

WIKIPEDIA

Jacques Mesrine

Jacques Mesrine (French pronunciation: [ʒak mɛsʁin], [mɛʁin]; 28 December 1936 – 2 November 1979) was a French criminal responsible for numerous murders, bank robberies, burglaries, and kidnappings in France, the US, and Canada. Mesrine repeatedly escaped from prison and made international headlines during a final period as a fugitive when his exploits included trying to kidnap the judge who had previously sentenced him. An aptitude for disguise earned him the moniker "The Man of a Thousand Faces" and enabled him to remain at large while receiving massive publicity as a wanted man. Mesrine was widely seen as an anti-establishment Robin Hood figure. In keeping with his charismatic image, he was rarely without a glamorous female companion. A two-part film, *Mesrine*, which came out in 2008, was based on Mesrine's life.

Contents

Early life and criminal career up to 1965

Canary Islands, Canada, Venezuela, 1966–1972

Murder of Médéric Cote and Ernest Saint-Pierre

Return to France: 1972–1977

Escape from La Santé

Mesrine as fugitive

Public Enemy No. 1

Death

Aftermath

Murder of Gérard Lebovici

Pop culture references

References

Further reading

External links

Jacques Mesrine



Booking photo of Mesrine, taken in 1973.

Born	Jacques René Mesrine <div>28 December 1936</div> <div>Clichy, Hauts-de-Seine, France</div>
Died	2 November 1979 (aged 42) <div>Paris, France</div>
Cause of death	Shot by four police officers
Other names	French <u>Robin Hood</u> <div>The Man of a Hundred Faces</div>
Occupation	Soldier, thief, smuggler, restaurateur, cook, chauffeur
Height	5 ′ 10 ″ (1.78m)
Criminal status	Deceased
Spouse(s)	Lydia De Souza (divorced) <div>María de la Soledad (divorced)</div> <div>Jeanne Schneider (partner)</div> <div>Sylvia Jeanjacquot (partner)</div>
Children	3

Early life and criminal career up to 1965

Jacques René Mesrine was born in Clichy, near Paris on 28 December 1936 to a couple of blue-collar origin who had moved up in social class. As a child, he witnessed a massacre of villagers by German soldiers. His parents had

great aspirations for their son and sent him to the prestigious Catholic Collège de Juilly where his friends included the likes of musician and composer Jean-Jacques Debout. Mesrine was an extremely unruly pupil and he was expelled from Juilly for attacking the principal. He went on to be expelled from other schools and fell into the lifestyle of a juvenile delinquent, much to the dismay of his family. In 1955, at age 19, he married Lydia De Souza in Clichy; the couple divorced a year later. Drafted into the French Army, he volunteered for special duty in the Algerian War as a parachutist/commando. While participating in counter-insurgency operations, Mesrine's duties are said to have included the killing of prisoners. Although he disliked military discipline, Mesrine enjoyed action and was decorated with the Cross for Military Valour by General Charles de Gaulle before leaving the army in 1959. His father was later to claim that the time in Algeria had brought about a noticeable deterioration in Mesrine's behavior.^{[1][2][3]}

Parent(s)	André Pierre Mesrine and Fernande Buvry-Mesrine
Criminal charge	<u>Assassination</u> , <u>bank robbery</u> , <u>burglary</u> , <u>kidnaping</u> , <u>smuggler</u> .
Penalty	20 years

In 1961, Mesrine became involved with the Organisation armée secrète. He married Maria de la Soledad; they had three children but later separated in 1965. In 1962, Mesrine was sentenced to 18 months in prison for robbery (his first prison sentence, although he had been a professional criminal for a number of years). After being released, Mesrine made an effort to reform: he worked at an architectural design company where he constructed models, showing considerable ability. However, a downsizing in 1964 resulted in him being laid off. His family bought him the tenancy of a country restaurant, a role in which he was quite successful, but this arrangement ended after the owner paid a visit one evening to find Mesrine carousing with acquaintances from his past. The lure of easy money and women proved impossible for him to resist and he returned to crime. Overcoming some suspicion about his relatively middle-class background, Mesrine began to establish a reputation in the underworld as a man who was crossed at one's peril.^{[3][4]}

