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L’Affaire Dreyfus

By Benjamin Sacks

The peregrinations of the Israelites after the loss of their native home is an interesting, albeit distressing, chapter in the history of mankind. Their quest for a haven free from persecution, took them all over the face of the earth. Wherever they went they were subjected to humiliating disabilities. Sentenced to live in special quarters, to engage only in certain occupations, to attend school in limited numbers, if at all, and to wear badges betokening their descent, the Jews eked out a miserable existence. To this group, it is needless to say, the French Revolution was a veritable blessing, for included in the rights of man was religious equality. The Jew was permitted to don the garb of a free man and to become a citizen of his adopted land. But traditional ideas and habits, if one chooses to call them such, are sometimes difficult fences to break down and occasionally there would appear signs of religious intolerance. To many of the older people of the present generation the news of the death of Alfred Dreyfus in July, 1935, at the age of seventy-five, recalled such a moment. In their youth they were treated to just such a spectacle as Germany under Hitler is affording the youth of today. From 1894 to 1906, with little interruption, the case of this French captain of Jewish extraction convulsed an entire nation. Its implications came to extend far beyond the individual himself. Important concepts of freedom and justice were at stake.

The genesis of this affair may be traced to the desperate struggle which the Catholic Church and the monarchical element were waging to retain their dominant influence in French life. Both were gradually losing ground and, unless the Third French Republic, guardian of the rights of man, was checked, they would soon be a spent force in their coun-

1. This paper was given originally as an address at the Temple Albert in Albuquerque, October 8, 1935, upon the invitation of Dr. A. L. Krohn, rabbi of that temple.

[254]
try. To place the Republic in an embarrassing light the remnants of the ancien régime spread propaganda abroad, predicting the disastrous consequences of a policy which gave full rein to man's ego. As an example they cited the fruits of religious equality. The rise of socialism, strikes, and anarchist outrages were attributed to the Mephistophelian influences of the Jews. If allowed to pursue their tactics, they would eventually undermine the unity of France and thus make it as easy a prey for foreign nations as Poland had been made in the eighteenth century. Some even regarded the unrest engendered by the Jews in France as but part of a general scheme of a Jewish Syndicat to dominate the whole world.

To give credence to such declarations of the perversity of the Jew there broke out in 1894 a scandal in the army. The Intelligence Service, reorganized after 1871 to watch particularly the German embassy so that the latter's attachés would be unable to effect any liaisons with French officers, discovered that secret plans embodying national defense were leaking out. This information was secured through the aid of a charwoman who collected the scraps of paper in the waste-baskets at the German legation where she was employed. From the tone of the notes, in particular that of a bordereau, an anonymous memorandum, pieced together by Major Henry of the secret service, it was concluded that it must be a staff officer and one in the artillery. This knowledge was communicated to the headquarters, which ordered the espionage bureau to leave no stone unturned to catch the traitor. In this connection it must be remembered that France never forgot the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, while Germany was constantly haunted by the fear of Gallic reprisals. So both sides, as a matter of fact, endeavored to maintain complete secrecy of the details of national defense in their respective countries and, at the same time, to keep apprised of the military plans of each other's country.
The army caste, still royalist in composition and spirit, since time had not yet given the Republic an opportunity to permeate that branch with its principles, had been noticeably displaying the growing anti-Semitic feeling in France. Jewish officers were discriminated against, provoked, and killed in unequal duels, and their courage rudely questioned. To such a group the presence of a Jewish officer in the Staff seemed very ominous. They compared the handwriting on the bordereau with that of the officer in question and, whether it was because of a slight resemblance or initial prejudice or a combination of both, they concluded that they had found the culprit. Forthwith the arrest of one Captain Alfred Dreyfus was ordered, while an investigation of his past life was undertaken. It was learned that the family, originally from Mülhausen, Alsace, had moved to Paris after the occupation of their beloved land by the Germans. Only one brother had acquired German citizenship and that solely to hold the family possessions, principally a prosperous textile business. At Paris, Alfred, an ardent exponent of revanche, had entered a military school and, despite obstacles placed in his path because of his faith, eventually had become a captain attached to the General Staff. At the time of his arrest he was thirty-five, married to the daughter of a wealthy diamond merchant, and father of two children. He enjoyed a considerable income, for in addition to his fair salary as an officer he possessed a private fortune invested with his brother.

There seemed little in such a recital to indicate any pecuniary motive for treasonable conduct. The examiners, however, accepted reports of a dissolute life as clinching the evidence and, after a secret and brief trial, declared him guilty of high treason. On January 5, 1895, he was publicly degraded before the entire corps of his comrades and sentenced to solitary confinement for life on Devil's Island, off the coast of French Guiana. The journals of the day gave the proceedings an anti-Semitic color, presenting the public with another bit of damning evidence of the evil
machinations of the Jews. They were willing even to sell out their country to Germany. In vain did the Dreyfus family protest their belief in the innocence of their kin. They appealed to a vice-president of the Senate and a former Alsatian, Scheurer-Kestner. But the latter was assured by the General Staff that the evidence gave definite proof of guilt.

