The Dreyfus Affair revisited

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Welcome to New York, Abel Ferrara's graphic new movie about Dominique Strauss-Kahn's fall from grace, ignited the recent Cannes Film Festival with its explicit depiction of the Jewish former politician's alleged sex scandals.

Strauss-Kahn, once the managing director of the International Monetary Fund and a front-runner for the presidency of France, was accused in 2011 of sexual assault, although all the charges were later dropped.

Nevertheless, the Frenchman's glory days were over. The new film chronicling the saga is apparently so blatantly defamatory that even Le Monde has described it as "un fantasme antisemite."

Sound familiar? A successful Jew in a powerful position, accusations based on nebulous facts, a court case that rips France apart ... it's the Dreyfus Affair all over again, this time tweeted and spread across social media.

And, in one of those serendipitous quirks of timing, Alfred Dreyfus is also currently back in the public eye - with some 40 broadsides, posters and videos documenting the drama of his story now on show at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center in Jerusalem. They trace the well-known dizzying course of Dreyfus's life, starting with his early army enlistment.

Good-looking, well-educated and newly married, Dreyfus initially shone in the military. Promoted to lieutenant in 1885 and then captain in 1889, he graduated with honorable mention from the French War College and went on to become the only Jewish officer in the French Army's General Staff Headquarters. But there were already complications: a Gen. Bonnefond of the college examination board, feeling that Jews "were not desired" at headquarters, pronounced Dreyfus, and another Jewish candidate, as lacking in cote d'amour (likability).

Then the 1894 denouncement: Dreyfus was accused of passing information about French military equipment to the Germans, arrested for treason and court-martialed, publicly stripped of his army rank and sentenced to life imprisonment. The haunting scene of Dreyfus proclaiming his innocence in front of an impassive line of soldiers, as his sword is ceremoniously broken while his insignia, braid and buttons are ripped from his uniform, is seared into the Jewish collective memory. In the background a large group of onlookers jeers, mocking and scorning the Jew.

Some two years later French military intelligence discovered the real traitor, a Maj. Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, although the army initially tried to quash this evidence. The press published leaked reports of a cover-up and Dreyfus's possible innocence, and the country erupted with pro- and anti-Dreyfus sentiment.

French novelist and journalist Emile Zola, who was not Jewish, then wrote his impassioned defense of Dreyfus in the famous newspaper article headlined "J'accuse."
Dreyfus was eventually released without pardon in 1899, receiving a full military exoneration only in 1906. The following day he rejoined the army, was promoted to major and later to lieutenant-colonel, and served with distinction in World War I. He died in 1935, aged 75.

Why should we still care? The answer is complex and sometimes sobering. First, a kickoff with the good news: We are reading The Jerusalem Post in homes and cafes around Israel right now largely because of the Dreyfus Affair. Theodor Herzl, then the Paris correspondent for a Viennese newspaper, heard the masses screaming "Death to the Jews!" and determined that only a Jewish homeland could solve the eternal problem of anti-Semitism. The rest is history.

But there is more. The Dreyfus Affair is not only a story of intrigue, dishonor and exoneration but also a prelude to the Holocaust, according to Lorraine Beitler, professor emeritus at the City University of New York, who painstakingly collected original documents from the French artillery officer's life. She revealed that in a sad twist of fate, almost 50 years after his trial, Dreyfus's granddaughter Madeleine Levy was murdered in Auschwitz. She was 22.

Beitler, an educator who focuses on creating programs to bridge gaps and create cross-cultural understanding, has been honored for her work throughout the world. For her, Alfred Dreyfus's story is "clearly not an isolated historical event, yet as an episode of the miscarriage of justice and the ultimate triumph of truth, the affair offers exemplary historical lessons."

Bizarrely, those lessons seem ever more contemporary and compelling. The lowlights of his life sadly still resonate throughout Europe over a century later; this time it's Israel which is often in the dock. Baseless accusations and legal proceedings, almost obsessive worldwide interest, vicious anti-Semitic outbursts coupled with the fact that an ultimate verdict of innocence did not stop the hatred or the vitriol, seem an uncanny mirror of what is happening today.

Beitler, who first viewed artifacts from the period at an exhibition at New York's Jewish Museum in 1987, understood the need to keep the Dreyfus Affair and its lessons in the public eye. Realizing that at the close of the New York show each picture and document would soon be dispersed among their disparate owners, she was determined to amass a collection of her own. Eventually, she painstakingly gathered together more than 1,000 artifacts that vividly bring Dreyfus's triumphs and disasters back into focus.

The close of the 19th century was an auspicious time to be in the news. A new law in France had liberated journalists from censorship, and advances in photomechanical and color printing welcomed in a golden age of the press, with over 70 daily newspapers circulating in Paris alone. Many of their powerful images are on display in Jerusalem today. There is the exposed cranium of a beak-nosed Jew, scowling from under his scraggly beard, his skull revealing his wicked thoughts: the veneration of money, his lechery, his rudeness. The famous poster from Sunday, January 13, 1895, hangs alongside, depicting an unbowed Dreyfus standing impassive as a soldier in full regalia breaks the Jewish officer's sword. The front page of L'Aurore from Thursday, January 13, 1898, showcases Zola's iconic letter to the president of La Republique of France.

Beitler, who gifted her collection of original documents to the University of Pennsylvania in 2002, first brought an international exhibition to Israel in 1994, 100 years after Dreyfus was first falsely accused. The technology of today facilitated the scanning of the present exhibition by JPEG files to Jerusalem, where they were reprinted more than a century after they first hit newsstands.

For years, the Dreyfus case has been studied annually at West Point and other military academies in the States.

Dr. Isabel Berman, an English as a foreign language coordinator in the government and communications programs at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya and a member of the U Penn Beitler Collection's advisory committee, hopes that the IDF will soon teach the lessons of the affair to Israeli soldiers.

Meanwhile, drop into the Begin Museum to view history for yourself; the exhibit runs until July 31. Chances are, at least until the outcome of its own defamation trial, you won't be watching Welcome to New York anytime soon at a
theater near you. It'll be useful to brush up on your Dreyfus before you do.

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NOTES: Some 40 broadsides, posters and videos documenting the drama are now on display at the Menachem Begin Heritage Center


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