

René Lévesque's Tall Tales of War
By William Johnson

Final edit 190513

In his memoirs, published in 1986, as well as in many interviews over the decades, René Lévesque loved to evoke his adventures during the final three months of the Second World War when, as a young man in his early twenties, he wore the uniform of the American army and reported on the American forces liberating Western Europe from the Nazis.¹ He told of witnessing some of the most dramatic events that occurred in the final phase of that momentous conflict. He had been present in the Austrian Alps, he said, when, before his very eyes, the bushes had parted on the side of the road and out stepped Reichsmarschall Hermann Göring, head of the Luftwaffe and the man whom Adolph Hitler had designated in his 1941 testament to be his successor, should the Fuehrer die or become incapacitated. With Hitler now dead by suicide and the Russian armies penetrating Berlin, Göring chose to surrender to the Americans. Lévesque, as he tells us, happened to be there, at the right place, at the right time.

There were other memorable scenes recounted in his recollections. He arrived with the first Americans who liberated Dachau, the concentration camp whose horrors, revealed that day, would stigmatize forever the Nazi regime and – so it would be said repeatedly – forever inure Lévesque against any temptation towards extremism. On another occasion, he tells us, while on duty in the Austrian Alps, he recognized a French sports celebrity who came running on the road, then stopped when he spotted the military unit and forthwith led Lévesque and the American troops to nearby Schloss Itter (Itter Castle) where Lévesque encountered select French prisoners of war, including two former prime ministers of France, two former chiefs of staff of France's armed forces and other French celebrities.

But that wasn't all. On another day, while travelling in Italy, he recalled witnessing the unforgettable sight of two defiled corpses, naked, dangling from ropes, upside down: Benito Mussolini and his mistress Clara Petacci, known as "Claretta."

Lévesque's accounts, dramatic as they are, have never been scrutinized in detail or verified against the contemporary accounts left by other journalists, military officers and various participants who were certifiably at the scene at the time. Lévesque's stories, all recounted long after the events, were simply taken as fact because the illustrious René Lévesque had said so. But, precisely because of Lévesque's unique stature in the history of Quebec, his narration of his Second World War experiences deserves to be critically revisited because it reveals so much about Lévesque the man. Our trip into his past will reveal an unknown dimension of Lévesque's character, one that will provide a new understanding of the political vision that Lévesque would develop after his return from the war and would promote so persuasively as a politician and as Quebec's most remarkable premier.

¹ The French original : René Lévesque, *Attendez que je me rappelle...* Montréal, Québec/Amérique, 1986, p. 121-139. The English edition: René Lévesque, *Memoirs*, Translated by Philip Stratford, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, p. 92-103.

In a word, René was, as we shall demonstrate, an inveterate liar, a self-aggrandizing story-teller, a spinner of myths in which he cast himself in the role of saviour of his people and would-be founder of a new country among the nations, an independent Quebec.

In 1978, when René Lévesque had been in office for two years as Premier of Quebec, he was interviewed at great length by a journalist from France, Jean-Robert Leselbaun. The French had been mesmerized by the prospect of this premier holding a referendum on secession and, should it gain a majority, declaring Quebec to be a new independent country. This would constitute a dramatic revenge of history, redeeming the loss of New France in the 18th century.

So the journalist sought to elicit a rounded picture of Lévesque, the man and the political leader. As part a review of his life, Leselbaun asked Lévesque to recount his memories of the Second World War. Lévesque's answer provided a bare-bones summary of the dramatic stories he had recounted during many interviews over the years and that he would develop at greater length in his 1986 memoirs. Here was his reply to the French journalist:

I will relate them some other time. To get to the point quickly, I would say that I followed the allied forces in Germany. I was there for the battle of Nuremberg, I discovered (one of the first) the horrors of the Dachau concentration camp, I found the well-treated prisoners of Itter Castle, including Édouard Daladier, Léon Jouhaux, Paul Raynaud and General Weygand. I saw the corpse of Mussolini. I was one of the rare journalists to hear Göring speak right after his surrender².

Part I: René Lévesque discovers Dachau

In his memoirs, the chapter where René Lévesque recalls his travels with the American forces during the Second World War is titled, in its French version, « LA VÉRITÉ DÉPASSAIT LA FICTION »; in the English version, it is "The Truth Stranger Than Fiction". His principal biographer, Pierre Godin, described his war peregrinations as follows in his entry on René Lévesque in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*:

His wartime odyssey did not really begin until February 1945. Holding the rank of junior lieutenant, he joined General Omar Nelson Bradley's army, which had liberated part of France and then stopped in Paris. Next came the march to the German border with General George Smith Patton and General Alexander McCarrell Patch, the crossing of the Rhine, and the discovery of a shattered Germany with its great cities, such as

² René Lévesque, *La Passion du Québec*, Montréal, Éditions Québec/Amérique, 1978, p. 28. My translation. This is the original French : « Je les raconterai une autre fois. Pour aller vite, je dirai que j'ai suivi les forces alliées en Allemagne. J'ai assisté à la bataille de Nuremberg, découvert (l'un des premiers) les horreurs du camp de concentration de Dachau, retrouvé les prisonniers bien traités du château d'Itter, dont Édouard Daladier, Léon Jouhaux, Paul Raynaud et le général Weygand. J'ai vu le cadavre de Mussolini. J'ai été l'un des rares journalistes à entendre Göring quelques instants après sa reddition. »

Nuremberg, Stuttgart, and Munich, devastated. Finally, there was the horror of the Holocaust, which turned his stomach when he entered the concentration camp at Dachau with the first group of American journalists.³

Lévesque's presence at Dachau and his description of the horrors he witnessed there is perhaps the most cited event of his entire life. On March 16, 2016, I Googled the words, "René Lévesque" and "Dachau." The response came with this notice: "About 2,720 results." So, 29 years after his death there were still thousands of items on his presence at Dachau.

In his four-volume biography of Lévesque, Pierre Godin gave this title to his chapter on Lévesque's continental wartime experiences: « Dans l'enfer de Dachau, »⁴ in the hell of Dachau. Lévesque's more recent biographer, Daniel Poliquin, commented: "In Dachau, Lévesque saw with his own eyes what unbridled nationalism could do, and that instilled in him a lasting skepticism about any expression of fanaticism."⁵ When Lévesque died on November 1, 1987, his obituary in *The New York Times* stated: "During World War II, he worked as a war correspondent attached to the United States Seventh Army and as an interpreter between American and Free French forces, covering the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp, among other major events."⁶ Journalist Graham Fraser informs us that Lévesque "witnessed the liberation of Dachau."⁷ Military historians Jack Granatstein and Peter Neary published an anthology of writings on the Second World War in which they reproduced the entire passage of Lévesque's memoirs where he described his experiences at Dachau.⁸

Dachau was liberated on April 29, 1945, just nine days before the war in Europe ended. The horrors discovered there by invading American forces triggered some of the most shocking reports to emerge from the Second World War, flashed onto the front pages of newspapers throughout the Western world. Dachau, like the swastika and the *Heil Hitler* salute, came to symbolize *der Fuehrer's* demonic rule.

Lévesque himself, to introduce in his memoirs his arrival at Dachau, wrote that it had won him « la primeur », ⁹ as the first journalist to reveal Dachau's liberation and its horrors. « La primeur »

³ Godin says here that Lévesque "entered the concentration camp at Dachau with the first group of American journalists." But Lévesque, in his memoirs, speaks only of arriving "with some of the members of the first health services." He made no mention of other journalists.

The reference for the quotation, above: Pierre Godin, "LÉVESQUE, RENÉ," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 21, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003, accessed February 27, 2018, at http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/levesque_rene_21E.html.

⁴ Pierre Godin, *René Lévesque : Un enfant du siècle*, Montréal, Boréal, 1994, p. 155.

⁵ Daniel Poliquin, *René Lévesque*, Toronto, Penguin Canada, 2009, p. 34.

⁶ "Rene Levesque, Ex-Premier of Quebec, Dies at 65," By John F. Burns, Special to *The New York Times*. Published November 3, 1987.

⁷ Graham Fraser, *René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in Power*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1984, p. 17.

⁸ "Dachau. René Lévesque," in J. L. Granatstein and Peter Neary, editors, *The Good Fight. Canadians and World War II*, Toronto, Copp Clark, 1995, pp. 194-196.

⁹ He spoke of Dachau, where he would arrive in a day or two, as "l'enfer sur terre dont le lendemain ou le surlendemain nous réservait la primeur." *Attendez que je me rappelle*, p. 133.

in French, is what in English is called a journalistic scoop, a unique revelation. Here's how Lévesque set the scene in his memoirs.

Our first sight of the camp was freight trains on a siding, two lines of boxcars with some cadavers hanging out the open doors, and more scattered on the embankment. A torrid sun shone down and the smell was atrocious. We quickly entered the town, for that's what it seemed to be: behind low walls interspersed with watchtowers there was some kind of industrial complex with small factory buildings and repair shops. But this first impression was dissipated at sight of the indescribable crowd that rushed toward us. Riddled with questions in a dozen languages, pulled here and there by hands of frightening thinness attached to translucent wrists, we stood there stunned staring at these phantoms in striped pyjamas who were staggering out of the huts where they had been hiding until we had arrived on the scene with some of the members of the first health services.¹⁰

That horrible scene described by Lévesque agrees with many other descriptions of Dachau on that day. But he then went on to offer an entirely personal and original description of his experience at Dachau. Lévesque wrote:¹¹

In fact, the last traces of the German garrison had taken to their heels less than a quarter of an hour before.

A man who was still young, but who was nothing but skin and bones, told me in excellent French that he had lived some time in Montreal and, like everyone else, asked for a cigarette. I felt in my pocket; the package had disappeared. I discovered that all the pockets of my jacket had fared likewise. The depths of misery and hunger sometimes brings out the hero and the saint, at least that's what they say, but more often they debase and bring out the bird of prey.