The possibility that such inquiries might continue to pour in caused the Staff to request the Intelligence Service to gather more evidence. Lieutenant-Colonel Picquart, a recent appointment as head, duly obeyed his instructions when one day he was handed a curious message, the famous "petit bleu," by the charwoman. The suspicious character of the note marked for one Major Esterhazy from the German embassy inspired Picquart to look up the reputation of the former. The findings disclosed the fact that Esterhazy was a very dissolute and debauched member of the nobility. Further, his handwriting closely resembled that of the bordereau attributed to Dreyfus. Picquart communicated his discovery to his superiors who, afraid of the disastrous repercussions it might have for monarchical sentiment if the Jew were vindicated and the noble indicted, ordered Picquart to cease his inquiry and shortly dispatched him on a special "mission" into the desert lands of Tunis.

Picquart did not take kindly to his involuntary exile to Africa. He felt that his military career was blighted unless he could regain the favor of his commanding officers. He secured leave to return to France and there placed his case in the hands of an old family lawyer. The latter, realizing that Picquart could only be saved through the vindication of Dreyfus and aware of Scheurer-Kestner's interest in the matter, went to him. The aged Senator was convinced by the facts laid before him of the innocence of Dreyfus and again requested the Army to reopen the case. Added confirmation that Dreyfus was the victim of abortive justice was obtained by Mathieu Dreyfus, a brother. In the hope that some one might recognize the handwriting, Mathieu
The NEW MEXICO QUARTERLY

had published a facsimile of the famous bordereau. Great was his exultation when a banker who had had financial relations with Esterhazy wrote him that the handwriting was that of his one-time client. The Army, fearful that to deny such a request might arouse suspicion, permitted a trial but secured the acquittal of Esterhazy by very arbitrary proceedings. That the affair had become of nationwide interest and might yet be the stepping-stone to power for the Church and Monarchy was seen in the fact that Esterhazy, after the trial, was borne to his carriage and acclaimed by the "patriots." He became an international figure and was hailed as the "martyr" of the Jews.

To a small coterie of liberty-loving individuals, however, the trial had seemed nothing less than a travesty upon justice. Interviews with Picquart, Scheurer-Kestner, and Mathieu Dreyfus had convinced Emile Zola, a novelist of the day, of the innocence of Dreyfus. When the stockholders of the Figaro, fearful for its financial security in view of the sudden loss of subscriptions, stopped his articles, Zola issued pamphlets at his own expense. The principles of the French Revolution were at stake and, come what might, justice must be secured. Leading figures from all walks of life joined with him—Albert and Georges Clemenceau, lawyers and politicians, Anatole France, one of the foremost writers of the day, and Jean Jaurès, a prominent socialist, to mention but a few. To these men, too, the union of the Saber and the Church to crush the Republic was a serious spectacle. Worse yet was the fact that the ministry, afraid that any movement to encompass revision might mean its own political eclipse, had allied the Republic with the reactionary elements. With the issue thus joined, the French nation shortly resolved itself into Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards. As illustrative of the fact that the implications of the case had come to extend far beyond the possible injustice meted out to a Hebrew, the Jews at first refrained from taking a conspicuous part. It would be better to allow those who were not members of their race to take the lead.
Zola sounded the trumpet call of liberty through Clemenceau's journal, *L'Aurore*. To the President of the French Republic he addressed an open letter, *J'Accuse*. In clear and simple language he accused the government of undermining the foundations of the Republic. Zola hoped that such a vigorous article would force the ministry to prosecute him and thus bring about a reopening of the case. The anti-Dreyfusards were quick to respond. They called for the crucifixion of Citizen Zola. He was burned in effigy and hurled into the Seine river. The press demanded his arrest for libel of the government. Throughout France, Jewish quarters were attacked. Faced with this public pressure, a reluctant ministry ordered Zola's arrest and, at the beginning of 1898, he was haled into court for his remarks concerning the Esterhazy acquittal. Apparently the crucial moment was at hand.

