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Great escapist

A French criminal with mythic ambitions

By **Andrew Hussey**



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A helicopter abandoned by Rédoine Faïd after his escape from prison in Réau, France, 2018 | © GEOFFROY VAN DER HASSELT/AFP via Getty Images

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The prison of Fresnes, to the south of Paris, is one of the oldest in the French prison system. It holds some of France's most dangerous prisoners and is known for its harsh discipline. It was the first jail I ever visited in France and I remember well Madame la Directrice, perched on her desk in her elegant, book-lined office, telling me casually about the daily toll of suicides and murder. When Rédoine Faïd arrived in Fresnes for the first time in 1998, convicted on several charges of armed robbery, he was terrified. He was placed in Maximum Security with "a lunatic" who asked if he was a rapist and who said that his ambition was to kill a guard. From then on, Faïd's only thought was to escape, from the prisoners as well as the guards.

In 2013, Faïd finally did make the great escape he had always dreamt about. He had been sentenced to thirty years in 1998, but was released on parole after ten years. By 2011 he was back inside for breaking parole conditions. Two years later, he escaped from the prison of Lille-Sequedin in the most spectacular fashion: on his way to a prison visit, he suddenly produced an automatic pistol, taking four guards hostage. He then blew up five prison doors with explosives, before disappearing in a waiting getaway car. He was arrested six weeks later in a cheap hotel, not too far from Fresnes.

Faïd's most extraordinary escape was, however, yet to come. This was in July 2018 from the prison of Réau, again to the south of Paris. Two of Faïd's comrades hijacked a helicopter which they landed in the prison courtyard, obscuring the security cameras with smoke bombs before cutting through Faïd's cell window with a power saw. They then took off, waving Kalashnikovs at the guards. The skill and daring of the escape left the French public breathless; the press loved it. The police were less impressed and more dogged. Faïd was tracked down again and arrested in October in Creil, the

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which is a translation of a memoir through interviews Faïd published in 2009 called *Braqueur: Des cités au grand banditisme* (Robber: From the council estates to organized crime). This is a wonderfully picaresque tale, delivered with wit and sharp intelligence, relating the story of how Faïd graduated from being a petty thief, whose main interest was stealing fashionable clothes to show off to local young women, to becoming a media figure, as well as a hero to the new generation of would-be bad guys all across France.

Among Faïd's earliest accomplices were two young "feujis" (an insulting but common slang word for Jews). His knowledge of Jewish culture became useful when, in the mid-1990s, after a series of heists, he went on the run first to Algeria, then to Switzerland and then finally to Israel, where he says he disguised himself as an Orthodox Jew, learnt Hebrew, how to shoot Uzis and make explosives from a friendly Israeli army officer. He was finally picked up in 1998 by French police who tracked him down via the travel agency where he had bought his tickets.

Faïd is a gripping storyteller but also an unreliable narrator. His role models include Jason Bourne, Al Pacino in *Scarface* (Faïd claims to have memorized every word in the film) and Steve McQueen in *The Great Escape*. His favourite film of all time, he says, is Michael Mann's thriller *Heat* (1995), which stars Pacino and Robert De Niro, portraying the rivalry between Pacino's character, a seasoned cop, and De Niro, who plays a master thief. Faïd has clearly cast himself as the De Niro character in the self-created movie of his life.

There is, however, a political subtext coursing subtly through the book, which is inevitably bound up with racism and colonial politics. Although he was born in Picardy in 1972, Faïd says that he came from a respectable hard-working family of first generation immigrants from the Algerian countryside. His father was a peasant who had worked for the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) during the Algerian War of

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community. Faïd was proud of his family's status, but wanted something else.

At one point he says that he loved crime because of the adrenaline rush he got from planning a bank robbery; it required discipline, courage and a love of risk and danger. But he was also ambitious in another, very specific way. He had noticed from an early age that everyone at the top of the criminal hierarchy, as in business or politics, was white. (He refers to them all as “Gauls”, regardless of whether they were Corsican, Marseillais or Basque.) Young North Africans like Faïd were useful for low-level crime - dealing drugs or violent extortion - but the strategic command was always controlled by “the Gauls”.

Faïd was, however, never content to be “le petit Arabe” - useful but too unsophisticated to ever take control. So he set out to overcome and reverse this structure. The fact that he did so with such success, making himself famous in the process, explains why he made enemies of so many “Gauls”, both among professional criminals and the “racist” police. For all his fantasies borrowed from American cinema, and Faïd's ambition to raise himself from obscure Algerian immigrant to master criminal, ironically enough his ultimate hero was also in fact a “Gaul”. This was Jacques Mesrine, who was shot dead by police on November 2, 1979 in a so-called state execution. The affair provoked outrage in France as well as a wave of anti-police feeling. Although Mesrine had a murky career - he was known as a cold-blooded killer and had been involved in far-right politics in Algeria and terrorism in Quebec - he was known, too, for his ability to trick the police and manipulate the media. For this reason he was admired by intellectuals of the post-68 generation, most notably the Situationist Guy Debord, the author of *La Société du spectacle* (1967) which is now claimed by Debord's admirers as the guiding theory of May 68. Mesrine also impressed Debord's friend and sponsor Gérard Lebovici. Mesrine was obviously dangerous company. Nonetheless Lebovici, a rich Left Bank intellectual with a taste for low life, so admired Mesrine's provocative adventures that in 1984 he posthumously published

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near the Champs Elysées on May 5, 1984. The French initially pointed the finger at Guy Debord, who was said to have links with the Brigade Rosse in northern Italy. The finally accepted version is, however, that Lebovici was shot by one of Mesrine’s accomplices who claimed that the publisher had failed to pay royalties on the book.

When Mesrine’s death was announced on television, Faïd says that his “whole family was sad. For us, he stood for the people against the rich and powerful ... Everyone says he was a good man, an intelligent guy. Through the 1980s, not one year went by that we didn’t talk about Mesrine. He stayed with me”.

Like Mesrine, Faïd is no saint or martyr, even if he sometimes thinks he is (he has, for example, been implicated in the murder of a young policewoman called Aurélie Fouquet, who was killed in a truck robbery planned by Faïd and others in 2010. Faïd has always protested his innocence). But, as this book reveals, he is determined to set himself up as the Mesrine of the twenty-first century. But the real significance of Mesrine for Faïd was that he was a real person who transformed himself into a myth. His career was living proof of Faïd’s sustaining fantasy that life can imitate art. In the meantime, I’m just waiting for the film.

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