This was illustrated by the following spectacle. Holding each other by the hand as though in some kind of children's game, a group of prisoners, surrounded by others watching them avidly, came toward us. Suddenly, savage cries of joy broke out when, from the middle of the circle, a young fellow was cast forth. He had plenty of meat on him, for he was a "kapo"¹² who hadn't been able to escape and who had been lying low waiting for the right moment. They forced him to kneel down, held his head up straight, and a big Slav with a toothless leer came up with a stick and methodically, chuckling

¹⁰ The original French version speaks of what "we" saw "on our arrival accompanied by a few scouts from the hygienic services." In French: "à notre arrivée en compagnie de quelques éclaireurs des services sanitaires." René Lévesque, *Attendez que je me rappelle...*, *op. cit.*, p.134. He never defined clearly who "we" were.. The conventions of journalism go missing, even though Lévesque was, officially, as "Correspondent, (Special Assignment on Continent), American Broadcasting Station in Europe Unit."

¹¹ René Lévesque, *Memoirs*, *op. cit.*, p. 101-102.

¹² I have excised these five words, "*one of the prison guards*," from Philip Stratford's translation of Lévesque's memoirs, because they are not found in the French text and are misleading. Lévesque wrote about "un 'kapo' qui, n'ayant pu s'enfuir, s'était déguisé en attendant l'occasion propice." (*Attendez que je me rappelle...*, *op cit.*, p. 134.) A kapo was not a prison guard, but rather a prisoner who connived with the Nazi guards, a trustee.

with pleasure, smashed the lower part of his face and jaw until it was nothing but a mass of bone and bleeding flesh.

One couldn't do a thing. We wouldn't have known what to do anyway. And wouldn't have wanted to do anything when we learned it had been literally a case of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Before putting their prisoners to work the Germans always stripped them of all their possessions, including their gold teeth. Then they worked them to death, especially the last year when rations were becoming scarce. At the end of the road they were sent to the "baths" (*Baden*) shabby-looking sheds linked to a reservoir by a couple of pipes. When the baths were full to the seams they opened the gas, and then, when the last groans had ceased, the bodies were taken to the ovens next door.

When news of this reached Quebec, and for some time after, people refused to believe. Heavy scepticism greeted such stories, which surpassed understanding. And even today, so many years later, it's sometimes worse. People who have the gall to proclaim themselves neo-Nazis, knowing that memory is a faculty capable of forgetting, go so far as to maintain that none of this really happened.

I can assure you that it was real, all right, that the gas chamber was real in its nightmarish unreality. The leaders had gone, trying to save their skins, leaving behind their last load of corpses, naked as worms in their muddy pallor. Near me was a cameraman whom I had promised a few words of commentary; he had to come out twice before he could film his ten seconds. On seeing it, the American Brigadier who had turned up on the scene took his revolver out of its holster and strode around with haggard eyes, muttering that he had to kill some of those bastards. His men had all they could do to calm him down.

That was his 1986 description. In 1972, speaking to his first biographer, the historian Jean Provencher, Lévesque had, then, too, claimed that he was with the first arrivals to liberate Dachau.

I was in the group that entered on the first day; it was awful. I remember; I interviewed two or three of the guys and it was incoherent. Everyone's first reaction was incoherent. Everything was upside down. First, there was the horror itself. Then, the fact was that you saw animals, because it's not true that, taken to that degree of pain and suffering, people are ennobled. It bestializes them. The guys that we were liberating were trying to steal from us, to swipe just anything, and you couldn't really blame them."¹³

Lévesque told Provencher in 1972 what he would repeat in 1986, namely that the German guards had fled shortly before the arrival of the American liberators. He made an exception, though, for a few guards who tried to avoid arrest by dissimulating themselves among the prisoners of war, in vain as it turned out. Here are Lévesque's own words, as quoted by Provencher:

¹³ "Interview with René Lévesque, May 25, 1972," in Jean Provencher, *René Lévesque : Portrait d'un Québécois*, Montréal, Éditions La Presse, 1973, p. 59-60.

The last German units had left an hour or two before our arrival. Some had hidden among the twenty or thirty thousand detainees, had mingled with them. The detainees, knowing that they were now free, made the rounds, hand in hand. And when they identified one in the group and had isolated him, that was the end of that guy. There's no two ways about it, not one of them got out alive. Now it was their turn to be torn apart.¹⁴

Towards the end of that interview with Provencher, Lévesque even shortened the time that elapsed between the departure of the German guards and Lévesque's arrival. Now it was no longer "an hour or two." He claimed: "Les Allemands partaient par un bout et nous arrivions par l'autre."¹⁵ The Germans were leaving by one end of the camp while we arrived by the other end.

An even earlier account of Lévesque's presence at Dachau was published in 1957 by Odette Oligny, a journalist who greatly admired Lévesque. Briefer than Lévesque's later descriptions, it simply made no mention of German guards. The state of the prisoners was dreadful, and that was the highlight of Lévesque's story. Oligny wrote:

On his return to Germany, René Lévesque was again exposed to a nightmare. He was among the first, with his American cohort, to penetrate into Dachau. "It was a horror beyond words," he said. ... "As for the survivors," René Lévesque continued, "they were no longer men. Thin to the limit, flabby, their skin loose over their bones, those unfortunates were certainly affected for life."¹⁶

In 1984, Lévesque gave another account of his wartime experiences to *Presse canadienne* reporter Pierre Tourangeau.¹⁷ He again emphasized that he was in the first contingent at the liberation of Dachau: "We entered at one end while the Germans were fleeing at the other end." And again he emphasized the degraded state of the prisoners of war: "The survivors who were still able leaped upon us, often almost like animals; they grabbed our rations, our cigarettes. At that level of misery there might be saints who are ennobled by it but for the majority, it destroys them."

One facet of all four accounts is surprising. In each, Lévesque described the prisoners as most obsessed with stealing cigarettes and with picking his pockets: they had become subhuman, were no longer men. That was rather a contemptuous generalization about those 32,000 prisoners, many of whom were there simply because they were Jews, and most of whom had been arrested simply because they were insufficiently pro-Nazi. No other account confirms Lévesque's degrading description of the prisoners.

¹⁴ Provencher, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁶ "René Lévesque, journaliste de l'air," *Le Samedi*, 7 décembre 1957, p. 7.

¹⁷ Pierre Tourangeau, "René Lévesque turns himself into an "American" war correspondent," *La Presse*, June 18, 1984.

More significantly, all the other eyewitness accounts of the liberation of Dachau include the presence still at Dachau of hundreds of German guards. They describe an initial exchange of gunfire and the slaughter of German guards. And they reported that there was an official ceremony of the surrender of the Dachau camp by a German SS officer to an American general. All that, Lévesque missed.

Here, for example is the communiqué, dated the very next day, April 30, 1945, issued over the signature of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, commander-in-chief of the Allied Forces. He stated: "Our forces liberated and mopped up the infamous concentration camp at Dachau. Approximately 32,000 prisoners were liberated; 300 SS camp guards were quickly neutralized."¹⁸

General Eisenhower stated that 300 camp guards had been neutralized. Lévesque claimed the guards had all left just before his arrival.

A war correspondent who was unquestionably there that day, Associated Press reporter Howard Cowan, filed a report published the next day in several American newspapers such as the *New York Sun*, the *New York World Telegram*, the *Chicago Herald-American* and the *Minneapolis Daily Times*. Local editing resulted in slight variations of Cowan's reportage in the different newspapers. Here is his account that appeared in the *Chicago Daily Times*.¹⁹ I have underlined statements that are at odds with Lévesque's account.

DAILY TIMES
CHICAGO'S PICTURE NEWSPAPER
MONDAY APRIL 30 1945

FREE 32,000 IN HORROR CAMP
Find Dachau Death Train

BY HOWARD COWAN

DACHAU, Germany, April 29. --(AP)--

The U.S. 42nd and 45th divisions captured the infamous Dachau prison camp today and freed its 32,000 captives.

¹⁸ Cited by American historian Abram L. Sachar, *The Redemption of the Unwanted: From the Liberation of the Death Camps to the Founding of Israel*, New York, St. Martin's/Marek, 1983, p. 9. SS stands for "Schultz-Staffel," the elite paramilitary organization of the Nazi Party, originally founded as a bodyguard for Hitler, but expanded under Heinrich Himmler to take up many armed functions, including that of guards at the Nazi concentration camps.

¹⁹ Colonel John H. Linden, the son of Brigadier General Henning Linden, self-published a book in 1997, *Surrender of the Dachau Concentration Camp 29 April 45, the True Account*. Invaluable, it reproduces photographically important original accounts and testimonies relating to the liberation of Dachau. The news report cited here was reproduced on pages 103 and 104.

Two columns of infantry, riding tanks, bulldozers and Long Tom rifles—anything with wheels—rolled down from the northwest and surprised the SS (Elite Corps) guards in the extermination camp shortly after the lunch hour.

Scores of SS men were taken prisoners and dozens slain.

The Americans were quickly joined by "trusties" working outside the sprawling barbed wire enclosure. Poles, Frenchmen and Russians seized SS weapons and turned them against their captors. Jan Yindrich, British war correspondent, and I saw the things that greeted our soldiers—39 open-type railroad cars standing on a siding which went through the walls of Dachau camp.

At first glance the cars seemed loaded with dirty clothing. Then you saw feet, heads and bony fingers. More than half the cars were full of bodies, hundreds of bodies.

Lt. Col. Donald Downard was driving in a jeep among a string of cars when a soldier shouted: "Come here, quick, colonel, here's a live one!"

Downard climbed over the pile of bodies to one man, his neck so small and shrunken it scarcely seemed capable of holding a head. He put the man in his jeep and carried him to a hospital, where plasma was keeping him alive.

The best information we could get was that this trainload of prisoners—mostly Poles—had stood on the tracks several days and most of the prisoners had simply starved to death. Others had been shot through the head.

Clothing had been torn from some, and their wasted bodies bore livid bruises. Some had tried to escape: their bodies lay along the tracks five or six steps away. One shot through the head was astride a bicycle.

