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I am the People

The rise and future of European right-wing populism.

Translated from the Norwegian by Diane Oatley

PROLOGUE

When this book begins, it is October in Paris. The mornings have been cold for a while now, but a bit later in the day the warmth of the sun is strong enough that the four soldiers patrolling with machine guns on the square in front of the Louvre Museum's glass pyramid have rolled up their shirt sleeves. It will soon be one year since the autumn day in 2015 when Abdelhamid Abaaoud and his fellow conspirators divided themselves up into three teams, got into three different cars and drove out into the Paris night to kill. By the time they had triggered their explosive belts, shot at café guests with machine guns and massacred spectators at the Bataclan concert venue, 130 people were dead and 368 injured. It was the worst attack on French soil since the Second World War, but not the only one. The same year, in January armed men forced their way into the offices of the satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo, where they shot and killed 12 people. Five people died in other attacks, one of these at a Jewish supermarket, immediately afterwards. On 14 July 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiel-Bouhlel drove a 19 ton lorry into a crowd of people celebrating France's national day on the ocean front promenade in Nice. 86 people died. 434 people were injured. Two weeks later, two 19-year-olds walked into a church in Normandy during a mass and slit the throat of the 85-year-old priest Jacques Hamel.

All of this has happened. Nonetheless, although a number of leading politicians claim that France is at war, Paris seems peaceful on this October morning. Not carefree, that would be an overstatement; the four-man patrols armed with machine guns are a constant reminder that something is not as it should be. Down in the metro I notice this a bit more.

Well-developed tube systems are the hallmarks of civilized metropolises. New York. London. Moscow. I have yet to encounter a city with an underground that I haven't liked. Paris is perhaps the best. The metro network is especially well-developed and intricate in this city. Where the New York lines are straight and predictable, the Paris lines pursue their own, serpentine routes and as a result you can always find a nearby station. 4.2 million passengers ride the metro daily and it works so well that it seems more like an organism living its own life than a machine that could potentially break down. The enormous underground network in the capital has not been the target of any of the terrorist attacks that have shaken France, so when I nonetheless register a slight tremor of anxiety, it is fully possible that it is first and foremost a case of a mild claustrophobia that I experience from time to time. And the images of blown-to-smithereens metro cars in Brussels in the spring of 2016, of course. And bloodstained faces in London in 2005. Or the images of ambulance personnel in full-body hazmat suits following the Tokyo subway sarin attack in 1995, which remains the most complete nightmare I can imagine, a hellish gas chamber on wheels. It doesn't improve matters either when I turn to page ten in the edition of Le Monde that I have on my lap. "The terrorists who attacked Paris in November 2015 had bigger plans," it reports. There was another group

who did not reach Paris in time. An encrypted computer found in a dumpster contained materials indicating yet another attack that had not been carried out in Paris; it is described under the file name "Metro group".[1]

As the metro races on through the tunnel, something bangs hard against the roof of the car. Nobody reacts, nobody even looks up, except for me and a couple who exchange glances. She whispers, "What was that?" He shrugs his shoulders. Then a voice comes over the loudspeaker, announcing the next station. "Chatêlet?" It sounds to me as if he is wondering about where we are headed. Perhaps he is not sure that we will make it to our destination, I have time to think, before the confirmation comes. "Châtelet." I had forgotten that this is how stations are announced on most of the metros in Paris. "St. Germain des Prés?" Yes, we have arrived at yet another station. "St. Germain des Prés." It bothers me that I was so startled by the sound. When I have a glass of orange juice at a meeting with a French journalist a bit later on that day, it becomes even clearer to me how un-Parisian my mild paranoia is. "Perhaps this sounds odd," she says, "but it's actually the truth. Sometimes I completely forget that it happened." She lives just a short walk away from Bataclan.

