

"French political life is saturated in ideology," Monjou continues. "With Macron, there is something you might call empirical or pragmatic. It's familiar to an Anglo-Saxon, but it stands out in France. I suspect this slightly Anglo-Saxon approach may come from listening to me for three years."

Macron's adviser stresses he is more than a mere pragmatist who would be content to solve one problem after another. "The two legs of Emmanuel Macron are action and reflection," he says. "He always does both."

Macron's *en même temps* mantra seeks to reconcile irreconcilables, such as liberalism and social protection. The challenge is most obvious in his self-described "humane but realistic" immigration policy. Measures such as the Collomb circular, which authorises police to search emergency shelters for illegal migrants, have alienated some of Macron's closest allies.

In 1997, Macron's spiritual father Paul Ricoeur delivered a lecture titled *Foreigner Myself*. Ricoeur cited Leviticus, about "the stranger that dwelleth with you", and the Gospel of Matthew, which says: "I was a stranger and you took me in." Opponents of Macron's tough immigration policy say he has betrayed Ricoeur's ideals. The criticism must sting, but Macron believes that unless he calms fears of unlimited migration, extreme right-wing populists will continue to gain ground, in France and across Europe.

The necessity of ending the "society of status" in which family background, education and profession determine all aspects of one's life, "gives coherence to everything we are doing", says the presidential adviser.

"When you're poor in France, you stay poor because you can't borrow money to buy the car you need to get a permanent job," the adviser explains. "You dare not abandon the benefits of being a civil servant, even if you have other opportunities. Getting a CDI [permanent job contract] is the holy grail. If you have one, you won't give it up to start a business."

## 'Flexicurity'

Philippe Aghion, who teaches economics at Harvard, the London School of Economics and the Collège de France, has greatly influenced the president's economic thinking.

Contrary to Thomas Piketty, the French author of the best-selling *Capital in the 21st Century*, Aghion and Macron believe that increasing social mobility, not high taxation, is the most effective way of reducing income inequality.

Aghion wants to wean France off its post-second World War reliance on the Keynesian welfare state, in which government spending stimulates demand. He is inspired by John Maynard Keynes's exact contemporary, the Austrian-born economist and Harvard professor Joseph Schumpeter, who believed that innovation and technical progress are the basis of a prosperous economy.

Aghion's theories underlie Macron's reform of the French labour code last year, and the ongoing reform of professional training. It is, Aghion admitted in an interview, a liberal economic policy. But, he insists, it is also a social policy.

Schumpeter believed in creative destruction, "which means you constantly have new jobs replacing old jobs, new firms replacing old firms", Aghion says. It's a hard sell to a French public that craves security and is adverse to change.

Aghion advocates Danish-style "flexicurity" that combines labour market flexibility with unemployment benefits and retraining for laid-off workers. "In a nutshell: innovation, social protection and social mobility. That's the triangle you want to achieve," he says. Listening to him is like hearing Macron speak.

Macron's parents were left-leaning agnostics who did not baptise their children. At the age of 12, probably under the influence of his surroundings at La Pro, Macron asked to make his First Communion. A black-and-white photograph provided by one of his teachers, Gérard Banc, shows the future president making his profession of faith.

Macron's intellectual affiliation has been with the Christian left, with Ricoeur and *Esprit* magazine, for which he wrote a half-dozen articles, and whose board he sat on. French media interpreted gestures at Macron's campaign rallies as signs of mysticism, for example when he asked his followers to "show benevolence", or ended rallies Christ-like, with outstretched arms. On the night of his election, he concluded his speech in front of IM Pei's glass pyramid at the Louvre with the words, "I will serve you with love".

## Secularism

During his evening with the Presidential Press Association, I asked Macron if, 28 years after his baptism, he still has faith. Personal belief is a taboo subject in secular France. Embarrassed laughter rippled across the room, but he addressed my question.

"I believe in something we don't see, yes," Macron said. "I have faith in the generic sense of the term. If one doesn't believe in one's lucky star, in good fortune, in one's country, one doesn't do what I'm doing. I believe in a form of transcendence."

Following Macron's April 9th speech to French bishops, leftists and Freemasons accused him of attacking *laïcité*, which has been France's official policy of state-enforced secularism since 1905.

