

Astérix, French Star Created by a Jew

by Michael Curtis



Rene Goscinny's Astérix and Obélix

In the political ironic drama of life, hold as it were the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature. Admirable though this may be as advice for the public arena, it is alas not universally esteemed. Robert Bowers, the man who slaughtered 11 Jews and injured a number of other people in the Tree of Light Synagogue on October 27, 2018 in Pittsburgh was himself wounded in the event, incurring multiple gun shot wounds and was taken to the Allegheny General Hospital for

treatment. The man whose stated ambition and objective is "to kill all the Jews," accusing them of being fixed on killing "my people," was taken care of by a Jewish nurse and Jewish doctors. The Jewish doctors said their job was to care for him, not judge him. On November 1, 2018 the unappreciative Bowers in U.S. Federal Court pleaded not guilty on 44 charges related to his murder of the Jews.

It is probable, and eminently desirable that Bowers as punishment will be removed from any future form of social relationship. He may have time to ponder at least two problems he would encounter in achieving his overall objective of eliminating all the Jews: the nature of antisemitism and reactions to it; and the question of Jewish identity.

The first factor to be taken into account is that Jews resemble all people in matters of life and death. They do not like being killed and understandably take measures and seek protection, political and legal, to restrain and punish like-minded Bowers. Physical barriers, guards, inspectors, are combined with legal norms and social mores, in the policy of attending to the advice of George Washington in his letter of August 18, 1790 to the Jews of Newport, "give to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance."

Antisemitism, hatred of Jews, a form of racism, may not be universally considered a criminal offence, though it was Joseph Stalin, who in his last activity in 1953 ordered the unmasking of the conspiracy of Jewish doctors to murder Soviet officials, surprisingly remarked in a statement on January 12, 1931 that under Soviet law active antisemitism carried the death penalty. However, in contemporary democratic countries the general consensus is that the cancer of antisemitism must be eradicated. Hate speech and action, creation of a hostile environment, should not be permissible or should be treated with heavy fines, prison terms as a minimum.

In recent years the memories of the fate of Jews are evident

physically as well as historically. Most recently in 2017, the winners were announced of the competition to create a UK National Holocaust Memorial with a subterranean learning center in a location in London. The Memorial, a £50 million structure, will consist of 23 structures in bronze with 22 spaces in between representing countries where Jewish communities were destroyed by Nazi Germany.

The architects Sir David Adjaye, born to Ghananian parents and came to UK when he was nine, and Israeli Ron Arad are concerned that Holocaust denial has festered in UK and hope that a memorial will ensure that the horrors of the Holocaust are not forgotten, for them it will be architecture as emotion. This aspiration is all the more welcome in November 2018 when Scotland Yard and the British Crown Prosecution Service are investigating reports of 45 incidents of hate crimes by members of the Labour Party.

Controversy exists over the selected location for the Memorial, the royal park Victoria Tower Gardens close to the Houses of Parliament. The park already exhibits August Rodin's bronze The Burghers of Calais, a statue of Suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst, and a fountain commemorating the abolition of slavery. Nevertheless, the Memorial will add to other Holocaust reminders such as that by Peter Eisenman in Berlin, by Daniel Libeskind in Ottawa, and many others especially Yad Vashem in Israel and at Auschwitz.

The second problem for Bowers and would be followers is to find the Jews to kill. Would he have known the quintessentially English actor, Leslie Howard, the epitome of the upper class, public school educated aristocrat Scarlet Pimpernel was really Leslie Howard Steiner whose father was a Hungarian Jew and his mother of Jewish origin? He might have been puzzled by a host of iconic figures such as Fred Astaire and Douglas Fairbanks, Sr., and their links to Jewish heritage. What to do about Madeleine Albright who confessed in her 70s she did not know her family was Jewish and had

converted to Catholicism to escape Nazi persecution, and who lived as a non Jew. Bowers might have known that George Gershwin was initially Jacob Gershowitz, but would he have known that composer of *Over the Rainbow* Harold Arlen was Hyman Arluk or that Stan Getz was Stanley Gayetski, or that Harrison Ford had a mother of Russian Jewish ancestry?

Bowers would have troubled about a Frenchman, Rene Goscinny, not much to look at, not much to see, but whose writing was punny to a fault. Far from plotting the destruction of Christian civilization, his writings exemplified a heroic and uplifting struggle to defend it against forces anxious to overcome it.

In summer 2018 the Jewish Museum in London opened an exhibition of the life and work of Goscinny who died at the age of 51 in Nice and was best known as the author of the series of comic books *Astérix* which have sold over 500 million copies. Born in Paris in 1926, Goscinny wrote and illustrated children's books, and was a cartoonist for a time, one of his early cartoons, one in 1943, was a humorous portrait of Winston Churchill with a six inch cigar. He was internationally famous for his creation of the "ultimate," the quintessential Frenchman, Astérix the Gaul.

He and his partner the illustrator Albert Uderzo, of Italian origin, founded a comic magazine *Pilote* in 1959 which from the start featured Astérix, the brave hero of a small coastal village of Gauls in Brittany resisting occupation by Julius Caesar and the Romans in 50 B.C., the only unconquered tribe, the "invincible Gauls." The adventures in the stories are replete with political and historical references parallel with French resistance to the Nazi occupation, and coincided with Charles de Gaulle's rise to political power.

Astérix and his friend Obelix use their wits to resist the Roman force anxious to occupy their village. Astérix was short, a warrior using intelligence, helped by Obelix, with

his supernatural strength.

The main point is that Goscinny, the author of *Astérix*, the emblem of France, was Jewish, born in 1926 in Paris of Polish and Ukrainian Jewish immigrants, spending a childhood in Argentina, a brief career in New York, and then return to Paris. He was the outsider, the underdog, who succeeded in his career and was both a patriotic and dedicated Frenchman and a proud secular Jew.

Goscinny, some of whose relatives were murdered at Auschwitz, died on November 5, 1977 and is buried in the Jewish Cemetery in Nice. He left a major part of his legacy to the chief Rabbinate of France. He was not a devout Jew, but he was an admirer of the State of Israel, and did visit Jerusalem the year he died and prayed at the Western Wall. His colleague Udezo drew a post, a cartoon of him as Saul Ben Epishul, later published as *Astérix and Jerusalem of Gold*.

By coincidence, the brilliant literary translator Anthea Bell died in Cambridge England on October 18, 2018 at age of 82. Bell translated into English over 250 works in French, German, and Danish, and many important authors, Kafka, Freud, Zweig. She had the Gaul to translate *Astérix* into English with extraordinary word play and good humor, perhaps at times even improving on the original French. Who else would name a Roman centurion, Crismus Bonus, or a druid Getafix who brews potions, or the dog Dogmatix or a mercenary Selectemployment tax, or a woman Gaul always mad at her husband, Impedimenta?

Astérix, is honored in France including in an amusement park, Parc *Astérix*, 30 miles north of Paris. Goscinny should remain remembered and honored for his singular contribution as a Jew to French literature and patriotic affirmation.