Paris is as it has always been, but in some fundamental ways the city and the country have been forever changed nonetheless. "Security" ranks higher on the public opinion polls when people respond to the question of which political issues are important to them,[2] and security has ended up even closer to the top of important politicians' lists of speaking points. For many of them the connection between lack of security, immigration and Islam's influence in France has now finally been confirmed. The general consensus was that the sitting government's responsibility for the events' unfolding as they did could no longer be ignored. Particularly after the massacre in Nice in the summer of 2016, something happened to the rhetoric, to the force of the critique. While the opposition was relatively cautious in its condemnation of the government's efforts following the terrorist attacks of Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan, prominent politicians from the opposition demanded that the Minister of the Interior step down after the Nice attack. While national unity was the line the majority had adhered to previously, accusations of how the government was partly responsible for the wave of terrorism had become more frequent. To a certain extent, this can be explained by looking at the calendar: the closer one came to the presidential election of the spring of 2017, the less surprising it would be to hear a critique of the government, especially following tragic events that shook the entire nation. At the same time, the escalating critique was an expression of an anger that became clear in contexts other than the speeches of politicians. After the sitting Prime Minister Manuel Valls held a speech in which he made it clear that for the time being there was no substantial evidence of a connection between the Nice massacre and the terrorist organization the Islamic State, he was booed out of a memorial ceremony

1 «Derrière le 13-Novembre, un vaste projet terroriste» in *Le Monde,* 6.10.2016.
2 Public opinion poll carried out by Ifop for the newspaper Le Figaro in April 2016.

in Nice. Later in the election campaign, Malek Boutih, a legislator from the Socialist Party, stated that "a traumatic reaction to the terrorist attacks" was dominating the entire political conversation, even when one spoke about other things. "Thousands of Frenchmen have lost a brother, a father, a sister. It's right there beneath the surface all the time," Boutih maintained. The election campaign was affected by this not having been processed, even though life appeared to go on as before, the Socialist politician said, who held that the Left was bound to lose if they didn't understand this.[3]

The leader of the National Front party, Marine Le Pen, warned against what she called "fatalism" at a press conference she gave after the attack in Nice. "We cannot become accustomed to living with this," she said. She called for action. She demanded that France "lift its head once more". "We must implement all legitimate means allowed by our constitution and our body of laws to disarm the Islamic threat, and tear it out by the roots. The time has come. To declare war against fundamentalist Islam," said Marine Le Pen, before expanding upon what she meant: "Actual war. Not a war of words." If the terrorist attacks had changed French politics, it wasn't difficult to see which party had the most to gain from the new fear or the accompanying fundamental uncertainty. "A lot of people who were hesitating to vote for the National Front will do it," researcher Stéphane Wahnich said immediately after the attack in Nice.[4] While some members of the Left were unsure of what specifically they should do about this, there were forces on the Right that held the solution to be to answer with the same arguments as the National Front. The establishment media such as Le Monde attempted a warning: "As long as the right-wing is dogging a National Front party which is proposing irresponsible, magical solutions and offering the miracles of a demagogy, the right-wing establishment is at risk of going even further than the National Front," one article read, just after the lorry had driven into the crowd in Nice.[5] But what did it mean "to go further" than the National Front in the prevailing political climate? What kind of party had the National Front become, almost a half-century subsequent to its establishment? And why does it appear to an increasing extent that it is viewed as an ideal model for sibling political movements in other European nations, an example to be followed?

