

"The Dreyfus Affair"

By Jeffrey M Cohen

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Allons enfants de la patrie,

O France with soul so pure;

The tyranny of monarchy,

With you,

Could not endure.

Aux armes, citoyens!

Against barriers of race;

Let justice and equality,

In France,

Gather pace.

Under that noble banner,

Let tolerance surge;

A revolution that would outlaw

Anti-Semitism's scourge.

But man's finest ideals

Often pop like a bubble,

When racists convert countries

Into blood-soaked piles

Of rubble.

Hence, égalité's gossamer

Soon disintegrated

When the case of Alfred Dreyfus showed

How much the Jew was hated.

Born in Mulhouse, in Alsace,

In 1859,

To a wealthy, cultured family

Whose Judaism was in decline.

A graduate engineer

From the École polytechnique,

Fast tracked in the army

For skills

Quite unique;

Made Captain on the General Staff –

The only Jew approved –

But anti-Semites soon conspired

To have him removed.

It went beyond antipathy

For an individual Jew,

Especially as Dreyfus

Lacked any Jewish hue.

This was pure and naked prejudice,

To paint the Jews of France
As a third column for Germany,
Whose cause they would advance.

They concocted a calumny,
With Dreyfus as its victim,
Alleging military secrets
Had been leaked from deep within
The General Staff headquarters
To France's German embassy,
From Dreyfus to its attache',
In the strictest secrecy.

The French Intelligence Service claimed
To have intercepted every note,
With handwriting identical to that
With which Dreyfus wrote.

Major Henry, head of the Service,
Promptly had him arrested,
But refused to have his 'evidence'
Independently, tested.

Worse still,
The Ministry of War –
For the Prosecution's eyes, alone –
Produced some forged documents,

Which, they claimed, had shown
That the Jew, Dreyfus,
For Germany, had spied,
And that the full force of the law,
Had to be applied.

The Court-Martial was held in secret;
The verdict, as clear as day:
Treason against the Republic,
For which he'd have to pay
With forfeiture of freedom -
No review along the way.

Dreyfus's attorney
Embraced the broken man,
As he protested his innocence,
And that the trial had been a sham:

"Never have I contacted
A German in my life;
My loyalty to France is that
Of a man to his wife!"

The attorney consoled him –
"Your honour remains intact;
Let your prosecutors tremble
For their distortion of fact.
If there is a God of justice

Who exacts retribution,
Then their gain and your punishment
Will end in substitution.”

“My God has deserted me,”
Said Dreyfus in reply,
“But I shouldn’t be surprised,
For I didn’t identify,
In any way, with him,
Nor, with Jews,
Did I ally.”

“For a Captain,”
Said the attorney,
“You’re surprisingly naïve;
For you’ve clearly missed the wider web
Your foes have sought
To weave.

“You aren’t the real target
They’ve set out to disgrace,
But a focus for their loathing
For the entire Jewish race.

“You are but one sacrifice
On the altar of gentile hate,
And an irrational anti-Semitism

That will never abate.

“Those secret documents,
That they’ve clearly forged,
Are but symbols of the calumnies
The Church has disgorged
By way of blood libels
And the charge of Deicide,
Desecration of the Host,
Wells poisoned,
Country wide.

“My friend, you’ve discovered
That religious alienation
Guarantees no immunity
From discrimination.”

“O, my God,” cried Dreyfus,
“Into no-man’s land, I’m pitched;
By Jews as well as Christians,
I’m now truly ditched!”

“Indeed,” said the attorney,
“A dilemma, for sure;
One faced by many Jews I know
Who, naively, abjure
The faith of their forefathers

As a key to the door
Of civic advancement
And the life, secure;
One free of all the prejudice,
To which fellow Jews are heir;
One in which they'll never hear
The taunt, 'You Jews, beware!' "

The Commanding Officer then approached
To give them notification
Of a military parade to be arranged
At a vast, open location
Where Dreyfus would be stripped
Of his rank and decoration,
And his crime announced for all to hear,
With attendant execration.