Labori, an Alsatian by birth, and Albert Clemenceau, brother of Georges, acted as Zola's attorneys, while the "Tiger," appeared in defense of his own publication. But the trial, held under ministerial influence, was a farce. The court shielded the army, and every day the proceedings became a re-edition of the Dreyfus trial. Even Picquart's damaging testimony was given scant attention, whereas Colonel Henry, now head of the Intelligence Service, was permitted to introduce further evidence of the guilt of Dreyfus. The new bordereau, however, was carefully kept from the eyes of the court, on the ground that it involved vital military plans. A verdict of guilt was rendered and Zola was given the maximum penalty of one year in prison and a fine of three thousand francs. The three handwriting experts whom Zola had libeled were awarded thirty thousand francs. It was only through the intervention of wealthy friends that his home and personal belongings were saved. Georges Clemenceau was sentenced to four months' imprisonment and a like fine of three thousand francs. Picquart, for his part in the affair, was stricken off the army list.
An appeal was taken and delay after delay secured in the hope that fresh revelations would develop. When further stays were refused, in July, 1898, Zola's advisers urged a secret flight to England until they could secure new evidence. Though Zola did not relish this cowardly role, he resigned himself to their contention that in exile he would be a greater menace than if he went to prison and posed as a martyr. In England, Zola, because of the existence of extradition laws with regard to criminal refugees, had to content himself with a secluded existence in the country. The fortunes of the Dreyfusards indeed seemed at a low ebb, for in addition to the loss of Zola by exile and the confinement of the other leaders to prison, Scheurer-Kestner fell seriously ill. To climax this series of misfortunes came a sudden change in the tactics of their opponents. The latter shifted the burden of proof by charging that the Jewish Syndicat, as the anti-Dreyfusards termed the opposition, was employing Esterhazy as a substitute in order to draw off suspicion from their activities. So convincing did General Cavaignac, a descendant of a famous French family, make his brief, that for a moment the Dreyfusards were stunned and many Frenchmen were won over to the cause of finality.

Amidst such heart-breaking circumstances came welcome news. In August, 1898, Colonel Henry was accused by a handwriting expert in the service of the Dreyfusards of having forged the bordereau which he had introduced during the Zola trial. Henry, confronted with the evidence, confessed his guilt, and was confined to prison to await trial. The trial never took place, however, for Henry committed suicide with a razor left in his possession. Upon receipt of this news Esterhazy fled to Brussels and thence crossed over to London. In almost bewildering fashion several generals resigned. To complete the cycle President Faure, a foe of revision, died and his place was taken, after a bitter struggle, by a friend of revision, Loubet. With the French government now more amenable, the Court of Appeals
ordered Dreyfus brought before it and a third military tribunal held in the light of the new evidence.

After four years of solitary confinement and mistreatment, Alfred Dreyfus, now thirty-nine and white-haired, returned to France. Zola came out of retirement and appeared to lead the offense. To the utter astonishment of many, however, Dreyfus was again declared guilty but under extenuating circumstances. His sentence was commuted to ten years and then, shortly, President Loubet pardoned him. Further, to put an end to the entire affair which threatened to disrupt French unity, the Senate passed a law of general amnesty. Although many urged Dreyfus not to accept the findings, his advisers felt that to continue to pose as a martyr would only involve the Republic in continued unrest. Instead, they persuaded him to accept the pardon but to retain the right to appeal to the Court of Cassation if new evidence was forthcoming. In 1904 Dreyfus availed himself of this privilege, the high court inquired afresh into the whole affair and, in July, 1906, declared Dreyfus innocent.

The real culprit was definitely found to be Major Esterhazy, and it was further disclosed that he had been receiving for a while a monthly pension of approximately five hundred dollars from the German embassy for his services in procuring information. His guilt had been covered up by Henry, a close friend of his while both were comrades in the Intelligence Service. Afterwards, apparently, Henry seems to have been in the clutches of the traitor as were most of the Staff when they perceived themselves in the anomalous position of suppressing the actual facts in order to protect the Church and Monarchy. In connection with these revelations it must be obvious that Germany could easily have cleared up the entire matter in 1894 if she had so desired. Her representatives in Paris were perfectly cognizant of the fact that they were dealing with Esterhazy and not with Dreyfus. The German Foreign Office, however, felt that to make such a disclosure would involve their embassy in a
breach of international law. So the German government would go only to the extent of categorically denying that it had ever had any dealings with Dreyfus.

The remainder of the story has the ring of a fairy tale. Dreyfus was reinstated in the army and raised to the rank of major. At the outbreak of the World War he was given command of a regiment in an entrenched camp in Paris and in 1918 he was again promoted, this time to the post of lieutenant-colonel, and made an officer of the Legion of Honor. After the conflict was over, Dreyfus lived in retirement and, from all accounts, was a friendly man, optimistic and with little outward sign of bitterness. Picquart was made a general and later a Minister of War. Labori, too, climaxed his career with a ministerial office, while Georges Clemenceau ascended to the pinnacle of premiership. For Zola the real reward was more spiritual than material. Religious equality and the French Republic which symbolized this and other liberal ideals had been preserved. The reactionary elements had been driven into eclipse. Medals were struck in his honor by many associations for his defense of the rights of man. When he died in 1908, he was accorded the highest honor that France could bestow—burial in the Pantheon. As for Esterhazy, he eeked out a miserable existence in England, selling several conflicting “confessions” to the press. In 1923 he died, virtually penniless.