"I am a free woman, I am a mother, I am French and I have decided to become actively engaged in my country." This is how Marine Le Pen introduced her new blog, Carnet d'esperances, "The notebook of hope", in the winter of 2016. In The notebook of hope there is not much that is reminiscent of a murky right-wing extremist Internet forum, although Marine Le Pen is the leader of one of Europe's most controversial parties from the far right, founded by her father, who was often referred to as "the Republic's Devil". Marine Le Pen's blog could be viewed as a preliminary high-point in a journey that started when she took over as

[3] Interview with Malek Boutih on the programme *BFM Politique* on BFMTV 5.2.2017.
[4] Interview in The Washington Post, 17.7.2016.
[5] Le Monde, 19.7.2016.

president of the National Front party five years ago. On 15 January 2011, she was ready to launch her great idea: to "un-demonize" the National Front: secure greater voter support and greater opportunities for real power by giving the party a more human face than previously. "The notebook of hope" is not embarrassed about its personal tone or choice of photographs. Here is Marine at the dinner table with friends, a little wine, some smoked sausage, a jovial atmosphere. There is Marine petting her cat nearby the family's summer house in Brittany. Here she is heartily greeting the president of Austria's Freedom Party, Heinz-Christian Strache during the "Patriotic Spring" event in Vienna. There she is greeting some piglets during a visit to a farm in Normandy. Marine and a calf. Marine and a husky. Marine and a cat. Marine and two cats. Marine in front of the Statue of Liberty. We understand that Marine le Pen often travels abroad, but it is France that is her home:

I hope that by reading this one will absorb the enormous beauty of our country. I fight for France every day, as a woman, as a mother, as an elected representative of the people, and as president of a movement that wants to write a new future for the country. A future that I cannot imagine as other than free, safe and prosperous, far afield from the horrifying pictures of assassinations, far afield from the desecration of the women in Cologne, far afield from falling growth cycles and rising suicide rates among farm workers…

And she continues:

As somebody who is in love with France, the French landscape and the French territories outside of Europe, in my country's people, gastronomy and history, I hope to be able to unite love for the fatherland, my vision of the future and the defence of the French people here.

First and foremost, it was about France. Nonetheless, neither terrorism nor uncertainty are exclusively French commodities. Marine Le Pen had simultaneously become a type of informal leader of a pan-European movement. "The Patriots", as they liked to call themselves, were joined in a common party group at the EU parliament in 2016. All the members of the group "Europe of Nations and Freedom" in one way or another dominate much of the political conversation in their respective nations: Geert Wilders' Freedom Party in the Netherlands. The Freedom Party in Austria, led by Heinz-Christian Strache. The Alternative for Germany, led by Frauke Petry in Germany. Matteo Salvinis Lega Nord in Italy. To a certain extent they are pursuing highly divergent political projects, but they convene around a few important issues: They are against Islam's influence in Europe. They are against the EU. And they are "patriots" representing the same trends that

ensured that the Brits voted themselves out of the EU. They were also, they maintained, the mouthpiece for the frustration with the elites which led to Donald Trump becoming president in the USA. They spoke about a domino effect, because the European right-wing populists were dependent on describing all these phenomena as being one and the same thing. It was an unstoppable wave that would change the West for good. "Your world is collapsing. Ours is in the process of being built," Marine Le Pen's most important adviser, Florian Philippot wrote after the election of Trump. It is this new world that is the subject of this book.

The point of departure is France and the National Front, because the growth the party has experienced in recent years has been a source of inspiration for many European parties. What follows here will also be about this influence. In Italy, Lega Nord's leader calls himself quite simply a "lepenist". This says something about how Marine Le Pen has become something more than a relatively successful politician – she has provided the name for an ideology, or perhaps more precisely a formula, a method for how to dominate the exchange of words during a time that is experienced as being unsafe and unpredictable.

The success experienced by the National Front can be explained in many ways. Terrorism is an obvious factor in recent years, but this extends further back in time. It's about immigration. Economic problems related to deindustrialization. The economic consequences of globalization. There is also a conflict between urban and rural districts in France and the National Front is felt to be an answer to the villages' experience of being marginalized, forgotten or ridiculed. All these factors play a part and provide meaning. The National Front is a party that has emerged due to actual, existing problems and real experiences. Perhaps it is true, as many claimed after Donald Trump's dramatic and surprising entrance into politics in the USA, that neither academics, the press nor the established political parties have to a sufficient degree listened to those who have experienced the problems first-hand. That there is a large group of people who have been "forgotten" and who now, finally, will find their place in political movements that speak for them and their issues, standing up to a torpid elite.