The French Press,
Under the banner of liberte',
Garnished and inflated,
In a uniquely vicious way,
The dealings of the miscreant Jew,
And publicized the day,
The place, the time, of his disgrace,
With glee and overplay.

To that carnival of hatred,
The mobs of France were drawn;
Droves of anti-Semites,
Were in their place by dawn.
A moment of history,
For which they'd long dreamed;
By midday, the arena,
With tens of thousands,
Teemed.

Long speeches were delivered,
Alluding to the danger
Posed by the ubiquitous
And scheming Semite stranger,
Who spurns bonds of friendship
And loyalty to the state,
Enlisting with one purpose:
Its defense,
To penetrate.

To an eruption of boos,
Dreyfus was led out;
A cacophony of coarse abuse –
The vilest ever shout.

The Marshal of the army
Uttered a tirade,

Demanding Alfred Dreyfus tell
How much he'd been paid
By France's sworn enemy,
Her defences,
To lay bare;
Or was it common-place for Jews
To do it for a dare?!

At that, the crowd erupted
With shouts of " Jew! Jew! Jew!
Treasonable activity,
For you, is nothing new!"

A rousing Marseillaise,
By military bands,
Was played;
Tempers were at boiling point;
The collective nerves
Were frayed.

A highly-decorated officer
Then approached the stunned man.
"But I'm innocent!" screamed Dreyfus,
"The trial was all a sham!"

"Silence," screamed the officer,
"You've had your day in court;

Your plea is of no interest;
Never again will it be sought.
Whereas, in good faith,
You were once promoted,
Now, I formally declare that you
Are totally demoted.
No wearing of military uniform;
No insignia may you display;
No benefits of any kind;
No pension and no pay."

From around the arena,
Screams of approbation;
Further chants of 'Jew! Jew! Jew!
Spewing detestation.
Alfred's shout,
"I'm innocent,"
An unheard protestation.

Two guards approached;
One held his arms
In an iron grip;
The other tore off his insignia,
And the scabbard at his hip.

High up in the arena,
A man watched bemused;

Knowing that the charge,
With falsehood,
Was infused;
A German Embassy clerk,
Whose ambassador had stated
That no contact with Dreyfus
Was ever contemplated.

“It was all trumped up” -
He told himself -
“All that they’ve alleged;
From the familiar, racist cesspool,
Their ‘evidence’ was dredged!”

His attention then reverted
To the Marshal’s closing speech;
Addressing Dreyfus, he declared,
“You have been impeached,
And found guilty by a court
Of fellow officers, true,
Who’ve subjected all the evidence
To the closest review.

The sentence that the court,
In your case recommends,
Is life incarceration -
For the message that it sends.

Hence, to Devil’s Island,

You shall be transported;
And may the plots of fellow devils
Ever be aborted!”

The German ambassador’s statement
Became public before long;
And more and more voices
Grew strident and strong,
Not out of sympathy
With the Jewish cause,
But in protest at the travesty
Of their moral laws.

A prominent writer,
Named Bernard Lazare,
Published a pamphlet,
Distributed near and far;
Public figures now sensed
That justice had been bullied,
And that France’s noble principles
Had clearly been sullied.

The following year, a new head
Of Intelligence was named:
George Picquart came with a hunch
That Dreyfus had been framed.

He reopened the shaky case

With vigour and aplomb,
Discovering a letter –
A potential time bomb.

Written by the German
Military attache',
To a French major,
By the name of Esterhazy,
From which it was apparent
That he was the one assigned
To steal the military secrets –
And that Dreyfus
Had been maligned!

It went even further,
As Picquart demonstrated,
That Esterhazy had been the forger
Who had incriminated
The innocent Dreyfus –
Who should now be
Exonerated.

The 'powers that be' decided
That such a revelation
Could cause incalculable harm
To the reputation
Of the French military

And its administration,
And confirm the suspicion of racism
Among the leaders of the nation.
So Picquart was instantly dismissed –
A government decision –
And dispatched to serve in Africa,
In some minor position.

Before he left, he handed over,
To influential friends,
All the evidence he'd gleaned,
And bemoaned the racist trends,
That, if unchecked, would destroy
The integrity of the state;
And he begged them to agitate,
Before it was too late.