In December 1965, Mesrine was arrested in the villa of the military governor in Palma de Mallorca. He was sentenced to six months in jail and later claimed that Spanish authorities believed he was working for French intelligence.^[3]

Canary Islands, Canada, Venezuela, 1966–1972

In 1966, Mesrine opened a restaurant in the Canary Islands. In December of the same year, he robbed a jewellery store in Geneva and a hotel in Chamonix. The following year, Mesrine robbed a fashion store in Paris.

In February 1968, he fled to Quebec with his then mistress, Jeanne Schneider, and worked as a housekeeper/cook and a chauffeur for grocery and textile millionaire, Georges Deslauriers for a few months. An argument Schneider had with Deslauriers' long-time respected gardener led to both being dismissed. They then attempted to kidnap Deslauriers, but this scheme failed when a supposedly strong sedative had no effect on Deslauriers.

On June 26, 1969, Mesrine and Schneider fled to the US. On June 30, Evelyne Le Bouthillier, an elderly lady who may have given them refuge, was found strangled. A couple of weeks later, on July 16, Mesrine and Schneider were arrested in Arkansas on information supplied by an accomplice and extradited to Quebec.^[5]

Mesrine was sentenced to 10 years in prison for the bungled kidnapping; he escaped a few weeks later, but was rearrested the next day. Mesrine and Schneider were acquitted of the

murder of Le Bouthillier in 1971. With Jean-Paul Mercier, Mesrine cut through the wire to escape again on August 21, 1972, with five others from the Saint-Vincent-de-Paul prison. Mercier, a wanted murderer, and Mesrine then robbed a series of banks in Montreal, sometimes two in the same day. By this time it was apparent that Mesrine did not have a typical criminal attitude towards minimizing the danger of being caught. Deeply resenting the way he had been treated in the prison, Mesrine and Mercier made an extremely risky attempt to precipitate a mass break out from the maximum security block of Saint-Vincent-de-Paul on September 3, 1972. However, their own break-out had caused perimeter security to be greatly increased and they found the area swarming with armed guards. There was a shoot-out in which two guards were seriously injured and Mercier was wounded before they managed to get away. The boldness of escaped convicts returning to attack a prison infuriated Canadian law enforcement; the escapade predictably led to a hugely increased effort to arrest the duo.^[4]

Murder of Médéric Cote and Ernest Saint-Pierre

A week after their foiled attempt to free the prisoners, Mesrine and Mercier went for a target practice session, taking Mercier's girlfriend along. But the location, though three miles down a dirt track through the forest, was far from being truly remote and the noise of them blasting away at targets all afternoon could be heard in the town of Plessisville where there was a Ministry of Natural Resources and Wildlife station. When Mesrine and company drove back along the track, two forest rangers, Médéric Cote, aged 62, and Ernest Saint-Pierre, aged 50, were waiting. The rangers were armed but their jobs had mainly involved enforcing hunting and firearms regulations, and in any case, there was no reason for them to expect that the men who had been making themselves conspicuous by such a disturbance would actually be wanted escapees. Realizing they were not policemen, Mesrine submitted to a search of the car, but on finding loaded guns in the rear, the rangers informed them that they would have to follow their car back to Plessisville. While Mesrine was trying to talk them out of this, Cote, possibly alerted by the sight of the arsenal of weapons, suddenly recognised the pair, whereupon Mesrine and Mercier shot both officers dead.^[4]

Mesrine continued robbing banks in Montreal, and even covertly gained access into the US again for a brief stay at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City, before moving to Caracas, Venezuela.^[3]