There is some truth in all of this, but it is not true enough. It does not give us an adequate explanation for the right-wing populist nationalism's expansion in Europe in recent years. To proceed from the assumption that the party-political development in the world is exclusively a result of demographic or production-based changes, that the political proposition the voters are presented with is always merely a reflection of their needs and wishes at any given time, would be to give too little credit, far too little responsibility to political innovators. Communism emerged due to economic problems and social dissatisfaction, but it was not the case that this dissatisfaction was destined to be channelled into Lenin's revolution. Nazism emerged in a society suffering from widespread unemployment, inflation and overall uncertainty and instability, but Adolf Hitler's interpretation of what had to be done was not prescribed in advance. It is not a given that there is a direct cause and effect connection between how "ordinary people" experience their daily lives and which

parties score high in public opinion polls. It is also about an image of reality that was created by somebody, and which in turn shapes and influences people's perceptions and actions. When the French intellectual superstar and darling of the media Eric Zemmour writes best-sellers about how France is "committing suicide", because the nation's elite does not come down harder on Islam's influence in the country, when others speak about a country in the process of "dying" because the elite has forsaken the country's history and traditions, these are not just descriptions, but normative political recommendations. The atmosphere of doom has a political impact, and a political goal, which can be more or less conscious.[6]

Early in 2017 the newspaper Le Parisien announced that they would no longer rely particularly on opinion polls before the presidential election in France. The experiences from the Brexit vote in Great Britain and Trump's shocking victory in the USA were precisely this: We don't understand what is happening. Nobody understands what is happening. The voice of the people sounds different from the information that all our instruments and analyses manage to capture. Therefore, the newspaper explained, they would rather invest the money in sending more journalists out into the field. Who are the voters, actually? What worries them? Why do they vote the way they do?

This was, I believe, a commendable and smart measure. It is easy to see how journalism can become too much of a desk job, particularly in times with deep cuts in media budgets in all nations. At the same time, there is something a bit naïve about it – the hope is that it should be possible to gain direct access to Reality in this way, now that the social scientists have so grievously missed the mark. The truth is, however, and as usual, that reality is a pretty complex matter. It includes ordinary people, experts, everyone who is in between, ideologies, books, people and thoughts. It is not as easy to distinguish between these levels of reality as the impression one gets from the debates would imply. Ordinary people have been ignored! We will speak with ordinary people instead. The elite are daydreaming in their ivory towers? We will take the pulse of reality instead. But reality is difficult to grasp, even for someone who has stuck their finger into the soil. Because reality is also ideology, texts, thoughts, and propaganda. And those who claim to be speaking on behalf of ordinary people or the real people, or those who claim to be brave enough to tell it like it is, can be oddly divorced from reality. In his humorous and thought-provoking book about French intellectual trends and traditions, How the French Think, Sudhir Hazareesingh writes about the large volume of pamphlets, articles and books that are predicting France's downfall and which in many ways have contributed to clearing the field for the National Front's analyses. "One of the paradoxical characteristics of French doomsday literature is how few references to hard facts it contains," Hazareesingh writes. It was quite simply assumed that France had become hell and dismal explanations were developed for why this was the case.[7]

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[6] See Griffin in the anthology.

[7] Hazareesingh, Sudir: How the French Think. An Affectionate Portrait of an Intellectual People. Penguin, 2015 Kindle edition.