This grisly spectacle was outside the walls of the camp—along a widely traveled road inside the city of Dachau where Bavarians passed daily.

The civilians were looting an SS warehouse nearby, passing the death train with no more than curious glances at the American soldiers. Children even pedaled past the bodies on bicycles and never interrupted their excited chatter. Looted clothing hung from their handlebars.

Seven thousand inmates were marched away on foot in the last few days, it was reported.

The main part of the camp, where 32,000 skinny men and women were jammed into wooden barracks, is surrounded by a 15-foot-wide moat through which a torrent of water circulates. Atop a 10-foot fence is charged barbed wire.

When Lt. Col. Will Cowling slipped the lock in the main gate there still was no sign of life inside this area. He looked around for a few seconds and then a tremendous human cry roared forth. A flood of humanity poured across the flat yard—which would hold half a dozen baseball diamonds—and Cowling was all but mobbed.

He was hoisted to the shoulders of the seething, swaying crowd of Russians, Poles, French, Czechs and Austrians, cheering the Americans in their native tongues.

Flags appeared and waved from the barracks. There was even an American flag, although only one American was held there. He is a major from Chicago captured behind German lines when he was on special assignment for the Office of Strategic Services.

The joyous crowd pressed the weight of thousands of frail bodies against the wire, and it gave way at one point. Like a break in a dam, they rushed out, although still penned up by the moat.

Three tried to climb over the fence, but were burned to death on the top wires, for the electric current still was on.

Two SS guards fired into the mass from a tower, betraying their presence. American infantrymen instantly riddled the Germans. Their bodies were hurled down into the moat amidst a roar unlike anything ever heard from human throats.

A few minutes later Brig. Gen. Henning Linden went inside the gates for a hasty inspection. He and four newsmen were surrounded by a cordon of armed guards, but that didn't keep us from being hugged and kissed half a dozen times by grimy, whiskered, bandaged men of various nationalities.

Inside the barracks were more than 1,000 bodies—some shot by guards in a wild melee last night, others victims of disease and starvation.

Inside as well as outside were gas chambers with adjacent crematory ovens. Sid Olsen of Time Magazine, Walter Riddler of the St. Paul Dispatch and I followed a fresh trail of blood into one brick building with a huge smoke stack.

Almost 100 naked bodies were stacked neatly in the barren room with cement floors. They had come from a room on the left marked "shower bath."

It really was a gas chamber, a low-ceilinged room about 30 feet square. After 15 or 20 persons were inside the doors were firmly sealed and the faucets were turned and poison gas issued. Then the bodies were hauled into a room separating the gas chamber from the crematorium. There were four ovens with a huge flue leading to a smoke-blackened stack.

Outside this building were tens of thousands of articles of clothing stacked in orderly piles.

Prisoners who said they had had access to the records and inner workings of the camp asserted 9,000 internees died of hunger or disease or were shot during the last three months and that 14,000 more had perished during the winter.

Typhus cases were scattered throughout the camp. The water supply of the city was reported contaminated from 6,000 graves on high ground which drains into the Amper River.

A French general was slain last week.

The GIs stormed through the camp with tornadic fury.

In the mess hall of the SS barracks food still was cooking in the kitchen. One SS officer was slumped over in a plate of beans, a bullet through his head.

The Rainbow infantry was among the first to reach the barbed wire enclosure.

Among the first there were Brig. Gen. Linden of South Minneapolis, deputy commander of the 42^d Division; Brig. Gen. Charles Banfill of Bonifay, Fla., assigned to the 42^d as an observer; Lt. Col. Walter J. Fellenz, San Antonio, Tex., commander of the 1st Battalion, 222^d Infantry, and Lt. Col. Cowling, Leavenworth, Kan., aide to Gen. Linden.

A Swiss Red Cross representative and two SS officers came out of the building behind a white flag. Gen. Linden said:

“The Red Cross man said the real heads of the camp had fled and placed these two fellows in charge of the camp last night.”

“I accepted their surrender, loaded the three of them in a jeep and drove them down to the train and made them look. One SS fellow asked for safe custody.”

Cowan wrote that “four newsmen” accompanied the general on a tour of the camp. Lévesque was not one of them. Cowan names three Americans. The fourth was a Belgian journalist, Paul-Michel-Gabriel Lévy. Fluent in German as well as English and French, Lévy was invited by Brigadier General Henning Linden to accompany him as he arrived to take control of the camp. And that scene of the camp surrender was precisely one that Lévesque missed. Here is how Lévy described it in the following extracts from his report, dated April 29 but published May 4, 1945 in the left-wing Belgian daily newspaper *La Wallonie*.²⁰

At 15:25, our jeeps stopped at the entrance to what was the first of the Nazi concentration camps. A white flag flew from the main building even while gunfire could still be heard. Just then, a civilian holding a Red Cross flag emerged from the camp; he was followed by an SS officer and enlisted man. The civilian produced a document: he was a German citizen²¹ representing the International Red Cross. He announced that the SS were renouncing fighting, they were turning over the camp to the American forces. The SS lieutenant confirmed what he had said and added that the only reason the SS were still armed within the camp was that it contained “dangerous political prisoners.” At the very moment that he assured us that the weapons of the SS would not be used against the allied soldiers, our group came under fire. Our men took cover, ready to fireback, but the firing stopped.

While Lévesque claimed that all the SS guards had fled, Levy described SS guards as still on duty in the camp and sometimes firing their weapons:

A group of SS men who had been deprived of their weapons now emerged from the porch, their arms raised. At that moment I could no longer hold back and I rushed into the camp. Machine-gun fire broke out again. Right at the gate, a detainee had just been shot to death by a sentry. Caught in the electrified fence, the body of another detainee was hanging.

Levy’s account evoked a touching scene that Lévesque could advantageously have recalled:

The crowd of the newly liberated was roaring, its acclamations went on for three quarters of an hour of delirium. The Russians broke into the “Internationale,” which was then taken up in every imaginable language. In nearby barracks, a Polish priest was

²⁰ Lévy’s account is reproduced in Linden, *op cit.*, p.108.

²¹ In reality, he was not German but a Swiss citizen named Viktor Maurer.

saying mass and the notes of an enthusiastic *Te Deum* blended with the words of the revolutionary anthem. All shared a communion in the inebriating joy of recovered freedom.

Another testimony to the presence of the SS and to the executions carried out that day was contained in the official report prepared by Lieutenant William J. Cowling, aide-de-camp to Brigadier General Linden who received the surrender. Cowling's report was by far the longest and most detailed, but only a few extracts will be cited here to confirm the picture presented by Howard Cowan and Lévy and others. In his report, dated May 2, 1945, he avoids using the first person singular when referring to himself but uses the third person, or sometimes his name, "Lt. Cowling," or "the aide" or "the American Lieutenant."²²

At this point, General Linden arrived, and the [German] lieutenant informed him that he wished to surrender the camp of Dachau to him and that approximately 100 SS guards still remained in the prison and that they were armed. These guards, however, had been ordered not to shoot the American soldiers but to keep only the prisoners in and to keep them in check. The Red Cross man said there were approximately 40,000 inmates of the prison, many of whom were half-crazed. At this point, small arms fire came from the left flank. The group took cover momentarily and the General had the German officer and the soldier stand in the open facing the fire. The fire soon let up, however, and the General sent the aide on up into the camp to get the situation.

Lt. Cowling went through one gate of the camp, and just off to the right of the gate, about fifty yards, observed a tower with German soldiers in the tower. Lt Cowling called out to them to come down. Approximately 12 soldiers came down out of the tower and the lieutenant sent them on back with the General's guards. The lieutenant, one of General Linden's guards and the two newspaper reporters²³ then proceeded on to the entrance to the actual camp cantonment. As the jeep approached and then crossed a small moat surrounding the main camp, its path was blocked by a dead civilian square in the center of the road. The civilian had been shot in the face and from the looks of the body had been dead not more than 24 hours. A German soldier guiding the lieutenant got off the fender of the jeep and lifted the body out of the way.

A guard house was on either side of the gate. ...At that point the lieutenant noticed something in the window of the guard house to the left of the gate. The German officer was waving a white flag out of the window, which practically touched the lieutenant's shoulder. Lt Cowling immediately went around and entered the guard house. Inside were two officers and six German soldiers. One of the officers asked if there was an American officer present and Lt Cowling informed him that he was an officer. The German told the officer that he wished to surrender and wished safe conduct for himself and his men. The Germans were all armed with pistols and rifles. The German could speak a little English and Lt Cowling had him place all the weapons outside the

²² Lieutenant Cowling's report is reproduced in Linden, *op. cit.*, p. 122 to 124.

²³ Sergeant Peter Furst of *Stars and Stripes* and Marguerite "Maggie" Higgins of the New York *Herald Tribune*.

door and then remain in place inside the guard room. Lt Cowling then went back outside the guard house and sent his driver back for the other guards. [...]

As some of the men of Col Fellenz's battalion and some of men of the 45th Division approached one of the towers, some of the guards fired into the crowd which was attempting to break through the fence. The doughboys of the two infantry divisions shot the SS guards who had commenced firing and quickly rounded up the other guards from the towers surrounding the prison. [...]

The party then returned to the outside of the enclosure. By this time order was restored; the German guards had either been killed or taken prisoner and the Americans had taken over the camp.

Another witness to the liberation of Dachau was reporter Margaret Higgins, of the *New York Herald Tribune*. A photograph shows her and Lévy – but not Lévesque – as part of a small group of people looking on as the SS lieutenant handed over control of the camp to General Linden. She arrived accompanied by a military journalist, Sergeant Peter Furst. I'll not quote her report because it adds little to what others have communicated. But her report, added to those of other certified eye-witnesses, makes it evident beyond doubt that Lévesque never saw what happened in Dachau that day. He was simply not there.