Return to France: 1972–1977

By the end of 1972, Mesrine had returned to France, where he resumed robbing banks. On March 5, 1973, during an argument with a cashier in a coffee bar, Mesrine brandished a revolver and seriously injured a police officer who tried to intervene. He was arrested 3 days later. In May, he was sentenced to 20 years imprisonment – which, considering his record, was lenient for the time and place – to be served at La Santé maximum security prison where escape was thought to be impossible. In a plan likely formulated even before his arrest, Mesrine took a judge, who sentenced him on another matter in the past, hostage with a revolver (recovered from the courthouse lavatory where it had been hidden by an accomplice) and escaped. After being at large for four months, he was arrested in his new Paris apartment on September 28, 1973, on information supplied by an associate who wanted a reduced sentence. Mesrine was returned to La Santé where he covertly wrote and smuggled out an autobiography, titled *L'Instinct de Mort* ("Death Instinct"),^{[6][7]} in which he claimed to have committed upwards of forty murders, a number thought by some to be a considerable exaggeration. The appearance of Mesrine's book resulted in France passing a "Son of Sam law", designed to stop criminals profiting from the publication of their crimes.

Escape from La Santé

La Santé was seen as escape proof. In his escapes from his Canadian prisons, Mesrine had required little more than wire cutters and a very high degree of audacity. During this incarceration, however, he faced security far better than any he had defeated before. A report noted that Mesrine had been seen doing exercises in his cell and was behaving like a man who had received good news. On May 8, 1978, he produced a gun, stole keys and, with François Besse (a highly accomplished escaper in his own right), and another man, Mesrine got out of a cellblock and into a fenced-off yard walkway. They had a grappling iron with them and Mesrine forced some workmen with an extending ladder to bring the ladder along. The trio unlocked a yard gate in an inner wall; an armed guard was taken by surprise at his post. The men then reached an isolated part of the 14 metre (46 ft) high exterior wall (which would have presented a considerable challenge without the ladder). They hooked the grappling iron onto the top of the ladder and slid down the rope. The third man over the wall was shot dead by police in the street outside. Mesrine and Besse hijacked a car and evaded the police cordon; they had become the first men to escape from La Santé.^[8]

Mesrine as fugitive

Mesrine and Besse robbed a Paris gunsmith four days after their escape from La Santé. On May 26, 1978, the duo robbed the *Deauville* Casino of 130,000 francs, but the police arrived as they exited. Around 50 shots were exchanged and Mesrine was wounded, but the duo made a getaway. Mesrine and Besse eluded the subsequent massive sweep of the area by taking a farmer and his family hostage and forcing him to drive them to safety. Subsequently, the kidnapping of a banker netted them 450,000 francs in ransom. Despite his position as "French public enemy number one" (*l'ennemi public numéro un*), Mesrine was featured on the cover of the August 4, 1978, *Paris Match*. In an interview inside, he threatened the Minister of Justice. By remaining at large in the Paris area, despite his notoriety, Mesrine appeared to be making a fool of the law and the state; the *Paris Match* interview was the last straw. The police agencies hunting Mesrine were pressured for results from the highest echelons of government.

This proved to be difficult, not the least because of rivalry between the various agencies. The usual informants were of little use as Mesrine generally avoided contact with the criminal underworld. Moreover, he was adept at disguising his appearance and allaying suspicion from members of the public: he reportedly went for a drink with his neighbours and laughed when one said he "looked like Mesrine".^[9] Mesrine travelled to Sicily, Algeria, London, and Brussels, and back to Paris in November 1978, where he again robbed a bank. Objecting to Mesrine's proposed kidnapping of a senior judge, and not sharing his desire for revenge against the system, François Besse disassociated with Mesrine and later disappeared. Besse was finally captured in 1994; he was paroled in 2006.^{[9][10]}

Public Enemy No. 1

Mesrine's next exploit occurred in November 1978. It was a daring attempt to kidnap a judge (who had sentenced him) as part of a campaign to get maximum security prisons closed. His accomplice was captured but Mesrine escaped by running downstairs past several policemen telling them "Quick! Mesrine's up there!" A young policeman posted outside was found handcuffed to a drainpipe weeping. On June 21, 1979, Mesrine kidnapped millionaire real estate mogul Henri Lelièvre and received a ransom of six million francs.^[9]

Mesrine made good copy for the press, clowning for the camera and asserting that his criminal

activity was politically motivated.