There are clearly problems both in France and in the rest of Europe. Nonetheless, recognizing this does not mean that it is certain that the parties that are a part of a new right-wing populist movement have the most precise explanations for the problems. These parties, which have often presented themselves as the true voice of the people, were perhaps to an equal extent their own voices, spokesmen and women for specific interests and world views. That is why demagogues can rise to power: not because people deep down are waiting for them, but because they make you believe that this is what you have been waiting for, this is what you actually think. The act of "expressing what ordinary people think deep down" must be viewed in this context. It is therefore important to take the ideological strategies of the national populist parties in Europe seriously. I will attempt to do so, with a basis in the National Front, to demonstrate that these parties do not always give people what they want, but to an equal extent actively create a demand for a specific type of politics, a specific way of viewing the world.

What kind of world does the National Front want? To find the answer to this, I boarded a commuter train out of Paris on an autumn day in 2016. I was headed for Nanterre, to become better acquainted with the man who led the party from the very beginning.

CHAPTER 1. THE LEGACY

An elderly man wearing a long, black overcoat and grey suit lights a cigarette and looks down towards the police station in Nanterre. There is a great view here at the top of the hill, but it is actually not that easy to gain an overview. The urban planning in the oldest suburb of Paris seems relatively random; it is a mixture of half-finished new buildings, on which it does not look like anyone has done any work for a while, and older, run-down buildings with "For Rent" signs in the windows at street level. A debauched bistro advertises with "traditional food", but there does not appear to be anyone inside from whom I might ask directions. I walk over to the man with the cigarette and ask where the courthouse is. "Are you a journalist?" he guesses. "Are you going to see the president? See you later then!" He eagerly points me in the right direction.

The name of the "President" is Jean-Marie Le Pen. He is not the president of anything at all, according to those who currently lead the party which the soon 90-year-old man played a part in starting. He was indeed awarded the lifetime title of honorary president when his daughter Marine took over as leader of the National Front in 2011. While some may have hoped that "honorary president" would mean "an old man who is looking forward to having more time to enjoy the ocean view from his summer home in Brittany," Jean-Marie had other plans. He still had important political input to contribute. Somebody had to shake things up a bit now and then, since it quickly became clear that the party was in the process of becoming far too streamlined under his daughter's leadership, in his opinion. Marine Le Pen's right-hand man, the great political talent Florian Philippot, who is young, has an elite education and is homosexual, was the worst of all. There were many people who maintained that he was the one chiefly responsible for sanding down the sharp edges of the party profile. About him there was actually only one thing to say, Jean-Marie Le Pen explained in an interview in the spring of 2015: "One is not necessarily right just because one is a young nitwit."[8]

Such comments were a source of irritation for the party leadership, naturally, but there were other and more important reasons why Jean-Marie Le Pen had to be moved out of the spotlight. Marine Le Pen had in fact a plan to modernize the National Front, both to make the party more palatable for a broader electorate and to adapt to the French Republic's institutional requirements and guidelines for a party in power. In the context of this project, the founder was to far too great an extent a constant reminder of what had been. That in itself was certainly unavoidable, in that Jean-Marie Le Pen for so long and to such a degree has completely dominated the public perception of what the National Front is. His nickname, Le Menhir, "the

8 Jean-Marie Le Pen in an interview with the television channel RTL on 11.5.2015.

menhir standing stone", comes from prehistoric monuments on the coast of Brittany, where Jean-Marie Le Pen grew up. The nickname can be interpreted in a number of ways: that he is a force of nature able to withstand the wind and weather without impediment, or that he represents a French national character that remains unchanged by the passage of time. In this particular context it is a third interpretation of the menhir nickname that provides the most meaning: It is very difficult to budge Jean-Marie Le Pen.