Another American officer present was Lieutenant Colonel Walter J. Fellenz, Commanding Officer, 1st Battalion, 222^d Regiment. He filed an official report dated May 6, 1945. I'll quote just one paragraph:

Amid the deafening roar of cheers, several inmates warned us of danger by pointing to one of the eight towers which surrounded the electrically charged fence. The tower was still manned by SS guards....The SS tried to train their machine guns on us; but we quickly killed them each time a new man attempted to fire the guns. We killed all seventeen SS.²⁴

Finally, René Lévesque failed to notice one of the notable occurrences of that day: that some American soldiers lined up disarmed SS guards who had just surrendered, and shot them in cold blood. These violations of international law led to an internal investigation by the 7th Army's Office of the Inspector General. Its report, submitted on June 8, 1945, was titled "Investigation of Alleged Mistreatment of German Guards at Dachau," signed by Lieutenant Colonel Joseph M. Whitaker. It established that several such atrocities had been committed, though the precise number of those shot dead after they had surrendered could not be established because of incomplete evidence.²⁵ Here are some conclusions contained in the report.

²⁴ Walter J. Fellenz, "Subject: Impression of The Dachau Concentration Camp. To: The Commanding General, 42^d Infantry Division," in Sam Dann, editor, *DACHAU 29 APRIL 1945: THE RAINBOW LIBERATION MEMOIRS*, Lubbock, Texas, Texas Tech University Press, 1998, p. 32.

²⁵ Linden, *op. cit.*, reproduced photographs of the four-page report at pages 129-132, and also photographs of nine pages containing partial transcripts of the interrogations of witnesses by Colonel Whitaker, on pages 133-141. Clearly the issue was considered serious. I have excised, as irrelevant to us today, the military identification number of the soldiers named as well as the military unit to which each belonged.

German soldiers after their surrender as prisoners of war to American troops were summarily shot and killed by such troops.

Four of such prisoners of war were shot by Lt William P. Walsh and by Pvt Albert C. Pruitt.

Germans identified as SS were segregated from other prisoners of war, marched into an enclosed yard, lined against the wall, and summarily executed under the personal supervision and orders of Lt Walsh. Seventeen of those segregated were killed.

Lt Jack Busheyhead, an executive officer to Lt Walsh, assisted such officer, and in addition personally participated in the execution of the seventeen.

Lt Daniel F. Drain assisted by directing his men to set up the machine gun used in the execution, knowing the unauthorized purpose to which it was to be put.

Lt. Drain witnessed abuse of [German] prisoners of war without taking steps to stop or prevent it.

Lt Howard E. Buchner violated his duty both as a physician and a soldier in ignoring the possibility of saving the wounded but still living prisoners of war who had been shot.

Tec Henry J. Wells wantonly shot and killed [German] prisoners of war in his custody.

Inmates shot and killed two guards, using a service rifle which they took from a soldier on guard duty, one Pfc Peter J. De Marzo. No investigation of the circumstances was made in such soldier's company although his commanding officer, Lt Lawrence R. Steward, Jr., was informed of the incident.

As a testimony to what really happened at Dachau, the distinguished British historian Sir Martin Gilbert, in his reconstruction titled *The Day the War Ended*, quoted the account of one of the prisoners of war who had witnessed the liberation of Dachau from within.²⁶

On April 29, the war ended for the prisoners of another vast concentration camp, in the village of Dachau, ten miles north-west of Munich. Among the prisoners in the camp was Albert Guérisse, a Belgian doctor who had been a British secret agent, with the false identity of a Royal naval officer, Lieutenant-Commander Patrick O'Leary. Guérisse later recalled how, as the first American officer, a major, descended from his tank, "the young Teutonic lieutenant, Heinrich Skodzensky", emerged from the guard post and came to attention before the American officer. "The German is blond, handsome, perfumed, his boots glistening, his uniform well-tailored. He reports as if he were on the military parade grounds near Unter den Linden during an exercise, then very properly raising his arm he salutes with a very respectful "Heil Hitler!" and clicks his heels. "I hereby turn over to you the concentration camp of Dachau, 30,000 residents, 2,340 sick, 27,000 on the outside, 560 garrison troops."

The American major did not return the German lieutenant's salute. "He hesitates for a moment," Albert Guérisse recalled, "as if he were trying to make sure that he is

²⁶ Martin Gilbert, *The Day the War Ended*, London, HarperCollins, 1995, p. 37 - 38.

remembering the adequate words. Then, he spits into the face of the German, “*Du Schweinhund!*” And then, “Sit down here!” – pointing to the rear seat of one of the jeeps which in the meantime have driven up. The major gave an order, the jeep with the young German officer in it went outside the camp again. A few minutes went by. Then I heard several shots.”

Lieutenant Skodzensky was dead. Within an hour, all five hundred of his garrison troops were to be killed, some by the inmates themselves but more than three hundred of them by the American soldiers who had been literally sickened by what they saw of rotting corpses and desperate starving inmates. In one incident, an American lieutenant machine gunned 346 of the SS guards after they had surrendered and were lined up against a wall. The lieutenant, who had entered Dachau a few moments earlier, had just seen the corpses of the inmates piled up around the camp crematorium and at the railway station.

René Lévesque, in later life, when caught making contradictory descriptions of such war events, would claim a failure of memory because of the long lapse of time. His interview with Odette Oligny, cited above, was 12 years after the liberation of the death camp. But could anyone who was at Dachau that April 29 as a war correspondent, possibly forget what he saw? The dramatically contrasting accounts surely establish beyond a doubt that René Lévesque was not there at Dachau on April 29, 1945. Nor was his Dachau imposture a singular occurrence.

Part II: René Lévesque interviews former Prime Ministers Daladier and Reynaud

In the turbulent, anarchic final week of the Second World War, in the mountains of Austria near the border with Germany, two former prime ministers and two former top generals of France were rescued from likely slaughter in the elite prisoner-of-war camp where they were held that was named Schloss Itter, or Castle Itter. It all happened as follows, according to Lévesque’s account, related in his 1986 memoirs.²⁷

One sunny afternoon a thin, athletic man approached us, running at an unhurried pace, jogging before the invention of the word. Being a tennis buff I recognized him almost immediately: it was Borotra, an all-time [tennis] champion. He was hardly winded and told us that he’d just walked out of the château-prison of Itter a few kilometres up the road. The garrison there had melted into the landscape, leaving some pretty fancy prisoners ripe for the picking. We found them in one of the ground-floor rooms sitting around in little groups seeming very disinclined to talk to one another. We had stumbled on the almost forgotten upper crust of pre-war Paris society: the union leader Léon Jouhaux, General [Maurice] Gamelin, Commander-in-Chief of the defeat of 1940, and, each in his own corner, the last two prime ministers of the ex-republic, Édouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud.

²⁷ *Memoirs*, pp. 98-99.

The chance to interview these ghosts was a real godsend. Respecting chronology, I began with Daladier. The old “bull of the Vaucluse” had thinned down a little, but he was still a rugged customer, though he had a hesitant look as if he might be worried about awkward questions. As far as that went, he’d had plenty of time to prepare himself.

“Monsieur le Premier Ministre,” I asked him after we’d been formally introduced, “would you mind sharing with us some of the reflections that time and distance have certainly given you a chance to elaborate?”

“Cher Monsieur,” he replied, “I have indeed many things to reveal, and above all a great many things to set straight. I intend to publish a full account as soon as I return to France. But here, you understand,” he said lowering his voice, “there are indiscreet ears belonging to certain individuals who will be unmasked in my memoirs as they deserve to be. I can hardly say more.”

Saying these words, he shot a murderous look at Paul Reynaud, who sat at the other end of the room affecting the most complete indifference. Hoping against hope, I now approached this dry, pointed little fellow and was summarily treated almost word for word to a repeat of the preceding scene. He, too, Reynaud said, had plenty to expose and certain people – same murderous look – had better watch themselves! Not only were they not on speaking terms, they could hardly wait to carve each other up. None the wiser, I had to settle for a simple statement of our discovery, without further adornment.

Fortunately, another chance encounter made up for the scoop I had been cheated of and earned me a host of compliments, which just goes to show that a reporter is only as good as his luck.

He presents what should have been, according to his story, an enormous scoop – being the first and only journalist on the scene for the liberation from a secret prison of two former prime ministers of France and two former French commanders-in-chief – as being little more than a missed opportunity: “I had to settle for a simple statement of our discovery, without further adornment.”

What a discovery! But for war correspondent René Lévesque, how disappointing! He was deprived of a scoop when the two former prime ministers refused to confide to him their inmost thoughts about that great catastrophe, the surrender of France to the Germans.

But in fact Lévesque had missed a greater scoop than the ruminations by two former prime ministers of France. The real scoop would have been telling the true story of the liberation of the French celebrities at Castle Itter. Had he really attended the liberation of Schloss Itter, he would have been struck by the sight, right at the entrance to the castle, of a bombed and burnt-out American tank. He would have seen the bullet holes in the walls of the castle. The two former prime ministers could have immediately told him of how they had taken up arms during the past night to repel the SS German soldiers attacking the castle, and how other German soldiers, within the castle, had fought on their side to repel the attackers trying to breach the castle walls.