"We share the confused feeling that the link between church and state has been damaged, and that it is as important to you as it is to me to repair it," Macron said. The purpose of *laïcité* was "certainly not to deny spirituality" he argued. "For biographical, personal and intellectual reasons, I have the highest opinion of Catholics."

There is something Jesuitical, indeed monklike, about Macron. Unlike his predecessors, he shows no need to eat, sleep or chase women. Asked what has been the "greatest trial" of being in office, the French president said he has "measured the weight and the solitude and the end of innocence" that came with power.

"I do not think it is a trial," Macron continued. "The French have authorised me to do what I committed to do. One thing is certain. There is no respite, which may explain why I sometimes look pale. I do not feel authorised to enjoy any form of leisure. I take time to reflect. I read and write. But in the times we live in, there is no room for respite. That may be the trial of power, though I don't live it as such. There is undeniably a form of asceticism."

Macron sees his rise to power as the result of a troubled epoch. "I don't forget where I come from and why I am here today," he said. "I am the fruit of a form of brutality in history, of a break-in, because France was unhappy and uneasy. If I forget that for one moment, it will be the beginning of the trial."



# FROM CAMP TO CAMPUS: STUDENTS FROM THE 'JUNGLE'

In 2016 Lille university invited migrants in the 'Jungle' encampment to enrol. Is the experiment working?



Lara Marlowe

in Lille

Seven women and 124 men from a dozen countries survived the Calais "Jungle" and other refugee encampments to enrol as full-time students at the University of Lille. The first 80 were taken directly from the "Jungle" when it was dismantled in October 2016. They were joined by 51 new migrant students last month. Thanks to the generosity of a few professors and humanitarian workers, the experiment is a glimmer of hope in the often tragic migrant saga.

## Mohammad

Mohammad Nihan (26), is the success story of the pilot programme. The son of a civil servant in Kabul, he will this year complete a master's degree in political science.

Mohammad studied business in Kabul. The US embassy sent him twice to the Asian Youth Congress in Pakistan. That inspired him to found an association to fight drugs in Afghanistan, where opium poppies and heroin are the mainstay of the economy.

Afghan drug lords threatened to kill Mohammad. After encouraging his association, the Americans couldn't protect him. In 2015, he fled Kabul, by commercial flight to Tehran, then overland to Europe. "I heard about the fires in the Calais Jungle when I was in a closed camp in Serbia," Mohammad recalls. He was perhaps the only one of nearly 10,000 migrants in Calais who went there expressly, not in the hope of reaching the UK, but to help fellow refugees.

On arriving in the Jungle, Mohammad volunteered to work as a translator in the camp's clinic. "It was very hard to live in the Jungle," he recalls. "It was filthy. The mafia preyed on people and police beat them up. There were traffickers, unaccompanied minors, people separated from their families." Secours Catholique hired Mohammad and gave him a room in Calais town. He applied for, and was granted, po-

litical asylum. Already fluent in English, he learned French quickly.

Maya Konforti, a volunteer with the Auberge des Migrants NGO, was a mother figure to the lost souls of the camp. She put Mohammad in touch with the programme in Lille. He intends to write his master's thesis on "international solidarity in time of crisis". After he graduates next June, he wants to become a humanitarian worker.

"I want to help people," Mohammad explains. "I have almost reached my goal." He takes in his stride the bureaucracy that paralyses some of his fellow students. "The French put up with it too," he shrugs.

## Abuelgassim

About 50 of the original 80 students are Sudanese. A dozen are Afghan, five are Iranian, four Pakistani and three Syrian. This year, the prefecture insisted on a broader selection of nationalities.

Like Mohammad the Afghan, Abuelgassim (25), from Darfur, is a lesson in the benefits of a positive attitude. He fled the war in southern Sudan in 2015, crossed the Mediterranean and was fingerprinted in Italy and Germany, which ordinarily would have prevented him seeking asylum in France.

The prefecture made an exception for the inhabitants of the Jungle, waiving the rule that those fingerprinted in other countries must return there to apply for asylum, as specified in the Dublin II convention.