The party's patriarch also refused to keep quiet. Two media performances were highlighted by the leadership of the National Front as definitive proof that they had to get him away from the party. The first was an interview in the spring of 2015 with the television channel BFMTV, which often invites the Le Pen family to appear as guests. The subject was Jean-Marie Le Pen's notorious statements about the gas chambers, which he has referred to as "a detail in the history of the Second World War". The host asked him if he has ever regretted making that statement. "Absolutely not," Le Pen replies. "Not at any moment?" "Not at any moment. Because that is how I see it. If not, one would have to claim that the Second World War is a detail in the history of the gas chambers." This answer is typical of Le Pen, who is fond of such rhetorical antics, which work so effectively in fast-moving debates. If it's not like this, it must be like that. Accordingly, in his opinion, it should not shock anyone. If somebody twists and turns his words to make it look like he is anti-Semitic, it is not his fault, he explains. The television host raises his voice: "You wouldn't characterize the murder of millions of people as the most absolute of horrors?" "There is so much in a war that is horrifying," Le Pen answers. "Shrapnel that tears apart your abdomen, a bomb that blows off your head, a gas chamber that suffocates you, all of this is quite awful, that's true."[9]

A few days after the TV interview, while the debate about Jean-Marie Le Pen's statements was still raging in France, the right-wing extremist newspaper Rivarol printed a long interview with the founder of the National Front.[10] Here he again defended his recent remarks, while highlighting another controversial aspect of the party legacy – its defence of the French Vichy regime, which collaborated with Hitler during the war under the direction of Marshall Phillipe Pétain. Pétain was sentenced to death for treason, but the sentence was set aside and he died in prison six years after the end of the war. While for many Frenchmen Maréchal Pétain is comparable to Quisling, Jean-Marie Le Pen explained that he "has never considered Maréchal Pétain to be a traitor". Even more important: "I have never viewed those who have retained their admiration for Pétain as bad Frenchmen or people one cannot be associated with. The way I see it, they belong to the National Front, just like those who have defended French Algeria or the Gaullists, or those who were formerly Communists, and all the other patriots who have France in their hearts."

Making light of the gas chambers. Defending condemned war criminals. In the process of "modernizing" the party, weeding out these matters has been of critical importance for Marine Le Pen. Her

9 Jean-Marie Le Pen in an interview with Jean-Jacques Bourdin, BFMTV, 02 April 2015.
10 Interview in Rivarol 9.4.2015.

father was very aware of this, but he refused to accept it. He was unhappy in the role of seventh master of the house. Jean-Marie Le Pen still wanted to be number one.

At the annual National Front Meeting before the statue of Jeanne D'Arc right next to the Tuileries Garden in the centre of Paris, a few weeks after the sensational interviews in 2015, Marine Le Pen stood ready to speak. Her father was placed on a platform below her, together with the party leadership. “He is in the process of getting accustomed to playing a smaller political role in the party, we see. The microphone has been taken away from him…” said the commentator on one of the television channels broadcasting the entire event live. But then: “Look at that! He is going up to the podium after all! What a surprise!”

Yes, there was old Le Pen, supported by two security guards, moving up on stage. He was dressed in a long, red coat and was grinning broadly, as he lifted his hands to the sky as if about to receive the World Cup trophy on behalf of the French football team. He did not once glance over at his daughter. Marine Le Pen appeared clearly disconcerted, when she took hold of the two adjustable microphones set up on the podium and bent them down. When after a few eternally long seconds he was escorted down again, she began to speak as if nothing had happened. But something had clearly happened, and the stunt was just one example among many. Jean-Marie Le Pen was on the verge of becoming something more than a disruptive element; he had become a problem. In May of 2015, he was suspended from his position as honorary president in the party, and lost the financial and practical benefits such a position entails. Jean-Marie Le Pen appealed the decision and the Court ruled in his favour. A few months later, the party leadership came to the decision to exclude him. Then he can’t be honorary president, was the party’s opinion: A man who has been excluded cannot very well retain either the honour or the presidency. But Jean-Marie Le Pen refused to give in. As he stated in an interview late in the summer of 2016, as usual referring to himself in the third person: “It is just a way of getting rid of Le Pen. It amounts to the firing of a bullet into his forehead.”[11]

There are extraordinary security measures in effect at the courthouse in Nanterre on the afternoon I arrive there. Security guards check handbags and permits, while the police prepare the courtroom. There is an illustrated poster hanging on a column in the lobby explaining how to respond to a terrorist attack. Tip number one: “Run away.” If that is not possible, you follow the arrow to tip number two. “Hide.” It does not seem particularly reassuring, but there is indeed not much else to be done, should it come to that. I do not have time to read the remaining advice very carefully, because Jean-Marie Le Pen’s lawyer arrives, a tall, elegant man with a powerful voice. He rages against the National Front, who have excluded their first president from the party and he explains why it is necessary, correct and reasonable to take the party leadership to court to have the decision overturned.