That was quite a story, and it was told by others. The French notables were liberated on May 6, 1945. That same month, on May 26, an account of what had happened at Castle Itter was published in the newspaper of the American 12th Armored Division, called *Hellcat News*. It was headlined: “12th Men Free French Big-Wigs,” and was bylined: “By Cpl. John G. Mayer, Co. B, 23rd Tank Battalion.” The report began: “American troops, soldiers of the Wehrmacht, and a handful of French personages slated for death by the SS, fought side by side in an alpine castle on the last day of the war in Bavaria.”²⁸

A fuller account of the attack on the castle was published in the *Saturday Evening Post* of July 21, 1945, just two months after the event.²⁹ It was written by American war correspondent Meyer Levin, who, accompanied by a French photographer named Eric Schwab, had arrived on the scene with American reinforcements sent to rescue the original small group of American soldiers who had reached Castle Itter a day earlier and had then come under attack. Levin’s account establishes that it was not Borotra who first alerted the American forces to the French celebrities awaiting rescue at Castle Itter, as Lévesque claimed. It was a Yugoslav prisoner at the castle named Zoonimir Cuckovic, who, on May 4, 1945, was dispatched on a bicycle to find the invading Americans and deliver a written message. Cuckovic eventually, after a long ride, located the front-line troops and was presented to an American officer, Maj. John Kramers. Here is part of Levin’s account:

Today he [Zoonimir Cuckovic] had come from Itter, bicycling 40 miles against the current of frantically retreating SS vehicles, whose occupants, fortunately, no longer had time to bother civilian cyclists. Zoonimir carried a message: “The American military authorities,” it read, in solemnly foreign English, “are hereby informed that the undernamed fourteen French statesmen, generals, ladies and personalities are confined in the castle of Itter. The village and castle of Itter are eight kilometers east of *Wörgl*. (They have plenty of trunks and bags.)”

Major Kramers studied the list of names:

Édouard Daladier and Paul Reynaud, former prime ministers of France.
General Gamelin, former commander in chief of the French army.
Léon Jouhaux, secretary of the Confédération Général du Travail.
Mme Alfred Cailliau, sister of General de Gaulle, and her husband.
Michel Clémenceau, son of the French statesman.³⁰
Colonel de la Rocque, chief of the Croix de Feu organisation.
Jean Borotra, ex-Minister of Sports in the Vichy cabinet.
M. Granger, a relative of General Giraud.

²⁸ The full account, online, can be downloaded at this address:

<http://www.lonesentry.com/newspapers/12tharmored/>

²⁹ Meyer Levin, “We Liberated Who’s Who,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 21, 1945, pp. 17, 97-98.

³⁰ Michel Clémenceau was the son of Georges Clémenceau, who served as France’s president from 1906 to 1909, then from 1917 to 1920. Michel Clémenceau would be elected to the National Assembly after the Liberation.

General Weygand and his wife.³¹
Mme Brucklin, secretary of Léon Jouhaux.
Mme Mabie, secretary of Paul Reynaud.

According to Meyer Levin's account, Major Kramers despatched a unit of tanks and jeeps the next day, May 5, to head to Castle Itter, but they were blocked on the way when they came under fire from SS soldiers. Another tank company, however, commanded by Captain John Lee, was scouring the mountains in search of stray German soldiers. When Lee's company arrived in *Wörgl*, newly liberated by Austrian partisans, they were informed of the eminent French prisoners interned at Castle Itter. Levin reported:

Lee had never heard of the castle of Itter, but he was quite willing to liberate any prisoners of the Germans. So he left one tank as a rear guard in *Wörgl*, while he and the German major and a few infantrymen rode the tank of Lt. Harry Basse, of Santa Ana, California, up the mountain to Itter.

Captain Lee parked his tank on the bridge, where it commanded the entrance to Itter. The heavy doors of the castle swung open and an excited and delighted company of aged, distinguished-looking gentlemen began pouring out their gratitude to him in French and pieces of English. The astonished Lee still had only a vague idea of the roster of the place, having had no Zoonimir to brief him. Daladier, Reynaud, Gamelin, Weygand – it looked like a good night's work. [...] Yes, it was a good night's work, and Captain Lee and his soldiers relaxed and celebrated with the generals and politicians, who staged a festive farewell dinner, with wine and many toasts, in the gloomy, narrow-windowed dining room where they had passed so many hours of the last years together, politely avoiding the dangerous subject of France's defeat, for that would have led only to recriminations between them.

What Meyer Levin described was the arrival at the castle of the first small group of American soldiers. It was true that the former German guards assigned to the castle had fled, but they had been replaced by several German soldiers volunteering to protect the French celebrities against the rampant die-hard SS soldiers still infesting the countryside and determined to fight to the end. Heinrich Himmler had given the order that all prisoners in the concentration camps were to be slaughtered before the Americans could liberate them. And soon after the arrival of the American soldiers at Itter, and after the joyous scene just described, the castle suddenly came under attack. Levin described the first stage of the defense put up by the prisoners and a few friendly German soldiers:

Now fire opened up from all sides. Machine-gun fire, sniper fire from the trees; shellfire from at least two guns. Maybe the war was over, but Lee was in just about the hottest spot he had ever known. However, help could not be far away. There was the

³¹ General Maxime Weygand was commander in chief of all the Allied armies fighting in France in June 1940 when Marshal Philippe Pétain, head of the emergency government, declared an end to the fighting and France's surrender.

tank he had left in Wörgl. Surely those boys would summon help. Meanwhile he had to hold the fort. He took stock. Under his command he has a French commander-in-chief and his top general, both definitely over combat age, also one former tennis champion, also nearly twenty assorted Germans of varying degrees of loyalty. Finally, he had something solid: his handful of Yanks. As for arms – nothing but small stuff. Lee placed his men.

It was a bright, warm morning; there was peppery intermittent fire. General Gamelin, dandy and neat, with brightly polished leather leggings, decided to take his morning constitutional in the courtyard, regardless. And as he paced briskly behind the battlements, an 88 [mm shell] plowed into the roof of the castle, exploding squarely in the general's room. He trotted up the stairs and gazed upon the wreckage, which was complete.

Levin arrived on May 6, the day after Captain Lee had driven up in a tank. Levin accompanied the American reinforcements who drove up to the castle, killing or scattering some of the German snipers and taking others prisoner. So he was the first reporter on the scene. Levin obtained the account of what had happened the night before, first-hand, from the participants themselves. Levin's account is convincing. Its main thrust was later corroborated by American military historian Stephen Harding in an article that appeared in World War II magazine titled "The Battle for Castle Itter." Here is part of Harding's reconstruction of events, from the time Captain Lee arrived at the castle:

The arrival of the eagerly anticipated rescue force left Castle Itter's French 'guests' decidedly unimpressed. The former prisoners had been expecting a column of armor supported by masses of heavily armed American soldiers. What they got was a lone tank, seven Americans, and—to their chagrin—a truckload of armed Germans.

Harding went on to describe the siege that started after the initial joyous greetings and after the banquet that was shared that evening by the prisoners of war and their newly arrived protectors.

Just after eleven o'clock that evening, Waffen-SS troops in the hills opened fire on the castle with rifles and machine guns. Whether they had come specifically to eliminate the French VIPs or had just decided to wipe out the small Allied force in their midst remains unclear, but the result was the same.

Lee's men and the Wehrmacht troops moved to their prearranged positions and began returning fire. The shooting from both sides remained desultory until dawn, but with first light things turned serious. Machine guns pounded the exterior walls and blew out the narrow windows of the central housing block. Then an 88mm antitank gun lobbed a shell into the upper floor of the main building, destroying Gamelin's empty room. Moments later, a second 88 round slammed into Lee's tank as Corporal Szymcyk was preparing to fire its main gun at SS men in the village. Szymcyk jumped from the tank and ran to cover behind the castle gate just before its gas tanks blew, turning the Sherman into an inferno.

The destruction of Besotten Jenny³² signaled the start of a general attack. SS troops swarmed from the tree line to the east, sprinting toward the castle's main gate. Others began scrambling up the hill on the west, trying to reach the relative cover of the lower walls. American and German defenders poured fire from the castle's upper walls and loopholes, taking a heavy toll with their rifles and machine guns. Even the French notables got into the act: Reynaud, Clemenceau, La Rocque, and Borotra all fired at the attackers.

Nonetheless, fire from the SS troops and the still-concealed 88 [millimeter anti-tank gun] killed several of the Wehrmacht men and wounded several others. Among the dead was [German] Major Gangel, killed by a sniper as he and Lee attempted to spot the 88's position from a rooftop observation post.³³

It was a dramatic scene of war. The defenders eventually ran out of ammunition and took refuge in the castle's keep, expecting the final assault at any moment. But, as Harding recounts: "Just in time, American reinforcements arrived on May 6, two days after the Americans first got the message from Zoonimir Cuckovic. Now all of the celebrities were saved and driven away to freedom."

How could Lévesque have missed such a great story? There can be only one explanation. He was never there. He concocted his own nonsense story to give himself more stature.

Part III: Hermann Göring encounters René Lévesque

Just as Jean Borotra had supposedly popped up suddenly to lead Lévesque to Schloss Itter, so it was that Hermann Göring suddenly appeared out of nowhere to provide Lévesque with another revelation from the Second World War. In his memoirs, Lévesque made the transition between two surprise discoveries with this sentence: "Fortunately, another chance encounter made up for the scoop I had been cheated of and earned me a lot of compliments, which just goes to show that a reporter is only as good as his luck."³⁴ Was Lévesque merely displaying his proverbial modesty, disparaging his own splendid accomplishments? As he described it, his encounter with Daladier and Reynaud had failed to deliver him a scoop, but now it would be Reichsmarschall Göring in person and in speech who would "earn him a lot of compliments."

Let us see whether, this time, Lévesque really earned those compliments. Here's his account in his memoirs of this second amazing stroke of luck.

³² Besotten Jenny was the nickname given to the tank.

³³ The quotation is from "The Battle for Itter," and can be downloaded at <http://www.historynet.com/the-battle-for-castle-itter.htm>

³⁴ Lévesque, *Memoirs, op. cit.*, p. 99.

As we made our way along, eyes riveted on the gigantic rampart of the Alps sparkling in the sun, the bushes at the side of the road parted and out strode a large man who planted himself before us. We recognized him immediately as Hermann Göring. For his surrender he had once again donned the grand pastel blue uniform he had apparently exchanged for a simple khaki outfit on his escape from Berlin. Against the vast natural setting, the resplendent epaulettes of this Reichsmarschall who had been fired by Hitler, as well as a chest full of decorations, shone in the sunlight. But in less time than it takes to tell, our platoon leader, in a couple of passes worthy of a fencer, ripped away all that glitter. A few buttons popped off, too, and became souvenirs along with the rest of the paraphernalia.

