



Edition 426: 4 June 2014

Events & People

## Obama: We Were There

Last update: 02/04/2014



*Newshound's trainees Catherine (left) and Mathilde (right), waiting in line to see Obama at the Bozar.*

On 26 March 2014, we, Newshounds trainees Mathilde and Catherine, were among 2,000 people privileged enough to hear Barack Obama -President of the United States of America! speak at the Bozar.

### — Catherine:

As I leapt out of the can of sardines that was the Metro at Arts-Loi on Tuesday morning, I breathed a deep sigh of relief.

Squashed up against the pane of the glass, I had watched each station go by with an increasing fear that I was going to be smothered, squeezed to death, or worse.

When the train finally stopped, I couldn't believe the size of the huge swarm of people that piled out of the station and out onto the streets.

All across Brussels, bus routes were down, parking was closed off, police were patrolling everywhere and cordons refused public access. Rue Belliard was a no-go area. The Schuman roundabout? Forget about it.

Barack Obama was visiting Brussels.

The doors to the Bozar opened at 3pm, so of course we were already queuing by 2:30. There was a crush of excited people pressed up against barriers made by Belgian police and American security staff.

We surged forwards eagerly, sweaty hands clutching tickets and passports as though our lives depended on it.

As it turned out my colleague Mathilde and I were among the first in.

A US brass band played as we scurried around the hall, taking photographs of the stage and the flags, laughing and talking, exclaiming excitedly in high-pitched voices.

People from all walks of life were there: politicians, students, businesspeople, professionals, salespeople, even members of the clergy.

The press took control of the middle balcony and assembled highly elaborate-looking equipment, wearing big earpieces and waving fluffy microphones. It was surreal.

I went to get a coffee and stood at the bar, searching for my phone in my bag. A man joined me and we started chatting about the event.

I thought that I heard him say he worked for the Ambassador of Moldova. Another man joined us. "Your Excellency," he greeted my companion. Actually, he *was* the Ambassador of Moldova. I was instantly starstruck and couldn't say another word.

At 6pm, Obama still hadn't arrived. We were seated now, and everyone was twitching with nervous anticipation. The air sizzled with electricity as we looked around excitedly, dying to catch a first glimpse of him.

"Who else would you wait this long for?" asked the woman seated next to me. "The Dalai Lama," another answered, as I joked, "Bon Jovi."

When he finally arrived though, it was all worth it. The crowd stood as one, clapping and cheering, as cameras flashed and iPads began recording.

He quietened us charmingly, telling us that it was not difficult to enjoy a place famous for chocolate and beer. The Belgians whooped and the King and Queen smiled, looking satisfied.

He spoke about Ukraine, of course; he spoke about the First World War and the Flanders Fields, which he had just visited.

He spoke about the values and ideals of freedom. He spoke about allowing people to decide for themselves how they wanted to be governed.

He spoke about choosing the future. He spoke about Indonesia and Jakarta, Kiev, Kosovo, Latin America. He spoke about Russia.

He spoke about the importance of learning from the lessons of the past. He spoke about international cooperation. He spoke about young people and he spoke about his own youth.

He held the audience absolutely captive. Not a pin was dropped; not a head was turned. We knew, I think, that something special was happening here.

When he spoke, we felt as though he was speaking to each one of us individually. The entire room was in the palm of his hand, mesmerised.

"Thank you," he said, and as he left the podium we rose as one again. Whooping and cheering, hundreds of people turned, trying to catch a last glimpse of Obama, to capture his image forever into a "selfie" on their phones.

He gave his traditional wave and a broad smile, and then he was gone, swept off down some secret exit by his bodyguards no doubt. Within minutes the Belgian police were swarming the building.

Out in the freezing cold street, we stood in groups, our chatter and voices rising as high as the buildings.

Without a doubt our spirits rose as high as them too...



*Selfie with Obama! and Kristina Marijanovic (left)*

— **Mathilde :**

2.30 pm. Helicopters clattered over the city; snipers, perhaps, watching the security perimeter from the tops of buildings.