11 Interview with med Nicholas Vincour in politico.eu 12.9.16.

“This is political homicide,” the lawyer declares. He is early and has time for a few quick statements in front of the long row of waiting press photographers. “We expect justice. This is a man who has given 60 years of his life to the party. He deserves better,” he says, before going to change into a black gown.

Inside Room B in Nanterre’s courthouse, the daylight comes in through a glass ceiling. The walls are covered with beige, oblong tiles. Every single seat on the red upholstered benches of the galley is occupied, predominantly by journalists. A few loyal Le Pen fans have taken the last remaining seats. Jean-Marie Le Pen is suing the party for moral reparation. His lawyer maintains that his name and reputation have been tarnished because of the exclusion. It is odd to imagine that a man who has been known as “The Republic’s Devil” and who for years has represented the gold standard for an abominable, right-wing extremist, European party would be so concerned about his reputation, but his lawyer maintains that that is what is at stake. He also claims that this reputation is worth EUR 2 million – that is the amount the National Front is being sued for.

The courtroom falls completely silent when Jean-Marie Le Pen comes in through the door, flanked by two older men. One of them is the man who showed me the way a little while ago; we greet one another silently. Le Pen passes two police officers and walks slowly towards the first bench. He leans heavily upon the black walking stick with each step. It looks like hard work, for both the large man and the cane. The National Front giant is dressed in beige trousers, brown crocodile-skin shoes and a dark blue blazer with gold buttons. In his jacket pocket he wears a paisley pocket square in the French national colours. His white hair, of which he still has a good deal, is combed back. His narrow eyes behind pale eyeglass frames give him a particularly reptilian gaze – it looks as if he is always on guard, ready to make a sudden movement, even as he is hobbling slowly forward.

He greets an old acquaintance in the courtroom, an elderly man wearing a cap bearing the word “Chile”. Perhaps it is an amusing salute to all the occasions when Jean-Marie Le Pen has paid tribute to Pinochet’s military dictatorship. They kiss one another on the cheek, three, four, five times, a greeting that never ends. Then it does end after all, and Jean-Marie Le Pen moves forward to the first row, directly in front of where I am seated. His enormous old-man ears wiggle when he starts pounding his cane against the floor. It is the rhythm of a cheer at a football stadium, or the applause before a politician comes out on stage to face a throng of people. It appears as if he is looking forward to the performance.

“This is a tragedy in three acts,” Jean-Marie Le Pen’s lawyer says.

“It is a matter of a patricide, as we know of this from Sophocles, or from Hamlet. But you must not think that it is only that. Behind this exclusion lies also a political operation. It is the first time in France, yes, in the world, as far as I know, that an honorary president has been excluded. It is a tragedy!”

The lawyer presents what he holds to be the three acts with great pathos. He maintains that Marine Le Pen and her allies have tried to banish the honorary president from the party in a shameful fashion, first with an exclusion that was later set aside, then by phasing out the honorary president position, and then by the final decision of the party's executive committee. Marine Le Pen "stabbed a knife into her father's heart", as the lawyer puts it, before changing the murder metaphor to apply to another body part: "It was a battle to the death! A head was going to roll!" And those who were too cowardly to look Jean-Marie Le Pen in the face and who have not dared to stand behind their treasonable acts, "they fled like thieves," the lawyer thunders. All of this has inflicted a lot of pain on Jean-Marie Le Pen, not solely because of his daughter, but because everyone in the party is his child, he explains.