Shaken, Göring lost his hesitant smile, came to attention, and without a word let himself be roughly shoved onto a bench standing in the field. During the next few minutes he silently endured the scatological inquisition the GIs reviled him with, for example (with expurgations): “So that’s the great Marshal, huh? Great? That thing? Hell, he’s just a great pile of shit!”

Taking advantage of a pause in these proceedings, he made a short speech in quite acceptable English, which ran more or less as follows: “You can do what you like with me. I have no illusions and nothing to complain of. I just find you very ill-bred. But I beg you, don’t make our people go on suffering. They have already more than paid for whatever the world, rightly or wrongly, may hold against them. If there is more to pay, it is I and others like me who should pay the price.”

At that particular moment one couldn’t help finding him impressive, if not exactly convincing. Under the carcass of the old ruffian there still lurked a spark of the heroic young pilot of World War I. It was doubtless this resurgent pluck that made him a leader of the impossible defence at the Nuremberg trials, cynical but fearless right up to the very last choice – cyanide instead of the rope.³⁵

Quite an apparition through the suddenly parted bushes! The head of the Luftwaffe himself, the very man whom Hitler had designated officially as his successor in his 1941 testament only to disown him and order his arrest in the final two weeks of the war. Quite a scoop indeed for a reporter.

In 1973, when Lévesque was interviewed by his first biographer, Jean Provencher, he gave a quite different account of his encounter with Göring from what he would write in 1986. In that interview, he did not claim to be there at the very first moment when Göring surrendered himself to the Americans, nor did he give himself a role as the sole journalist present.

And so he had surrendered to the Americans in the area where I was, about half an hour before our arrival. And I caught sight of him, seated in his pearl-grey uniform – he was a dandy of the regime – but they had torn off or he had himself torn off his epaulettes, his decorations and all that. So his uniform was quite unadorned. He was seated under a weeping willow in a huge armchair, because he was one corpulent fellow. He was

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

treated properly. But he knew very well that his life wasn't worth a damn. Obviously, it goes without saying that he was closely guarded. And he held a short press conference. We were not many, maybe four or five at the start. Afterwards the journalists from all the other fronts came quickly. But, the first time, we were only four or five. And, you have to give him credit, he performed with dignity. He didn't growl against Hitler or the regime, except to say "It's all over" and "I ask the German people..." You know, he tried to take on a kind of saviour's role at the end, as did all the others as well. But he did it with a certain dignity, fully aware that his life wasn't worth a plugged nickel. The interview that we had with him didn't take us very far because, of course, all we cared about was to see if he would send out some little message to try and save his skin. That's it.³⁶

In 1980, interviewed by the magazine *L'Actualité*, he gave an account that was more similar to that given in his memoirs:

L'Actualité : You were present when Marshal Göring surrendered to the Americans. How did that happen?

R. Lévesque : It was rather banal. We were raking, at the end of the war, we were raking, literally, the south of Germany. At one point, emerging literally from the bushes, there arrived a bemedaled fat gentleman. It took us a few seconds - we were on patrol - before we caught on. Good God! He looks like someone... He walked to the middle of the road in front of the first jeep. We stopped, we surrounded him, then we discovered that it was Goering who thought that he was still Goering! It didn't take long before it became brutal. It's brutal at the end of the war. The officer commanding the patrol yanked off his medals, sat him down brutally at the foot of a tree and then summoned the military police to escort him to where he could be secured...³⁷

Lévesque's presence at that historic moment is recalled in a book on French Canadian Second World War correspondents, written by Aimé-Jules Bizimana, a professor in the Social Science Department of the Université du Québec en Outaouais: "After the arrest of Hermann Göring, René Lévesque was to be found among the small group of journalists who received the testimony of the defeated general, one of the architects of the Holocaust."³⁸ Bizimana's summary agrees with what Lévesque told Provencher in 1973, but it conflicts with what he then wrote later, in 1986.

In reality, both of Lévesque accounts of his encounters with Göring are fictitious. The known, certified facts are entirely different. Göring did not hide alone in a bush and pop out when he spotted Lévesque and his companions. Nor did he grant an interview to Lévesque and four other journalists half an hour after surrendering to the Americans. The Americans did not

³⁶ Provencher's interview with René Lévesque, March 21, 1973. This account by Lévesque is related in Provencher, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

³⁷ France Nadeau, « 'Interview' René Lévesque intime... », *L'Actualité*, mars 1980.

³⁸ Aimé-Jules Bizimana, *De Marcel Ouimet à René Lévesque. Les correspondants de guerre canadiens-français durant la Deuxième guerre mondiale*, VLB éditeur, Montréal, 2007.

honour arrested war criminals like Göring by setting up a press conference to give them a platform for a speech. In any case, Göring's meeting with the American forces was pre-planned, pre-arranged. Not one journalist was there.

Göring himself, seven days after Hitler's suicide on April 30, 1945, had requested an encounter with the American forces. Compare Lévesque's account with that of British historian David Irving.³⁹

The fighting had all but ended. Göring sent his adjutant off by car to contact the Americans, bearing a laissez-passer and two secret letters, addressed to 'Marshal' Eisenhower and U.S. Army group commander General Jacob L. Devers. The letter to Eisenhower, verbose and tedious, read in part:

Your Excellency!

On April 23, I decided as senior officer of the German armed forces to contact you, Excellency, to do everything I could to discuss a basis for preventing further bloodshed. [...]

Despite everything that has happened during my arrest, I request you, Excellency, to receive me without any obligation whatever on your part and let me talk to you as soldier to soldier. I request that you grant me safe passage for this meeting and accept my family and entourage into American safekeeping. For technical reasons I would propose Berchtesgaden for this purpose. [...]

Göring then sent Eisenhower a message suggesting Fischhorn Castle at Zell am See, fifty miles away, near Salzburg, for their historic meeting. [...]

At midday on May 7, an irate [General Karl] Koller [Göring's adjutant] phoned and told him [Göring] that a top American general, the deputy commander of the 36th (Texas) Division, had put on all his medals and finery and driven through the lines to Fischhorn Castle. 'You asked for that rendezvous,' said Koller. 'Now keep it.' Grumbling and hesitant, Göring climbed into the twelve-cylinder Maybach and set off with his family and what remained of his staff. [...]

Some thirty miles short of Salzburg they encountered the American posse. Tired of waiting, the American officers had set out to fetch him. Both convoys stopped, facing each other. Brigadier General Robert I. Stack, a burly, white-haired Texan, met Göring, saluted smartly. Göring returned the courtesy, using the old-fashioned army salute, not the Hitler one.

This account differs totally from Lévesque's. But it is essentially consistent with the earlier biography of Göring authored by British writers Roger Manvell and Heinrick Fraenkel:⁴⁰

³⁹ http://www.fpp.co.uk/Bormann/Bradin/Goering_chap1.pdf. David Irving was himself controversial as an admirer of Hitler and a denier of the Holocaust.

⁴⁰ Fraenkel, Heinrick; Manvell, Roger (2011-03-02). *Goering: The Rise and Fall of the Notorious Nazi Leader* (Kindle Locations 5649-5650). Frontline. Kindle Edition.

Then a telephone message came from Fischhorn during the morning to report that a detachment of Americans in jeeps had arrived for the safe custody of the Reich Marshal. The officer in charge, who had been detailed to receive Göring, was very angry indeed to find that he was not there. Koller, the resourceful organizer, gave orders that the Americans were to be provided with a good lunch; meanwhile he would try to find out where Göring had gone. He telephoned Mauterndorf, to find that Göring had, after all, felt that it was preferable for him to stay in his own castle, but he had failed to let Koller know of this. Koller at last lost his patience. The Americans were at Fischhorn waiting, he said, and Göring must undertake to go there at once. [...]

Koller telephoned Mauterndorf again to see whether Göring was on the way. The housekeeper replied that he had left at about noon. Yet at four o'clock he still had not arrived at Fischhorn, and the Americans, tired of waiting, but determined not to return without their prize, had set out in search of him. He was finally discovered in a traffic jam near Radstadt and was taken on to Fischhorn. There, Koller learned over his telephone, Göring and his entourage had arrived "much relieved, everybody in splendid humor. ... Göring is cracking jokes with the American soldiers."

There is another account of the surrender, more precise and detailed, that was given by someone who actually took part in the action whereby Göring had come under American control. What follows are excerpts taken from an interview with *World War II* magazine that was given by Lester Leggett, who was a sergeant participating in the action to retrieve Göring in early May 1945.⁴¹

On May 7, our acting first sergeant, Staff Sgt. Hank Probst, told us to get three to five days of rations and ammunition together and be sure we had plenty of gas and water. He said we had a mission. [...]

1st Lt. Golden Sill, our company commander, was called in by the 36th Infantry Division's assistant division commander, Brig. Gen. Robert I. Stack. He briefed Sill that he needed a combat unit to go with him. Stack said we were going to follow a senior German officer farther into Austria to accept a surrender.

We took off following a Mercedes. It turns out a Mercedes came in under a white flag with letters from Reichsmarshal Hermann Göring to General Dwight D. Eisenhower. Göring was interested in surrendering. He thought he would sit down with Eisenhower and work out the means of surrendering the rest of the German forces and revitalize Germany to assist the Allies, because the Germans thought we'd be fighting the Russians.

Göring's senior aide Oberst [Colonel] Berndt von Brauchitsch was the man in the Mercedes. He left with his Mercedes leading with himself, a captain and a driver.

⁴¹ The article was a question-and-answer interview conducted by David Lesjak and published under the headline, "Bagging a Bigwig" in the January/February 2006 issue of *World War II* magazine. It is available online at: <http://www.historynet.com/world-war-ii-interview-with-lester-leggett-about-the-mission-to-capture-hermann-goring.htm>. I have eliminated the questions put to Leggett and excised what seemed irrelevant to the topic.