Jacques Tillier (a former Directorate of Territorial Security policeman) had written disparagingly about Mesrine in the French newspaper *Minute* but on September 10, 1979, he went, rather incautiously, to a clandestine meeting with Mesrine on the promise of an interview. The incensed Mesrine had other plans: he shot Tillier in the face, leg and arm. Tillier survived the ordeal, although he lost the use of one arm. During his contact with Mesrine, Tillier discovered the identity of Mesrine's accomplice.^[9]

Death

The special gendarme unit tasked with finding and capturing Mesrine found it impossible to track him down directly. Eventually, by using information supplied by Tillier, they ascertained the licence number of the car that a woman named Sylvia Jeanjacquot, believed to be Mesrine's mistress, had used and checked parking tickets which it had received months previously. These tickets indicated that she had been frequenting a certain district without any obvious cause. Undercover patrols combed the area and a man fitting Mesrine's description was spotted walking with a woman believed to be Jeanjacquot on October 31, 1979. One officer who had seen Mesrine at court confirmed the identification by noting Mesrine's distinctive build. The couple were followed home and their building watched around the clock.^{[4][9]}

Two days later, on November 2, 1979, the couple left the apartment for a weekend in the country, taking Jeanjacquot's pet poodle with them. Mesrine and Jeanjacquot had reached Porte de Clignancourt on the outskirts of Paris, when the gold BMW they were driving was boxed in at the entrance to an intersection. Police marksmen in the rear of a lorry immediately in front of their car threw open a tarpaulin. Reportedly, in the instant before the gendarmerie opened fire, Mesrine's eyes were described as being so shocked they seemed to be bursting from his head, as he realized he was trapped. Twenty rounds were fired at point blank range. Mesrine was struck 15 times. A coup de grâce was then administered with a pistol. Sylvia Jeanjacquot lost one eye and suffered lasting damage to her arm. Her pet dog was killed.^[3]

Aftermath

French police announced that their operation was a success and received congratulations from then President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing. There were suggestions in some media publications that Mesrine may have been shot without warning in a way which amounted to extrajudicial killing, but the police pointed out that he had sworn that he would never surrender and that, as well as having a gun on him, Mesrine had been armed with two grenades which were taped together and adapted so they could be brought into action instantly.

Sylvia Jeanjacquot underwent multiple operations and served more than two years in prison before being ultimately acquitted of any crime.^[11] Mesrine's former defense attorney, Maître Malinbaum, continued for 30 years to fight for a judicial investigation into the events surrounding Mesrine's death at Porte de Clignancourt and to have the French state held accountable for what she saw as the assassination of her client.^[2]

Murder of Gérard Lebovici

By law, Mesrine could not profit from *L'instinct de Mort*, but the publishers had received a threatening letter from him in 1979 demanding payment nonetheless. *L'instinct de Mort* was republished in 1984 by Champ Libre Editions,^[12] The founder of Champ Libre, Gérard Lebovici,

was a gifted entrepreneur, influential in the French film industry, and known for his fascination with criminals. Lebovici adopted Mesrine's daughter after her father's death.

On March 5, 1984, the body of Gérard Lebovici was found in the Avenue Foch underground car park. He had been shot dead, with the bullet wounds forming a square: a traditional underworld sign for a contract that has not been fulfilled. One theory is that Lebovici may have been killed by a close associate of Mesrine's with whom Lebovici may have had an appointment on the day of his death.^[13]

Pop culture references

A film about Mesrine; *Mesrine*, was released in 1984. It featured Nicolas Silberg in the title role and was written and directed by André Génovès.

Hard rock ensemble Trust dedicated two tracks ("Le Mitard" and "Instinct de Mort") to Mesrine on their 1980 album *Repression*.