By the time Abuelgassim arrived at the Porte de la Chapelle encampment in northern Paris, he was weak and feverish. Other Sudanese advised him to continue to Calais, where he could at least find a tent, food and medical care. "Life in the Jungle was hard, but not bad, because I began learning French there," Abuelgassim says. "From the moment I arrived in France, I wanted to make my life here. I spent all day every day in the école des Dunes [a makeshift school built by NGOs], and I met a lot of teachers and volunteers."

Abuelgassim was not part of the initial intake of 80 students, and spent the past year at a refugee centre in the French Alps, where he continued to study with volunteers from Secours Catholique. His French is now better than his English, and he is proud to have scored A++ on a recent exam.

"I have met many sympathique people who help refugees," he says. "In Aix-les-Bains, families invited us into their homes. They were like our families. For me, life is getting better and better."

## Nasser

Nasser Muhanna (43), from Sudan, is one of the oldest former inhabitants of the Jungle admitted to Lille university. He holds degrees in agronomy and computer programming from the University of Khartoum, and worked as an accountant and human resources supervisor in Saudi Arabia for 14 years.

Nasser was imprisoned in Sudan for opposing the regime of Gen Omar al-Bashir. When Saudi Arabia concluded an agreement with Sudan, his Saudi employers became frightened and terminated his contract. He obtained a tourist visa to Italy, took a commercial flight to Rome, then made his way by train to Calais.

"Such things should not exist in this day and age," Nasser says of the Jungle. "People lost their morals. They raped and killed and set fires. There was no security. It was full of disease. I tried many times to cross to the UK, but I finally told myself, 'This is not the way I want to live. I am educated and I don't have to live in the UK. It is stupid to put myself in such danger.'"

More than two-thirds of the 80 members of last year's class obtained refugee status. Nasser is in limbo while he appeals a negative decision. "You can do nothing here without papers," he says.

While his appeal is pending, Nasser continues studying computer science. "I'm the only refugee in my class. The other students are very nice to me. We laugh and joke a lot." He misses his wife and three children in Sudan, and hopes they will join him one day in France. About half the migrant students have enrolled in a programme that matches them with French families, who invite them home on holidays and weekends.

## Naqeeb

Baby-faced Naqeeb Sadat (23), from Nangahar, Afghanistan, is studying French, science and mathematics. He was teaching local policemen in Afghanistan to use computers when his brother-in-law, a commander in the police force, was assassinated by the Taliban.

"I knew I was next," says Sadat. "They thought I was a spy." He fled to Tehran, then paid smugglers to bring him to Europe. "Every border has a price," he says.

"It was very, very cold when I arrived in Calais," Sadat recalls. "A volunteer called Aice gave me a small tent. We had problems with food, with clothes, with showers. Everything was a problem. The police were cruel. I tried to cross [the Channel] every day, and they sprayed us with tear gas."

One night, Sadat was one of five migrants hiding in a container lorry in a parking lot. "Police burst in and started beating us," he says. "I climbed out the hatch and I jumped to the ground. I sprained my ankle so badly that I thought it was broken. I couldn't move. I shouted in English, 'I can't walk. Please help. Please take me to the doctor,' and the police came and beat me even more."

One of Sadat's friends died when he fell from the top of a moving lorry. Another, an Afghan who ran a shop in the Jungle, was attacked by vigilantes and thrown into a river, where his body was found 20 days later. "The night I fell off the truck, I thought the gang that attacks refugees would come and kill me... How can it be that some French people want to help you, and some want to kill you?"

Like other survivors of the camp, Sadat was thrilled to receive a key to his own room in the Evariste-Galois dormitory last year. But he remains suspicious of a country whose treatment of migrants is so erratic.

His biggest battle now is with bureaucracy. "You have appointments every day with the Pôle Emploi [unemployment agency], the CAF [housing authority], the prefecture, the immigration office..." Sadat says. "You don't know what it's for but they want you to go there. Tomorrow, I have a class and an appointment at the same time. It's not easy to study."



■ The 'Jungle' in Calais. The first 80 students were taken from the camp in October 2016 and they were joined by 51 more students last month. Clockwise from left: Zahra Alizada (19) was one of six migrant women students admitted this year. Zahra and her sister Masomah (20) are famous in Afghanistan and minor celebrities in northern France, as "the Bicycle Sisters"; Mohammad Nihan (26); Naqeeb Sadat (23) and friend; Nasser Muhanna (43).

MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: NURPHOTO VIA GETTY IMAGES

world championship qualifying race in Albi, France, in 2016, they were threatened by the Taliban. The "bicycle sisters" are living in Evariste-Galois while they learn French and train for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics.



"An asylum seeker belongs to the state," says Maya Konforti. "And the state does what it wants with him."

## Shahram

Shahram (22) is the son of a farmer from Logar, Afghanistan, who like Mohammad and Sadat fled the depredations of radical Islamists. Everything is difficult for him, starting with the French language. "If you don't speak French, you can't do anything," he says. He wants to become a medical doctor, but administrators say he'll have to lower his ambition.

Shahram doesn't understand why his benefits suddenly dropped from €350 a month to €200. He shows me a letter from French authorities demanding his 2016 income tax return - an absurd request of a migrant who was expelled from the Jungle late last year.

"The way they treated the refugees in Calais - shame on the French president, shame on the British prime minister," Shahram says.

He is convinced that migrants are better treated in other European countries. "I am forced to ask my family in Afghanistan to send me money!" he laments. "Why give us

papers if you were going to treat us like this? I wish the French government would take back my papers and let me go to another country."

A few weeks ago, Adoma, the housing authority that lodges migrants, tried to expel several students from the Evariste-Galois dormitory. Second-year students are required to pay rent, and Adoma needed to make space for new arrivals. Pro-refugee groups organised protests on campus, and the university mediated a temporary solution. But Shahram remains angry and insecure. He swears: "I'm going to learn French and go to medical school. Then I will go back to Afghanistan and I will never set foot in Europe again."

## Zahra

Outside the Ulysses Cafe on the campus, we meet Zahra Alizada (19) one of six migrant women students admitted this year. Zahra and her sister Masomah (20) are famous in Afghanistan and minor celebrities in northern France. From the persecuted Shia Muslim Hazara minority, they were encouraged by their father to become cyclists.

After placing second and third in a

## A tiny example

The programme in Lille was initially a reaction to the publication of the heartbreaking photograph of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian Kurdish refugee who drowned on a beach in Turkey in September 2015.

Because of the proximity of the Jungle, just 120km away, professors at Lille felt personally implicated. Camille Masse, now head of international relations for the university, and Giorgio Passerone, professor of Italian literature, organised forums on the migrant crisis in the autumn of 2015 and spring of 2016. They invited migrants to the second forum.

Before they knew the camp would be dismantled, the Lille professors envisioned an exchange. Migrants from the camp would be brought to the campus, while students from Lille would teach in the camp. Under fire for the brutal evacuation of migrants from the Jungle, the French government embraced the university's programme. They were, Passerone says, exploited for government propaganda.

"The government boasts that it has welcomed migrant students to our university, but they're a tiny minority," says Judith Hayem, a professor of anthropology and self-described militant for the migrant cause. "The majority are still sleeping under bridges in Paris, or being denied showers and food in Calais, where they're driven out with tear gas. The government uses the university programme to make people forget how violently migrants are treated elsewhere."

Some 700 migrants still sleep rough in Calais every night. They are not allowed to build a new camp. The French council of state and the UN in recent months exhorted French authorities to stop their "inhuman and degrading treatment".

Emmanuelle Jourdan-Chartier is the vice-president for student life at Lille III. "People have to stop seeing migrants as a problem," she says. "Diversity is always a source of enrichment." Jourdan-Chartier believes the vast majority of the 70,000-strong university's staff and students support the programme. She dismisses hate speech on far right-wing websites as "a few people sitting behind their computers".

The ill-treatment of migrants in Calais, and the fact that the prefecture no longer allows "Dublined" students to enter the programme, has led to allegations of a crackdown by President Emmanuel Macron's administration.

"We've adopted a militant political position," says Prof Passerone, who wants equal rights for all migrants in France. Despite its negative aspects, the Jungle was "an experiment in unprecedented relationships between volunteers, associations and refugees", he says. "We created a sort of alliance, a new way of living together."

The Lille programme "is a tiny example that has a lot of problems, but it works", summarises Maya Konforti of the Auberge des Migrants. "The refugees are thrilled to participate. They know they are lucky. But it's only a drop of water, and we need an ocean."

