

Perfume Politics in France

by Michael Curtis



Coco Chanel, 1920

Pecunia non olet (money doesn't smell) was the reply of the 7th century Roman Emperor Vespasian when he was criticised for imposing a new tax on the use of public urinals in Rome. The death on September 21, 2017, of Liliane Bettencourt, at 94, was a reminder that in early to mid 20th century France perfume, whether devised by Francois Coty, Coco Chanel, or L'Oreal, smelled of money used for vile purposes. All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten the memories of the mischievousness of those perfumiers. Their beauty creams, fragrances, and hair dyes can not overcome the smell of their collaboration with Nazis.

Mme. Bettencourt was the richest woman in the world, worth about \$40 billion, as the heiress of the large L'Oreal

cosmetics empire of which she owned about a third. She had inherited her fortune on the death of her father in 1957. Bettencourt was involved in a number of personal, legal problems and scandals, including illegal donations to the 2007 presidential campaign of Nicolas Sarkozy, but she is important for her relationships with antisemitic and pro-Nazi individuals, and as a reminder of some dark years of the French past. Ironically, as if in rejection of the family past history, her only child, Francoise, married a grandson of a rabbi killed in Auschwitz and converted to Judaism.

The significance of Liliane Bettencourt is not a matter of the personal scandals or private life, but her kinship with father and her husband, both of whom were associated with far right extreme political organizations and held bigoted and racist especially antisemitic views. Her father was Eugene Schueller who in 1907 invented the non toxic hair dye he called Aureale or Oreale which was the beginning of his fortune. Schueller was a pro-Nazi supporter of and founder of extreme organizations. In addition he had acquired property taken from Jews; one of those properties became L'Oréal headquarters in Germany.

Schueller admired Henry Ford's executive managerial activities, but he also admired and adopted Ford's pro-fascist and antisemitic standpoint.

Schueller, with another antisemite and pro-fascist Eugene Deloncle, in October 1940 founded the (MSR) , with help from German Ambassador in Paris, Otto Abetz and approval of Reinhardt Heydrich. Official meetings of MSR took place at L'Oréal headquarters in Rue Royale, Paris. Deloncle in 1935 had already founded the La Cagoule, the fascist Secret Committee of Revolutionary Action, that Schueller helped fund.

The program of MSR is nauseating and revealing: "to build a new Europe in cooperation with National Socialist Germany and all other nations freed from liberal capitalism, Judaism,

bolshevism, and French masons." MRS also wanted to "ensure the Jews that stay in France are subject to harsh laws, preventing them from infesting our race."

Within the MSR was a smaller, private group called *The French Community*, established with the aid of SS Theo Dannecker, representative of Adolf Eichmann, the aim of which was "to free France completely from the ferments of corruption that are the Jews and the Free Masons," and which organized the looting of Jewish property.

In February 1941 the MSR merged with Marcel Deat's *Rassemblement national populaire*, RNP. Schuler called for revolution for "cleansing and remedy," and together with Deloncle, in June 1941 after Germany attacked the Soviet Union, set up the *Legion of French Volunteers*, LVF, to fight with Germans on the Eastern front. Members swore an oath of allegiance to Hitler.

A post World War II investigation was opened on Schueller but he was found not guilty of economic collaboration though his book, *La Revolution de l'Economie*, was essentially a fascist book. It is not coincidental that Francois Mitterand, the rising post war politician, was a friend of Francois Dalle who succeeded Schueller as head of L'Oreal, that in 1945 Mitterand was appointed director of the L'Oreal magazine, *Votre Beaute*, owned by Schueller, and that a niece of Deloncle, Schueller's political partner, married the older brother of Mitterand.

Schieller's daughter Liliane in 1950 married Andre Bettencourt, a Catholic lawyer, who was a bitter antisemite, who knew Mitterand while they were law students in Paris in the 1930s. He had joined La Cagoule and had written a large number of antisemitic articles for *La Terre Francaise* which he edited. He disseminated Nazi propaganda, is known to have written 60 articles, in some of which which he referred to Jews as "hypocritical Pharisees whose race has been forever

sallied by the blood of the righteous, and whose race is tainted with Jesus' blood for all eternity."

Bettencourt claimed to have joined the Resistance at the end of the war, a claim that is disputable, and remained friendly with Mitterand. What is more certain is that in July 1944 he travelled to Geneva where he was given, apparently by Alan Dulles and the OSS, a large sum of money, about 2.5 million francs, for French POWs, a sum he passed on to Mitterand. In post war France, Bettencourt was a journalist and served in a number of governmental positions, including intelligence, and almost became prime minister in 1986 when Mitterand was president of France.

The political record of the perfume fraternity is not a savory one. Rene Coty, originally Corsican and a pioneer in a variety of fragrances, allegedly the first French billionaire had a sensitive nose for perfume but a less desirable one for political organizations. He founded or aided a number of pro Nazi organizations: Faisceau, the French Fascist party, and for a time the Croix-de-Feu; the Solidarite Francaise in 1933, a fascist and paramilitary group. He bought *Le Figaro* and transformed it into an extreme right wing paper. Coty was bitterly antisemitic, blaming Jewish bankers "for bloody and rapacious policies that ruined the world, for establishing communism, and for the world wide economic depression."

The ambitious Coco Chanel, noted for her fashion style and understated elegance not only slept with the enemy but seemed to have worked for German military intelligence. Living in the luxurious Hotel Ritz, Chanel conducted an affair with a German officer Baron Hans von Dincklage, an Abwehr military intelligence officer who used her as an agent and a facilitator, curiously codenamed Westminster, the name of Chanel's former lover, the Duke of Westminster.

It is not too strong to say that L'Oreal for a time in postwar France was a hiding place for former collaborators or Nazi

supporters attempting to hide their wartime past. One of them Jacques Correze, once a member of La Cagoule , became an L'Oreal executive in New York.

Liliane Bettencourt of course was not involved in the political activities in her kinsmen. However, her death at the time of the Jewish New Year and Day of Atonement raises an interesting problem. Her husband Andre Bettencourt in postwar France said "I have repeatedly expressed my regrets concerning 'the errors of my youth' in public and will always beg the Jewish community to forgive me for them." France is still striving to overcome the sad days of Vichy and to create a friendly and healthy society. For the Jewish community, in view of contemporary antisemitism, the painful memories remain.