A left-winger in the Senate,
Scheurer-Kestner, by name,
Denounced Esterhazy,
And his cruel and lying game;
Presenting all the evidence
That Picquart had disclosed –
But the right wing Prime Minister
Declared the case was closed!

The 'Dreyfus Affair' soon became

A national debate
Around the nation's dining rooms
And the bars of the senate;
Workers in factories,
As well as stevedores,
Were questioning the integrity
Of those who made their laws.

Forced to take some action,
Esterhazy was put on trial,
But the courts betrayed no conscience -
Justice was in denial.

Not only was he acquitted
Of all the charges brought,
But an astounding recommendation
Was issued by the court,
That to Picquart's banishment order
They add the new detail:
That he be detained for sixty days
In an African jail.

This was the tinder to ignite
All that combustible fuel;
And the newspaper, L'Aurore, staged
The opening duel:
It published an open letter,
To the President of the state,

By Emile Zola, the novelist,
Demanding a debate.

It bore the caption, "J'accuse!" -
On its front page, writ large -
And stripped away the 'evidence'
That underpinned the charge,
Levelled against Dreyfus,
As a libel, most malicious,
Demanding redress on his behalf,
As the action most judicious.

Two hundred thousand copies
Sold in Paris, alone;
Though, through the printer's windows,
Bottles were thrown.
Anti-Semitic riots,
Throughout France took place,
Claiming Jews had brought the nation
Into disgrace.

Zola was found guilty
Of libelous intent;
He told the court
Whatever charge
It struggled to invent,
He knew he was fighting

For France's very soul,
And the repair of its moral fabric,
Had been his worthy goal.

In summer of 1898,
A new War Minister stated
That all the case's documents
Were to be re-evaluated.
They showed that the original
Intelligence Services' head,
One Major Henry,
Had ensured the state was fed
With the forged documents
That ultimately led
To the prosecution of Dreyfus –
And that his case was now
Quite dead.

Henry was arrested,
But, before the charge was read,
Committed suicide in his cell –
A rope around his head.

His patent guilt served to generate
Public sympathy for Dreyfus's fate.
The government sought to set aside
The original verdict,

And have Dreyfus retried.

At the retrial, the military
Stood firmly by its word:
No admission of forgeries;
No racism incurred.
The Court-martial reaffirmed
Dreyfus's treason,
But commuted his sentence
For 'an extenuating reason'.

But that verdict provided no relief
To either side;
Each claiming that,
Their own stand-point,
The court had justified.

When the state heard that Dreyfus
Was about to appeal,
It offered him, with alacrity,
A compromise deal:
A Presidential pardon,
It was prepared to confer
If, pursuit of any further appeal,
Dreyfus would demur.

Five years later, in 1904,

A leftish administration

Instigated, doggedly,

A fresh investigation.

The Court of Appeal

Declared the charge,

Unsubstantiated;

And Captain Alfred Dreyfus

Was, forthwith,

Exonerated.

The affair, however, left its scars

On Jews far and wide;

Shocked how deeply prejudice

Could thrive on every side;

With some even suggesting

It could lead to genocide.

Theodore Herzl -

An assimilated Jew -

Had been present at the first trial

And the subsequent review,

As the Paris correspondent

For the Vienna *Neue Freie Press*;

To the mobs' vicious ranting,

He'd been a shocked witness.

He'd winced

As they'd screamed,

"Death to the Jews!" -

Inducing an epiphany,

And revision of his views.

Now he saw clearly

The direction of his mission:

To redeem his Jewish people

From deprivation and derision,

To garner world support

For a homeland of their own,

To make the cause of Zion

Universally known.

1975 was a dire year,

When the U.N. sank

To its nadir;

Defining Zionism,

As, with racism, twin;

Against the Palestinians,

A mortal sin.

But, in a sense, those two terms

Were, indeed, associated,

Since Herzl had been inspired

By how the Jew was hated.

So Zionism had emerged
From a racist chrysalis,
As a response to that evil –
And as its nemesis.

Dreyfus was the catalyst
For the miracle of our age;
His suffering, the harbinger
Of Zion's bright new page.

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