

Beggar writes bestseller but is still down and out

A homeless man who begs on one of Paris' swishest avenues has become an unlikely celebrity after writing a bestselling book about his life on the streets. The creme de la creme of Parisian society pass daily in front of Jean-Marie Roughol's pitch outside a Chanel boutique on the chi-chi Avenue Montaigne.

The actor Jean-Paul Belmondo once gave him 10 Euros (\$11), and France's most famous chat show host, Michel Drucker, always tossed him a coin. But now the beggar is appearing on television himself including on Drucker's show after selling 40,000 copies of his memoir, "My Life As A Panhandler".

But despite the success of the book, which the 47-year-old wrote on park benches and in the dosshouse hotels where he sleeps, Roughol is still on the streets and was back working his pavement this week in a Santa Claus hat. "In 10 months I will start getting my royalties, although I would prefer to have them now," he told AFP.

Pet rat

But from the small advance he has been given Roughol has bought a smartphone to keep up with his growing band of followers on Facebook, where his profile picture shows him with a rat on his shoulder. "People write to me from everywhere and I am stopped every day by people who have read my book," he said.

Roughol, who has been on the streets for 25 years and regards begging as "a profession", has to make 80 Euros a day to pay for his food and board. And his new-found celebrity has helped him put bread on the table from the most surprising of sources.

"Last week I was taken to a restaurant by a man from Tennessee who bought 15 copies of my book and another person came from Switzerland with chocolate for me." Roughol wrote the book with the help of a former French interior minister Jean-Louis Debre, after offering to look after his bicycle for him while he did some shopping on the nearby Champs Elysee. In the book he tells how their friendship was cemented when a couple who saw them chatting, said, "Look, it's Debre with a hobo." Roughol began writing down the story of his life two years ago in school exercise books.

Abandoned by his mother when he was a small child and brought up by his alcoholic father, he ended up on the streets after he lost his job as a waiter in his early 20s. He admits to "not spending much time at school" so Debre-now head of France's highest constitutional court-agreed to correct and reshape his drafts. Roughol said he hopes the book might help



This file photo taken on October 06, 2015 shows French writer of the book "Je tape la manche" Jean-Marie Roughol poses in Paris. — AFP

change the way homeless people are viewed. "People who have read it say they look differently at us now." Certainly it seems to have had a positive effect on the life of the other beggars in his neighborhood. "They tell me 'lots of people are coming to see us because of you,'" he said.

Celebrities and politicians

Also thanks to the book he has been reunited with one of his long-lost brothers. "He saw me on the TV and didn't know I was homeless. When you are on the streets, you are ashamed and you turn in on yourself. Now I have nieces and nephews who want to meet me—imagine! — when I have always been alone."

Roughol is also now getting help to get the social security payments he is entitled to. "When you are on the street getting all that sorted out would mean you would lose days of begging," he said. The book's success has also given him hope that he might realize his life's dream of opening a creperie.

"When I have my own apartment I will buy a computer so I can continue writing books," he said. But it is finally being rec-

ognized as a worthwhile human being which warms his heart most. "People ask me to sign my book, they give me money and clothes too," he said showing off the "brand new" sneakers he was recently presented by one of his well-heeled "neighbors".

It was not always thus. While Roughol sings the praises of the French actor Gad Elmaleh and producer Robert Hossein, who both hired him as an extra, he said the the screen legend Alain Delon was horrible to him, and is equally scathing about another actor Gerard Jugnot, star of the hit feelgood movie "The Chorus".

"He plays poor people in his films but he doesn't like them" in real life, he wrote. But his most damning verdict was on Jean-Luc Melenchon, France's firebrand leftwing leader, who has walked past him many times without as much as a nod. "He is not a nice man," said Roughol. — AFP



The Armenian Patriarchate in the Iranian capital Tehran. — KUNA

Armenians in Iran preserve cultural identity

Christian Armenians have lived in Iran since thousands of years ago and their existence in the nation dates to the pre-Christ times. According to historic evidences and relics, their existence in the nation dates back to the BC fifth and sixth centuries. Since then, they have preserved their own social fabric and language in Iran, as well as in other countries of their diaspora.

In an interview with Kuwait News Agency (KUNA), the chief Armenian bishop in Tehran, Sebulh Sarkisian, said the Armenians have been since the old times a very active community in Iran in humanitarian, cultural, literary, commercial and military sectors.

In the 17th century, the Safavid Shah Abbas transferred more than 300,000 Armenians from Armenia to Esfahan, with aim of renovating the city and creating a new social mix-up, he said. Esfahan was the first city to host the Armenians. They built their own town in Esfahan, named Newo Julfa before spreading to other countries such as India and Iraq.

According to official figures, there are some 100,000 Christians, including 80,000 Armenians, in Iran. They practice their religious rites freely. The Iranian Christians have three patriarchates. According to historic sources, the patriarchate in Tibriz is the oldest one in the country, followed by the one in Esfahan. The newest is located in Tehran.

The Tehran patriarchate groups the largest number of Armenian worshippers. It is significantly influential, managing 20 schools, 20 associations in addition to a number of clubs for the community. The Armenians are represented with two men in the parliament. They publish a number of newspapers and the patriarchate in Tehran oversees up to 11 churches.

Bishop Sarkisian noted that the largest number of Armenians live in Tehran, followed by Esfahan and Aroumiah. He affirmed that the Armenians enjoy freedoms in Iran, unlike other countries, with exception of Lebanon. They practice their rituals without any restrictions, Sarkisian said, adding that the authorities encourage them to hold their religious ceremonies.

The Armenians view Armenia which ceded from the Soviet Union 24 years ago as their mother land. The Armenian schools teach the official curricula, except for the religious curricula, the Armenian language and history. — KUNA