First, thanks to the invitation card bearing my name – oh yeah! – I passed through two security checkpoints around the city centre.

3 pm. We arrived. Along with some other trainees we were among the first to be let into the building. The security did not strike us as being too heavy-handed. True, we passed through security portals and had our bags searched, but we've known worse catching a plane... or visiting the European Parliament!

It was a long wait. Three long hours sitting in the upper circle. The room gradually began to fill up. Everyone was dressed up to the nines. People started to get impatient. There was a real hubbub. Bets were placed on what he would say in his speech.

There were lots of young people in the room, or at least there were where I was sitting! We swapped stories about how we came to be invited: universities, exchanges with the US, American embassy... An orchestra from NATO helped to pass the time. They played jazz!

In the audience, I spotted Justine Hénin and Kim Clijsters. The King and Queen of the Belgians, and the political top brass from the EU and Belgium: Herman Van Rompuy, Martin Schulz, Jose Manuel Barroso, Lady Ashton and Elio Di Rupo, Didier Reynders, Herman De Croo and many more.

6 pm. Obama stepped up to the stage. Laura Hemmati introduced him. A former EU trainee, she is now head of the NGO Leadarise, an association that encourages women to become leaders in their professional lives.

This was it. Barack Obama! Wow. I listened attentively, I took photos. "Im so lucky," I thought. He had charisma. Such presence. Even his body language: palms of the hands turned towards the public. I was so impressed.

You could have heard a pin drop. There were smiles and murmurs all around the room at each of the Presidents remarks.

The market economy, Ukraine, Russia, the role of the United States...

A few complimentary words for Belgium – its beer and chocolate...

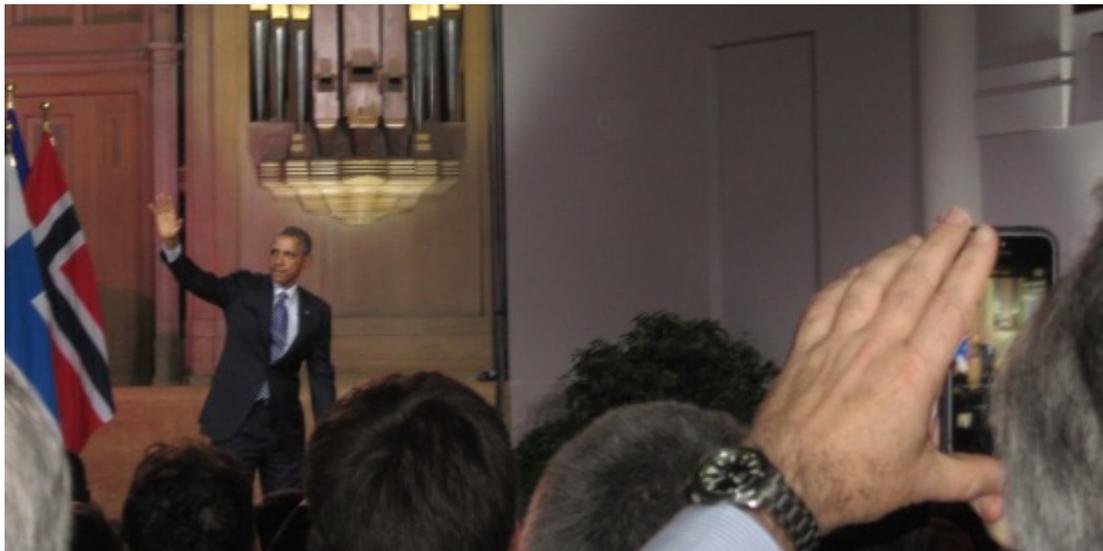
... and above all, a message highlighting humanity and unity, addressed to young people: peace, democracy, preserving human dignity, respecting our differences. Universal values, none of which should ever be taken for granted.

"It is you, the young people..." he said, "who will decide what kind of a world we want."

The room burst into applause. Obama waved. He left the stage.

In the end, it was over all too quickly.

Ive told you just a bit about it. In 40 years time, Ill be telling my children and my grandchildren a lot more...



Edition 419: 2 April 2014