

Georges Picquart : Honest Hero in the Dreyfus Affair

by Michael Curtis



Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart

Whether I shall turn out to be the hero of my own life, or whether that station will be held by anyone else, these pages will show.

Alfred Dreyfus never uttered these words, but they are appropriate for any real understanding of the Dreyfus Affair. The Affair was, and remains more than a century later, a controversial issue, a political and moral crisis, which divided the intellectuals, politicians, and the French nation over the guilt or innocence of Dreyfus accused of treason in 1894. It is still pertinent today because of the relevant issues of national identity, personal integrity, political and legal actions purported to be in the national interest, and virulent antisemitism. The Dreyfus Affair was full of false accusations, fake news, laws ignored, prejudiced judges, blindness of the leaders of the French military bewitched by security paranoia, viciousness of the media and right wing intellectuals such as the violently antisemitic Edouard Drumont condemning Dreyfus even without an open, public trial.

Many works, fictional and non-fictional works have been published presenting their version of the Affair and its repercussion on all aspects of French life; among them are works by Anatole France, Marcel Proust, and Roger Martin du Gard. The Affair is again the center of attention with the appearance of a new film, *J'Accuse* by the French-Polish film director Roman Polanski. He is yet another example of the problem of distinguishing between the man and the artist, assessing and according priorities between a celebrity who can be viewed either as tragic and brilliant, or malignant and convoluted.

Polanski is a gifted film director, celebrated for his artistry, whose films include *Chinatown*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Pianist*. However, he has had a sad and complex life, mother killed in the Holocaust, agonized by the murder of his wife, actress Sharon Tate, personally involved in orgies and drugs, and charged in 1997 with drugging and raping a 13 year old girl. He was legally condemned for unlawful sexual behavior, and was expelled from the U.S. Academy of Motion Pictures

(Oscar). He is still a fugitive from U.S. justice. He complains of the denial of facts about his conduct, and condemnation of him for things he had not done. In his own view, this attitude towards him resembles allegations in the Dreyfus Affair.

The facts of the Affair are well known. Alfred Dreyfus, born in Mulhouse in 1859 was a French artillery officer of the Jewish faith assigned as a Captain to the War Ministry. On October 15, 1894 he was arrested on orders of General Auguste Mercier, minister of war. A few days later in a secret court martial he was found guilty of treason and sentenced to life imprisonment on Devil's Island. The charge stemmed from the discovery by a French cleaning woman working in the office of the German military attache in Paris of documents, "bordereau," containing a letter with handwriting alleged to be that of Dreyfus.

In a ceremony in the Champs de Mars on January 5, 1895 the insignia were torn from the uniform of Dreyfus and his sword was broken. Dreyfus declared, "You are degrading an innocent man," but the large crowd shouted "Death to Judas, death to the Jew." He was sent to life imprisonment on Devil's Island., A second secret court martial held in Rennes in September 1899 again found him guilty, but he was pardoned by the president of the Republic. In July 1906 the Cour d'Appel set aside the verdict of the army court martial and rehabilitated him. Even so, the French army did not declare Dreyfus' innocence until 1995.

In the divided France there were some who from the beginning believed in the innocence of Dreyfus and were active. Among them were Bernard Lazare, Georges Clemenceau, future prime minister, Mathieu Dreyfus, the brother of Alfred, Joseph Reinach, Senator Scheurer-Kestner, all of whom in one way or another called for a new free open trial, and Emile Zola. It was the 4,500 word article, really an open letter to President Felix Faure, headed *J'accuse* by Zola published on the front

page in L'Aurore on January 13, 1898 that caused a sensation by forcefully accused the Army of carrying out and covering up the false conviction of Dreyfus. As a result, a month later, Zola was put on trial, found guilty of libel, and sentenced to a year's prison and a large fine. But the article can be considered as a major example of intellectuals influencing public opinion. Zola was, as Anatole France said at his funeral on September 28, 1902, "a moment in human conscience."

But a case can be made that the real hero of the Dreyfus Affair was Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart, courageous officer who spoke out against a flagrant abuse of justice. Born in Strasbourg, Alsace in 1854, Picquart was a brilliant officer, appointed to rank of Lieutenant-General in April 1896, and one acknowledged to be antisemitic. Indeed, Picquart illustrated the fine line between personal, private antisemitism and the institutional collective practice of antisemitism. He was a staff officer, an assistant to General Mercier, minister of war, at the court martial of Dreyfus. He took for granted that Dreyfus was guilty. Indeed, at the occasion of Dreyfus' degradation, Picquart remarked that it was as if the army was being stripped of pestilence.

Picquart was appointed to the 2nd Bureau, statistical section in 1895, but in reality France's external military intelligence, and soon found that Dreyfus has suffered from miscarriage of justice and had been framed. He discovered that the handwriting of the "*bordereau*" (Memorandum) was akin to that of Major Ferdinand Esterhazy, who had previously been suspected of espionage. The Major collected information on confidential military matters, especially mobilization and artillery. He was careful in concealing his real activity. However, Picquart learned from a spy that Dreyfus had never been employed by the Germans, but Esterhazy had been.

Picquart informed General de Boisdeffre of his findings who was unconcerned, and was not interested in pursuing the case.

Picquart then obtained samples of Esterhazy's handwriting, and showed copies of photos of letters written by Esterhazy to Armand du Paty de Clam and Alphonse Bertillon but to no avail. Lieutenant de Clam, a graphologist, was the officer who had first arrested Dreyfus and who protected Esterhazy, refusing to accept the truth, replied that "the Jews have, for the past year, been training some one to imitate the writing, he has succeeded in making a perfect reproduction." Not surprisingly, Zola called him "an evil man,... he is the entire Dreyfus case."

Bertillon was a police officer, an expert in scientific methods for criminal forensics. Though he was not a handwriting expert, he testified that the bordereau was the work of Dreyfus.

Picquart persisted in his investigation of the facts, but was hindered and sabotaged by senior officers. The intensity of the dislike was shown in a duel between Picquart and Commander Henry in March 1898. Henry committed suicide in August 1898.

Picquart was relieved of his duty in the 2nd Bureau, and sent as commander of an Algerian unit to Tunisia. He himself was falsely accused of forgery of the evidence of Esterhazy's guilt. He resigned from the army, but after the exoneration of Dreyfus in 1906, he was promoted to Brigadier-General, and returned to service. He died in January 1914.

Most of the previous works on the Affair have indicated the triumph of justice, and the victory of the Dreyfusards against the hard line nationalists and antisemites who persisted against all evidence in Dreyfus' guilt and his danger to national security. Picquart stands out as an honorable man insisting on truth. He had no personal affection or concern for Dreyfus, but saw that the Army was being dishonored by its injustice. Most important, though Picquart never disavowed his personal antisemitism, his personal prejudice never affected his sense of what was right for the

Jewish officer Dreyfus. He should be honored.