"The party is his family! The National Front is a fellowship. All members of the party have always been amateurs – amateurs in the truest sense of the word, driven by their enthusiasm! Today the world has become a cold place, fit solely for ambitious careerists."

Throughout his lawyer's presentation Jean-Marie Le Pen sits without speaking a word. He does not move a single inch; it almost seems as if he is not breathing, until the lawyer reaches his point about how ridiculous it is that Jean-Marie's interview statements from the spring of 2015 could possibly be the grounds for his exclusion. Because both the gas chamber statement and the ideas about Marshald Pétain's patriotism are views that Jean-Marie Le Pen has promoted on several occasions over the years. The lawyer maintains that it is ridiculous to imagine that they were decisive. The punishment does not in any sense fit the alleged crime, he states.

"They have lied about how the decision to exclude Jean-Marie Le Pen was made. And such people want to govern France! It is a shameful scandal!"

The lawyer with the resonant voice sits down with an expression on his face that is highly reminiscent of the former French Foreign Secretary Dominique de Villepin, when he stood up in the UN General Assembly and told the US president that France will not go to war in Iraq. Judging from the lawyer's tone and gestures, we are witnessing statements of the same significance in world history.

It is difficult to imagine that the dramatic level attained by the lawyer's three act tragedy could be outdone, but the National Front's lawyer manages this just fine when it is his turn to take the floor. He immediately addresses Jean-Marie Le Pen's statements, to demonstrate that they are in fact so scandalous that they constitute valid grounds for exclusion. "My colleague laid it on thick when he spoke about this being a historical trial! I don't know which trial he was comparing it with, but I would recommend the Nuremburg trials! Had he familiarized himself with them, he would certainly have had greater difficulties making light of Le Pen's statements about the Holocaust. The gas chambers as a historical detail? Yes, this merits exclusion. One cannot defend war criminals. It doesn't matter that he has done it before and has been

punished for it in court several times," the lawyer says, before he guides the audience through other Le Pen statements. The main character himself does not appear to be affected by any of his own quotes until he comes to what he has said about his daughter Marine: "I am ashamed of her bearing my name," one quote read. "Certainly I disown her," was another. At this precisely moment, Le Pen looks a bit sad where he is seated, but his spirits are revived somewhat when the lawyer quotes what he holds to be hateful words about homosexuals, such as statements like "the young nitwit" Florian Phillipot and "his pouf friends". It seems like he finds it a bit amusing to receive a rerun of this in particular.

There is something unreal about this performance. A man who in his day founded his own right-wing extremist party is attacked in court by his own party for having promoted right-wing extremist points of view. The answer to the question "Does Jean-Marie Le Pen have scandalous opinions about different things?" seems so obvious, so given. It's like asking whether the Pope is Catholic.

The National Front's lawyer has come to his closing argument, which is also based on Jean-Marie Le Pen's statements about the Holocaust being "a detail". His final point is formulated as an irrefutable insult:

"Today, ladies and gentlemen, it is Jean-Marie Le Pen who has become a detail in history. A detail in the history of the National Front."

Jean-Marie Le Pen walks slowly out of the courtroom, flanked by his aids after court is adjourned. The judgment will be delivered a few weeks later. He looks tired, but he resembles his former self in his days of glory when he agrees to answer a question from the nesting cliff of journalists and photographers who are waiting behind the barricades. What is it like to be so harshly condemned by your own party? one journalist asks.

"It is quite surprising, I must say," Jean-Marie Le Pen says.

"Because I am sure I remember Marine Le Pen claiming that she took over the entire National Front when she was elected as president. Both assets and liabilities," Le Pen says and laughs at his own joke. Then he asks that they understand that he doesn't want to answer any further questions.

"That is my obvious right," he says, before lifting his cane and walking slowly towards the exit.