General Stack followed in the staff car with his aide, 1st Lt. Harold Bond, and then a jeep following him. [...]

The entire party went 84 kilometers into occupied territory the day before the war was officially over. [...]

We got a radio message to keep on rolling until we saw a guard at a castle entrance — at a road entrance is the way they put it. A guide waved us through a gap in a stone fence and we followed a little dirt road. We saw some outbuildings. When we turned that corner and went into the little clearing behind the castle, we realized we were right smack in the middle of an SS headquarters. There were maybe 50 or 60 men. All of them had their weapons. We thought we might have some problems there. We were just stunned. Nobody had told us on the radio to expect that. It was real fortunate that we didn't have somebody start shooting. [,,,]

My job and first section sergeant Richard Snell's job was to run the guard posts and to keep note of what went on outside.

Göring was not at the castle. General Stack got a hold of Göring's senior aide and said, 'Can you find him?' Brauchitsch said: 'I'm making phone calls. I think I've found him on the road between here and Mauterndorf. He's somewhere on the road trying to get here.' Göring was cluttered up on the road someplace. There were people all over those roads — homeless people, German soldiers trying to get back home or to their unit. It was a mess.

General Stack called 2nd Lt. Shapiro in and asked 1st Lt. Sill to leave the room. Evidently Stack told Shapiro to take his sedan and his driver and let Göring's senior aide go forward in that vehicle to find Göring on the road. And that's what they did. That Plymouth station sedan and one jeep with two of Shapiro's men left with von Brauchitsch. Stack was still in the castle.

I happened to be on the gate. At about 11:30 we saw all these vehicles with lights on approaching. There were about 13 followed by the Plymouth. The first vehicle was one of our jeeps. The second was Göring's Mercedes 770 150-W, better known as the 7.7-liter Mercedes. He had his driver, his wife, his daughter, a nurse and an officer with him.

I had one of those old Army flashlights. I shined my light in there. I was looking for attitude and weapons. I shined it in there and saw there were ranking people and their families. I didn't know what Göring looked like, but I did know he was the chief of the Luftwaffe.

There were some cars, trucks and buses and we just waved them in. The G 2 [intelligence] journal for that day listed the people — there are only about 26 of them in the report. Good Lord, there were 75 or 80 Germans that came in with Göring. They arrived in 13 vehicles and dribbled in all night long until there were about 25 vehicles in all. The trucks were parked in a clearing about 75 yards from the castle.

Sill later wrote to me that he and the general walked out of the castle and into the clearing and that was the first time the general had laid eyes on Göring. That's the way that Göring surrendered.

Göring told General Stack that the SS previously had him under arrest. Stack allowed Göring and his men to keep their weapons. Göring had a side arm and two additional machine pistols that he wanted for the night. He wore a white armband and he had

his Reichsmarshal's baton in a little canvas-like sack. Stack and Göring went into the castle.

I had been at the gate when he came in. I was relieved at 12. They were in the castle when I got back up there. Snell took over. We were kind of keyed up. We got the guy that we went up there to get, but we still didn't know any of the details. We were just standing guard keeping the Germans in their area, and we were guarding the castle.

Göring was on the second floor of the castle. We slept in the halls. They had big thick carpet runners on the floors and on the stairs. That's where we slept at night. Some of those people were considered high ranking and they went into the castle, along with the womenfolk.

I knew since landing in Italy that Göring was the head of the Luftwaffe. I didn't know what he looked like until after I saw all 240 pounds of him in that Mercedes at my guard post on May 7.

We were out in the courtyard. General Stack said, 'Take as many pictures as you can, because there's not going to be any newspaper people here.' Göring only spent one night there. He went back with the general in the Plymouth staff car to division headquarters at Kitzbühel. That's when the picture was taken, at division headquarters. Besides Göring, they also loaded up the senior German officers.

What is beyond dispute, from a wealth of evidence, is that René Lévesque was not present when Göring, his family and a considerable entourage surrendered to the American forces. His account of Göring lurking alone in a bush is simply ludicrous. Lévesque invented his presence at Göring's apparition, just as he had invented his presence at Itter Castle, at Dachau, and, as we shall see, by the hanging corpses of Mussolini and his mistress.

On January 30, 2011, the *Jerusalem Post* published an Associated Press story under the headline: "Pilot recalls Nazi leader's capture." It confirms that Göring did not appear alone through parted bushes: he was accompanied by a great number of people, including family and staff.

MISSOULA, Montana — Capt. Bo Foster had an extraordinary mission: Fly captured Nazi leader Hermann Göring to the 7th Army's headquarters for interrogation. It was May 9, 1945, the day after World War II ended in Europe. Göring, Foster and a group of officers from the Army's 36th Infantry Division gathered on a tiny airstrip outside Kitzbuhel, Austria, to transport the highly-prized war prisoner back to Germany in an unarmed, two-man reconnaissance plane.

Göring, 52, had surrendered to the US Army's 36th Infantry Division the day before. Before his capture, Göring wrote a letter to Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, offering to work with Eisenhower on the conditions of the German army's surrender, according to an account of Göring's capture by Brigadier Gen. Robert Stack kept by the 36th Infantry Division Association.

After receiving the letter, Stack and a group of soldiers drove from the division's base near Kitzbuhel across the border into Germany and intercepted a convoy that included

Göring, his wife, daughter, sister-in-law, household servants and military aides, according to the account.

Göring agreed to surrender unconditionally but asked that his family be cared for, and the Nazi leader was delivered to Foster for transport the next day.

Which account is to be believed? René Lévesque's, which places a solitary Göring stepping providentially in his path, or the account of everyone else?

Part IV: Lévesque views the corpse of Mussolini, hanging upside down

René Lévesque must have had a busy day on April 29, 1945. His war memoirs place him simultaneously in two different countries, Germany and Italy. We have just seen that Lévesque reported himself at Dachau. Though he didn't cite the date, it is established that Dachau was liberated on April 29 of that year. But Lévesque claimed that he was also present when the battered corpses of Benito Mussolini and his mistress were exposed in Milan hanging upside down. Or did he just miss seeing the sight by a few minutes? Whatever the precise time of day, it is known to history that Mussolini's corpse was exposed in Milan, Italy, on April 29, 1945. No explanation is yet available as to how Lévesque could have witnessed on the same day both events, in Germany and in Italy.

This vagueness about dates and location characterizes his entire recital of his wartime adventures. Rarely does he situate in precise time or place the historic event at which he claims to have been present. That is most surprising given Lévesque's decades-long career as a journalist. In the tradition of good reporting, precision is the cardinal virtue and every newspaper report begins or ends with a byline, a dateline and a place line. The event under scrutiny occurred "today," or "yesterday," or on such and such a date. A radio reporter typically would end his piece with this signoff: "This is René Lévesque reporting from Dachau."

So why did he maintain a constant vagueness over time and place in the entire account of his wartime experiences on the continent? There is one obvious explanation. By being vague about time and place, he could make himself a witness to many historic events, even to events that occurred at the same time but in different places. Contradictions would not immediately be outed.

Odette Oligny was quoted above recalling Lévesque's presence at Dachau. But she also recounted what Lévesque had told her about another adventure as an American Army war correspondent.⁴²

⁴²"René Lévesque, journaliste de l'air," *Le Samedi*, 7 décembre 1957, p. 7 and 35. Odette Oligny ended her portrait of Lévesque with these words: "Our friendship goes back a long way. You may be sure that I am very proud of it."

[Italy] is the location of some of René Lévesque's most cruel and most unforgettable memories. Near Lake Como, in the village where they had inflicted such an ignominious death on him after deifying him, as is well known, René Lévesque saw, hanging from his feet, battered by blows and covered with spittle and excrement, the almost unrecognizable corpse of Mussolini and, next to him, hanging from the same gasoline pump, the corpse of Claretta Petracchi. He saw them, saw them with his own eyes...

But did he really see the corpses through his own eyes, or was it through the eyes of others? When, 16 years later, Lévesque was interviewed for a biography by historian Jean Provencher, he had changed his story, was evasive, reluctant to say much. So Provencher reported:

When we question him about this event, it is easy to detect some reluctance to talk about it. "From afar, yes. From afar, because the crowd there was quite disgusting, we could see the two slabs there. It was like two carcasses of meat, if you will. And we didn't come up close. Besides, there was no point in trying to get close. It was really some kind of delirium. And it didn't send a very flattering picture of the reactions of the Italians, that's for sure. It's not enough just to say: "That guy..." Anyway. Yeah... What can I say? But, that... We saw him like that, from about 500 feet away."⁴³

Lévesque, it seems, was sputtering, unusual for the man with a golden tongue who normally spoke with such assurance and virtuosity. Could there have been a reason for his hesitations in 1973? Then, 13 years later, when he published his memoirs in 1986, Lévesque again changed his story, admitting that he never did actually see the corpse of Mussolini – supposedly because he arrived too late. This was after Robert McKenzie of the *Toronto Star* had pointed out in a news report the contradictions in Lévesque's several accounts. But, just as he had when interviewed by Provencher, Lévesque tried in his memoirs to downplay the incident. He did correct his earlier accounts of seeing the two corpses, but this time he buried his single-sentence disclaimer in a paragraph dealing with many other matters. He was untypically brief:

To change our ideas we took a tourist detour to see Berchtesgaden and Hitler's eagle-nest retreat. But our friends from the Leclerc Division had already gone through it with a fine-tooth comb. In a pile of garbage I at least turned up an autographed record (signature illegible) of "Lili Marlene," that imaginary pinup of all the camps. Then we made a side trip as far as Milan only to discover that Mussolini, that Caesar so acclaimed and then so spat upon by the Italian crowds, was no longer hanging in the street. There was no more war, no more German army, just the residue pouring back over the Brenner Pass toward Innsbruck.⁴⁴

So now he was no longer 500 feet away from the corpses. The bodies were no longer there at all. So why had he insisted, twice before, that he had seen them with his own eyes, from up close or from 500 feet? He changed his story because he had been caught out in a falsehood.