Punk group The Blood recorded a track titled "Mesrine" on their 1983 *False Gestures For A Devious Public* LP. There is also a Quebec-based grindcore band named Mesrine.^[14]

In the French novel, *Les Rivières Pourpres*, the protagonist, Niémans, is implicated in Mesrine's assassination.

A two-part film, *L'instinct de mort* (English title: *Mesrine: Killer Instinct*) and *L'ennemi public No. 1* (English title: *Mesrine: Public Enemy No. 1*), recounting Mesrine's career and starring Vincent Cassel in the lead role, was released in France in 2008 and in the UK in August 2009.

Popular French-Algerian rap duo PNL released a track titled "Porte de Mesrine" in 2015.^[15]

References

- Line of Fire: Heroism, Tragedy, and Canada's Police By Edward Butts
- "Jacques Mesrine: Le grand gangster" (<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/jacques-mesrine-le-grand-gangster-1766392.html>). *The Independent*. 3 August 2009. Retrieved 22 March 2011.
- Mesrine, Penguin Books, 1980.(English)
- Line of Fire: Heroism, Tragedy, and Canada's Police, Edward Butts 2009
- Line of Fire: Heroism, Tragedy, and Canada's Police, (2009), Edward Butts (2009)
- L'Instinct de Mort, Editions Lattes, 1977(French)(First publishing)
- L'instinct de Mort, Flammarion Quebec, 2008.(French)
- "Le jour où Mesrine s'est évadé de la prison de la santé" (<http://www.directmatin.fr/racines/2014-10-19/le-jour-ou-mesrine-sest-evade-de-la-prison-de-la-sante-693308>). Retrieved 7 April 2018.
- Mesrine by Carey Schofield, Penguin Books, 1981.(English)
- French Wikipedia page 'François Besse'
- "Sylvia Jeanjacquot : Mesrine, mon amour" (<http://www.vsd.fr/les-indiscrets/sylvia-jeanjacquot-mesrine-mon-amour-4530>). *VSD*. 21 September 2011. Retrieved 25 December 2015.
- L'Instinct de Mort, Champ Libre Editions, 1984.(French)
- BBC radio interview with Vincent Cassel
- "Mesrine" (<http://mesrine.org/>). 23 August 2010. Retrieved 14 July 2012.

15. *PNL – Porte de Mesrine* (<https://genius.com/Pnl-porte-de-mesrine-lyrics>), retrieved 2018-03-15

Jacques Mesrine, Richard Cobb *People and Places*, Oxford University Press 1986. Essay appeared as review of Carey Schofield, *Mesrine, The Life and Death of a Supercrook* (Penguin) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, May 1980.

Further reading

- Hussey, Andrew (11 July 2009). "Killer, robber, master of disguise... and now the biggest movie star in France" (<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/jul/12/jacques-mesrine-french-movie>). *The Guardian*. Retrieved 25 July 2018.

External links

- The Indomitable Gaul! – World's Greatest Prison Escapes: Jacques Mesrine (http://www.eco-action.org/dod/no9/prison_mesrine.html)
- *L'instinct de mort* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1259014/>) at [IMDb](#)
- *L'ennemi public n°1* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0411272/>) at [IMDb](#)
- *Mesrine* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0087712/>) at [IMDb](#)
- *La chasse à l'homme (Mesrine)* (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0793481/>) at [IMDb](#)
- video Jacques Mesrine (<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/k5Zb2on9VTtjSl6Qdp>)
- Interesting TV on *Jacques Mesrine* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20120721055448/http://interestingtv.org/mesrine>) Information on the two films and Mesrine's autobiography: *L'Instinct De Mort*

Retrieved from "https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jacques_Mesrine&oldid=1080574880"

This page was last edited on 2 April 2022, at 01:47 (UTC).

Text is available under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License 3.0; additional terms may apply. By using this site, you agree to the Terms of Use and Privacy Policy. Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a non-profit organization.