

The Dreyfus Affair's Living History

France Commemorates Episode That Profoundly Changed the Nation

By Anne Swardson
Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS, Jan. 13—France, a nation that values the past at least as much as the future, today commemorated the 100th anniversary of one of its most shameful and triumphal episodes.

The history of the Dreyfus Affair, the wrongful 1895 conviction of a Jewish army officer for treason is called, actually stretches over 12 years. But this date marked the turning point. It is the anniversary of "J'accuse" ("I accuse"), the headline over Emile Zola's damning article in L'Aurore newspaper on Jan. 13, 1898, that not only led to a pardon for Alfred Dreyfus but changed the future of France.

In a wreath-laying ceremony today at Zola's tomb in the Pantheon, Prime Minister Lionel Jospin called the Dreyfus Affair "one of the founding events in the history of our country."

The affair's impact on France can be compared to that of Watergate in the United States in the 1970s. Because of Zola's article, a new government came to power, the role of the press was transformed, the rule of law and respect for truth were more firmly established in the national culture, the army was brought into line, and the intellectual class was accorded the status it still holds as molders of public opinion. Even the creation of the state of Israel has roots in the Dreyfus Affair.

"If my grandfather could see all that has happened, he would be delirious with joy, even though he probably wouldn't show it," said Simone Perl, Dreyfus's 80-year-old granddaughter, in a telephone interview.

The anniversary comes as France looks back at its role in World War II and the Holocaust. The Nazi collaborationist Vichy government is on trial in a Bordeaux courtroom in



FILE PHOTO

French army captain Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused of spying.

the person of Maurice Papon, 87, a Vichy functionary accused of playing a role in the deportation of more than 1,000 Jews from France. And the museums of France are under fire for failing to return works of art taken from Jewish families during the war.

"Half a century after Vichy, we know that obscure forces, intolerance, injustice, can insinuate themselves up to the summit of the state," President Jacques Chirac wrote last week in a letter to Dreyfus's descendants. "But we also know that France knows how to make things turn out for the better in the moments of truth, great, strong, united and vigilant."

For the last week, France has been in deep remembrance. All the major newspapers and most of the magazines have produced special sections retelling the Dreyfus Affair history and, in many cases, spelling out new

perceived injustices for which "J'accuse" is appropriate.

In addition to a series of ceremonies, conferences and lectures to commemorate the anniversary, new books have been published, and high school students are participating in an essay contest to write their own versions of "J'accuse." On the facade of the National Assembly, or legislature, hangs a 42-foot high reproduction of L'Aurore's front page, taken up by Zola's article.

As with Vichy, there have been some apologies. The Roman Catholic newspaper La Croix, which at the time called Dreyfus "the Jewish enemy betraying France," this weekend admitted its editors had an attitude "that nothing can excuse." Le Figaro, which was generally pro-Dreyfus and had printed some of Zola's earlier articles on Dreyfus, admitted this week it was "not courageous" because it had asked Zola to take his opinions elsewhere after readers complained.

The affair began when the French army's general staff learned in 1894 that someone from within had been selling secrets to the Germans. Because Dreyfus's handwriting resembled that on a note written by the traitor, he was quickly arrested. The fact that he was Jewish made him, to his enemies in the army, a desirable target.

Despite his fervent protestations of innocence, Dreyfus was tried by a military court behind closed doors and—after the deliberating judges were given a secret file not shown to the defense—convicted. Afterward, a crowd paraded through the streets of Paris shouting, "Death to the Jews!" Dreyfus, still protesting his innocence, was exiled to Devil's Island off French Guiana in South America.

But first he was drummed out of the military in a ceremony witnessed by Austrian lawyer Theodor Herzl.



BY PASCAL GUYOT—AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Jospin, center, lays wreath on tomb of Emile Zola, whose article "J'accuse" a century ago led to Dreyfus's vindication.

The scene strengthened Herzl's belief that antisemitism would not allow Jews to assimilate successfully in Christian society. Herzl's subsequent book, "A Jewish State," encouraged the founders of Israel.

Dreyfus's wife, brother and mistress fought for the truth for three years. But it was not until world-renowned writer Emile Zola took up the cause that they made progress. Zola, incensed by the recent military-court acquittal of a man who was clearly the real spy in the army general staff, wrote his piece in 2½ days. He wanted to call it "an open letter to the president," but Georges Clemenceau, editor of *L'Aurore* and later prime minister, thought "J'accuse" was a better headline.

The 4,000-word article, which named and accused the officers who had trumped up the flimsy evidence against Dreyfus, caused a sensation.

L'Aurore, whose circulation was normally about 30,000, sold 300,000 copies. Writer Anatole France called it "this great moment for the human conscience"; socialist Jules Guesde called Zola's manifesto "the greatest revolutionary act of the century."

For his pains, Zola was tried for slandering the military. He was convicted, and only escaped a year in prison by fleeing to England. But the seeds had been sown. France divided in two, pro- and anti-Dreyfusards. As leftist intellectual Leon Blum put it, "People's personal lives, and the life of the community, were completely absorbed, they were turned upside down by unparalleled passions."

The various steps in the case were avidly followed internationally, from New York to Russia. When Dreyfus was brought back from his island prison and tried again in 1899, 400

journalists from around the world covered the trial.

He was convicted again, but was pardoned 10 days later by President Emile Loubet. It took six more years, but in 1906 he was reintegrated into the army with honor. Zola had died in 1902; while attending the transfer in 1908 of Zola's ashes into the Pantheon, Dreyfus was shot and wounded by a fanatic.

Simone Perl, who was 17 when her grandfather died in 1935, said he never spoke of what he went through; at least not to his grandchildren. But when the young ones visited their grandparents in summertime, they could hear him screaming during his nightmares. "It marked us all greatly," she said.

A month after the article appeared, Zola was already under heavy criticism. He wrote: "One day, France will thank me for having saved its honor." Today, it did.