⁴³ Interview with René Lévesque, March 21, 1973, quoted in Jean Provencher, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-69.

⁴⁴ *Memoirs*, p. 103.

Now he put himself at the right place, in Milan, but at the wrong time. The corpses had vanished.

Was Lévesque ever anywhere near those corpses, or even arriving a little late? There is also the problem of location. In his account to Odette Oligny, she has him saying that he saw the hanging corpses near Lake Como. But, in fact, though Mussolini and party were captured near Lake Como on April 27 and were shot the next day in the Lake Como town of Mezzegra, it was only on April 29 that their bodies were taken south to Milan, some 50 miles away, there to be hanged to meat hooks and exposed to public contempt. To have conformed his account to known facts, Lévesque would have told Odette Oligny that he had seen the corpses in Milan, not “near Lake Como.”

For a journalist recounting his journalistic experiences, Lévesque could get his facts disconcertingly wrong. But he had an explanation: these events happened many years ago and his memory may have betrayed him. Surely anyone could sympathize with that.

There is a telling passage in Jean Provencher’s biography of Lévesque. It has this heading: “The surrender of Kesselring.”⁴⁵ The passage is revealing because Lévesque clearly wants to associate himself with the event of May 9, 1945, when Hitler’s famous Field Marshal Albert Kesselring surrendered to the Americans, the day after the official end of the war in Europe on May 8. Lévesque clearly wants *almost* to put himself there even though he was not there. Here is the ambivalent passage where Lévesque confided to Provencher that he almost more or less witnessed Kesselring’s surrender. Here is his account, under the heading: “La reddition de Kesselering.”

Lévesque did not pack up and go. Curiosity got the better of him and he made a sally into Italy. Making his way through the Brenner Pass he attended the surrender of the last great German army, that of Kesselring. [...] But, at the moment when Lévesque reached the Brenner Pass, Kesselring is no longer there. A month and a half earlier, Hitler had recalled him to name him the commander of the German forces on the Western front. René Lévesque recounted that surrender. “It was just unbelievable! I did not attend the surrender in the precise meaning of the word, that is, to see Kesselring surrender. But Kesselring’s army was moving north from Italy and, at the entrance to the Brenner Pass, it could go no further. [...] So they had no choice. They either died or they surrendered. And they surrendered.”

So Lévesque “did not attend the surrender in the precise meaning of the word, that is, to see Kesselring surrender.” In fact, he tells us he was in Italy and Kesselring surrendered in Austria.

⁴⁵ Provencher, *op. cit.* pp. 67-68. “René Lévesque raconte cette reddition. « Ça, c’était incroyable! Je n’ai pas assisté à la reddition dans le sens précis du mot, soit voir Kesselring se rendre. » p. 67.

But, never mind, he can still associate himself with Kesselring's surrender because he saw Kesselring's army. Or so he said.

Lévesque ended his tale of war by a final non-fact. He claimed to have returned from Europe on the famous French cruise ship *Normandie*:

My own sailing late that summer was on board the Normandie, which hardly lived up to its reputation. We were some twelve thousand packed in like sardines, and, rather than suffocate in the cabins we preferred to sleep, or at least spend the night, on deck. Since my two Atlantic crossing were decidedly short on comfort, and Progress soon after condemned me to air travel, I've always had a hankering for a beautiful first-class cruise awash in voluptuous luxury.⁴⁶

The *Normandie*, built in France during the 1930s, was the fastest cruise ship anywhere and held the record for achieving the shortest time in crossing the Atlantic. But as reported by Wikipedia, "During World War II, *Normandie* was seized by US authorities at New York and renamed USS *Lafayette*. In 1942, the liner caught fire while being converted to a troopship, capsized onto her port side and came to rest on the mud of the Hudson River at Pier 88, the site of the current New York Passenger Ship Terminal. Although salvaged at great expense, restoration was deemed too costly and she was scrapped in October 1946."⁴⁷

The *Normandie* never stirred from its dock in New York and there it still languished in 1945 when Lévesque was returning to Canada. But Lévesque had to associate his return, not just with any old frigate, but with the legendary Normandie. That was Lévesque.

So the mystery remains. If not aboard the Normandie, how did Lévesque get back across the Atlantic Ocean? Where and when did he land? Nobody knows.

Ah, but a retired professor from McGill University's Department of Education, Jonathan Bradley, took up the challenge. He found a way to explore the records of the Port of New York for the year 1945,⁴⁸ and here is what he found

Name:	Levesque, Rene
Age:	23
Calling:	War Corresp.
Able to: Read:	Yes
	Read what language: English
	Write: Yes
Nationality:	Canada

⁴⁶ *Memoirs*, p. 105.

⁴⁷ Wikipedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Normandie, downloaded October 27, 2014.

⁴⁸ "Year: 1945; Arrival: New York, New York; Microfilm serial: T175, 1897-1957; Microfilm Roll: Roll 7010; Line 2; Page Number 6."

Date of Birth	abt 1922
Birth Location:	Canada
Birth location:	cambelltown (sic)
Race or people:	English
Height	Feet 5 Inches 5
Complexion	Fair
Color of	Hair Dark Eyes Green
Arrival Date	28 Sep 1945
Port of Departure	Southampton, England
Port of Arrival	New York, New York
Ship Name	Queen Mary
Final destination	Canada
By whom was passage paid?	U.S. Government

So there we have it. Lévesque returned from Southampton on the Queen Mary, arriving on September 28, 1945. Oddly, he gave his nationality and his language as English. Thank you, Jonathan Bradley, for this information.

CONCLUSION

René Lévesque had a golden reputation as a man who always spoke the truth. He has maintained that aureole of honesty to this day. Here is how Odette Oligny described him in her 1957 portrait of him:

René Lévesque? Though he has been “doing” radio and television for a long time now, he is, always has been and always will remain a journalist. And, believe me, it is a beautiful title. One that deserves a medal. One that he admits he is proud of, he who is modesty itself and who waves away the compliments that are paid him on the programs that he presides over on Radio-Canada...⁴⁹

Lévesque was “modesty itself?” He “always has been and always will remain a journalist?” Yes, but what kind of a journalist?

His biographer Pierre Godin wrote of him: “Lévesque himself had the natural humility of common people.”⁵⁰ Claude Morin, one of Lévesque’s closest collaborators in constructing the Parti Québécois and then in government, wrote a preface in 1991 to a collection of texts on or

⁴⁹ Point de Mire was the title of his weekly television program from 1956 to 1959. Literally, it means the target, as seen through the lens of a firearm.

⁵⁰ Pierre Godin, “LÉVESQUE, RENÉ,” in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 21, University of Toronto/Université Laval, 2003–, accessed February 27, 2018, at http://www.biographi.ca/en/bio/levesque_rene_21E.html.

by Lévesque. He titled his observations: “*René Lévesque ou l’authenticité.*” So Lévesque, in Morin’s description, was most characterized by his being authentic. And Morin declared: “His sincerity and his frankness represent two of the most winsome facets of his personality.”⁵¹

Lévesque himself testified to his own veracity. The book that Morin prefaced opens with this epigraph:

Je me suis toujours fait une règle: non pas dire tout, on ne peut jamais dire tout ce que l’on pense parce que l’on s’entretuerait, mais au moins ne jamais dire le contraire de ce que je pense.
René Lévesque⁵²

Knowing how René Lévesque is revered still today, I knew that people would find it shocking that I would examine so critically his accounts of himself in Europe in 1945. That is why I found it essential to accumulate the evidence at length so as to prove beyond doubt that his stories of what he witnessed in Europe were non-credible, untenable, self-glorifying fiction. These were not merely youthful exaggerations that he spun as a young adult: they were stories he repeated and amplified through the following four decades and even in the year before he died.

There is a phenomenon called “name-dropping,” when one enhances one’s importance by citing the rich, famous and powerful people with whom one claims acquaintance. René Lévesque was indeed a name-dropper. With reckless disregard for reality, he declared himself as present or somehow involved when the most dramatic historic events occurred. His own real accomplishments were not enough. He had to fabricate fictitious episodes to present himself – despite his conspicuous modesty and self-deprecation – as a man constantly associated with History. That was how he projected his six-month-long adventure in wartime continental Europe. And he counted on the ignorance of his audience to protect him from being exposed as a narcissist and a fraud. The man clearly had an obsession, “*une fringale,*” to become a great historic figure in his own right.

It seemed important to me to correct the historical record because these war stories revealed something essential about Lévesque’s character. Lévesque was driven from adolescence and all his life to self-aggrandize. This compulsion drove him in his choice of a career, first as a journalist, which kept him constantly before an ever-growing public, then as a politician and finally as the creator of a secessionist party and the outstanding leader who united the till-then divided secessionist movement.

He was thus enabled early on to project portraits of himself interacting with the great of this world. But even interviewing the foremost movers and shakers, being seen in their company

⁵¹ RENÉ LÉVESQUE *TEXTES ET ENTREVIUES 1960 – 1985*, Préface de Claude Morin. Textes colligés par Michel Lévesque en collaboration avec Rachel Casaubon. Esquisse d’un portrait par Evelyn Dumas. Sillery, Québec, Presses de l’Université du Québec, 1991

⁵² “I always stuck to this rule: not to say everything – you can’t always say everything that’s on your mind because that would have us killing each other – but at least never to say the opposite of what I think.”

and questioning them, eventually could not satisfy his ambition. He needed to become himself a mover and shaker, a leader, even a liberator of his people – in a word, a mythological figure.

This drive to self-aggrandize would find a perfect expression in his vision of Quebec as colonized, with the Québécois being treated as white niggers or like the Indians, while English speakers played the role of white Rhodesians. The concordance is too perfect to be accidental between, on the one hand, his compulsion to self-aggrandize, and on the other his persistent excoriation of New Carlisle-Quebec-Canada as Rhodesia in America, which led to the logical conclusion that he must be the saviour of his people, the liberator of the Québécois and the founder of a new country.

30.