

Andre Schwarz-Bart*

THE 1959 GONCOURT PRIZE novelist was born in 1928 into the large family of a peddler, a former rabbinical student from Poland. At home Andre learned Yiddish; on the streets of Metz, French. The Nazis ended this attempt at assimilation by cremating his parents. Pretending to be 16, Andre himself joined the Resistance movement.

In postwar France, Andre worked in a factory and read detective stories, until 1946 when *Crime and Punishment* taught him life's seriousness could be reached by art. He was sufficiently self-educated to enter the Sorbonne, but he left after 15 days because his fellow students were too casual. He began to write.

So desperate did he become when his work did not go well that he even hoped to catch t.b. from his friend so that he would have more care and leisure. Like most writers, he "wrote in order to clarify my thoughts." His Jewishness, for which his family perished, did not succor him but it did provide some inner stimulus. "All the present-day Jews of the West," he has written, "are not simply the descendants of persecuted individuals, not the descendants of individuals who did not have a passive relationship of victim to executioner but an active relationship." In his prize-winning novel, *The Last of the Just*, a twelfth-century rabbi puts 250 of the faithful to death rather than let them be converted to Christianity.

What has made Andre more sensational than earlier Goncourt winners is the number of plagiarism charges now being made against him, even if one kindly critic has said, "If someone borrows four copper coins and returns a ton of pure gold, is he a thief?" At least a dozen lines of the novel came verbatim from *Travels of Benjamin III*, a Yiddish classic by Seferim. There are also exact parallels, discovered by a critic named Parinaud, between

* Exclusive Panorama feature.

the novel and historical accounts of the extermination camps and with the religious writings of Isaac Babel, Martin Buber, Manes Sperber (also a novelist), and others. The epigraph, attributed to a dead Yiddish poet, really are the words of a living Polish Roman Catholic; the Zionist anthem, "Hatikvah," is hardly the thousands of years old as claimed by the novel.

On the other hand, a number of weeklies have defended Andre Schwarz-Bart by saying that he necessarily had to research the Middle Ages, since he could not possibly have any first hand knowledge; and since he was writing fiction, giving credit would have been difficult. The Goncourt judges made their decision before the case could be clarified, deliberately, so that the judgment would not be harassed by, to them, extraneous matters. The novel, according to them, is brilliantly written, regardless of who is responsible for each of its parts!

Critics today still cannot decide whether a prank or crime has been committed; whether the insertions, so anachronistic, are the product of playful editors or of Andre's lack of education. The most serious charge has come from Arthur Sandauer who claims that Schwarz-Bart invented his own Middle Ages in such a way that the Jewish martyrs act and talk like Christians. For what purpose? Will Andre Christianize the Jews among his readership; or convert Christians to the Jewish faith; or simply become wealthy behind his dark dirty smile? Thinking that no man deserves to be poor forever until he has had the luxury of sinning, many readers anxiously forgive Andre, hoping he will join them in their own suffering loss of innocence.

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Deftly Speaking

*A non-conformist is a person who keeps gloves
in the glove compartment.*

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