## French outrage after woman died following 'mocking' phone call



**Lara Marlowe**

in Paris

Naomi Musenga called emergency services but operator hung up

Naomi Musenga might be alive today if telephone operators for the French emergency medical call centre, Samu, had not mocked the 22-year-old African woman, then hung up on her, last December 29th.

Musenga's family obtained the tape recording of the dead woman's desperate call to the Service d'aide médicale urgente at the Strasbourg university hospital after repeated demands.

For the first minute and a half, two operators joke between themselves, implying that the caller, who has been placed on hold, had nothing more serious than flu. "She told me she's 'going to die'," the first one says.

"Ah, for sure she's going to die some day, that's certain!" the second operator replies, before taking the call. The exchange with Musenga lasts one minute and 20 seconds, and it is chilling. Musenga whimpers faintly and with difficulty: "Help me, Madame. Help me."

"What's going on?" the operator snaps. "If you don't tell me what's happening, I'll hang up."

"Help me Madame. I hurt so bad."

"So call your doctor. Okay. Or call SOS Médecins."

"I can't."

"You can't? Oh no. You can call the fire department, but you can't."

"I'm going to die."

"Yes, you're going to die. Certainly. One day. Like everyone. You call SOS Médecins. It's 03 88 75 75 75, okay?"

"Please, Madame. Help me."

It took Musenga five hours to reach SOS Médecins, who sent an ambulance. She died in hospital, 6½ hours after calling Samu.

Musenga's death became a national scandal this week, when the Strasbourg tribunal



opened an investigation for "failure to assist a person in danger" and Musenga's family held a press conference.

Health minister Agnès Buzyn said she was "profoundly indignant at the circumstances" of Musenga's death and assured the family of "my total support".

The family were sad and dignified at their press conference

on Thursday. "We want justice to be done. That is our first concern for this child who everyone loved," said her father, Polycarpe Musenga.

"What killed my daughter?" asked Bablyne Musenga, a professional caregiver.

It took weeks to obtain the recording, but Louange Musenga, the sister of the deceased, was reluctant to listen to it. "Af-

ter my mother heard it, she was shaking. She couldn't sleep. She couldn't stop weeping. Every time we listened, it was like hearing Naomi die again... Naomi was a great girl, strong and courageous. She wanted to go back to

**“Every time we listened, it was like hearing Naomi die again. She was a great girl**

school. She was raising her little daughter alone. We don't understand how she died in one day."

The post-mortem was performed on January 3rd, five days after Musenga's death. It recorded that her organs were "in an advanced state of putrefaction" and that she died of "multiple organ failure after massive haemorrhage".

"Why wasn't the autopsy done in time? Why did they leave my daughter's body to rot?" Polycarpe Musenga asked. "My daughter's body

was left in intensive care. They didn't take it to the refrigerator in the mortuary, which made the autopsy difficult."

The hospital did not talk to the family until a week after a local news magazine, *Heb'di*, published the story on April 27th. The hospital had refused to answer questions from the news magazine.

"They gave my daughter the runaround, and after she died they gave us the runaround," Mr Musenga said. "They mocked us, the way they mocked my daughter."

Christophe Gautier, the director of Strasbourg hospitals, said the operator had 10 years' experience, and had worked on an ambulance for 20 years before that. "She is very upset, like all of us," he said.

### Internal investigation

Gautier said the hospital's internal investigation is leaning towards "personal fault". Had the operator observed standard procedure, she would have transferred the call to a doctor. Initial speculation suggested she might have been over-

worked or exhausted, but she had just returned from a two-week holiday. She did not dispute the recording, or the handwritten note on the hospital's admission sheet: "Samu laughed, told her to call SOS Médecins and hung up."

The heads of two national associations of emergency medical personnel have requested a meeting with the health minister to discuss what they claim is understaffing of emergency call centres.

Musenga's death has revived the case of Maxime Van Gertruy, who died of a massive heart attack a decade ago, when he was 23. Van Gertruy's companion pleaded for an ambulance while he screamed in agony. "It's just a side-ache. Give him an aspirin, put him in the car and bring him to the emergency room," the Samu doctor told her.

Naomi Musenga and (left) her parents, Mukole and Honorine. PHOTOGRAPHS: MUSENGA FAMILY/CATHERINE FABING/AFP, FREDERICK FLORIN/AFP/GETTY