LETTERS AND AUTOGRAPHS

The period of the Dreyfus Affair was an age of letters and of letterwriting. Autographs by figures on both sides of the Affair are included in the Lorraine Beiliter Collection. In a sense the Affair began with handwriting, in that the major piece of material evidence held against Dreyfus was the infamous "bordereau." Three items in the collection document the handwriting of both Dreyfus and Esterhazy with the aim of demonstrating the innocence of the condemned man. (L.C. 20, 21). The intriguing album, presumably published privately by Stock, compares the autograph of Esterhazy with that of the bordereau, page by page, line by line, letter by letter. (L.C. 9). Although undated, this study probably appeared during 1897 at a time when the Dreyfus family and others, such as Senator Scheurer-Kestner, were resolved to show by legal, in this case graphological, methods that Esterhazy was the author of the bordereau.

The personal involvement and effects of the tragic condemnation are movingly evoked in the letters of Alfred Dreyfus and his wife, Lucie. A selection was published in 1898 as the Lettres d'un innocent (Stock). Of the numerous translations, the English version, which appeared in New York in 1899, is in the collection. (L.C.8). Almost forty years later, Dreyfus' souvenirs were published by Grasset. (L.C.1). In 1998, Dreyfus' notebooks were published by Calmann-Lévy (Alfred Dreyfus, Carnets [1899-1907]). The copy in the collection bears the following autograph dedication to Lorraine Beiliter from Madame Simone Perl, grand-daughter of Alfred and Lucie:

May the souvenir of our grandfather, who through scorn and hatred, was able to oppose the bitter trials of his torturers with the will for the honor of his name, provide for all a lasting example of endurance under the worst of adversities.

Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart, who, in 1896, initiated the investigation which would establish the innocence of Dreyfus, is represented by three excellent autographs. Two of them are to a childhood friend and dreyfusard intellectual, Dr Georges Hervé. Written the day prior to J'Accuse..., !, and the colonel's arrest, the first contains the following moving passage: "I expect anything, but am not afraid. When one has justice and truth one is calm and strong, the estimation of good people is the greatest recompense one can be accorded." (L.C.13). The second was written in February from Picquart's cell at the military fort on the outskirts of Paris, Mont-Valérien. (L.C.14). A third letter is addressed to the future premier of the Republic, Georges Clemenceau, under whom Picquart would later serve as Minister for War. (L.C.6).

In the political sphere, convinced by his personal investigation of the Dreyfus case and aware of the findings of Picquart, Auguste Scheurer-Kestner, the Republican senator from Alsace, staunchly came to the aid of Dreyfus, ignoring potential dangers to his position as Vice-President of the Senate. (See L.C.36, L.37). On December 7, 1897, Scheurer-Kestner rose in the Senate to demand that the Dreyfus case be reopened and that the bordereau be reviewed by other experts. Following Esterhazy's acquittal, Scheurer-Kestner privately expressed his dissatisfaction to his son-in-law (L.C.38):

And so, I am beaten! the bordereau not by Esterhazy! I'm confounded! I cannot believe that the three experts have declared consciously, as was affirmed this morning, that the paper is not by Esterhazy. But anything is possible, and the improbable more often than I thought, as we have seen over the past two months. Poor Dreyfus is going to remain on Devil's Island, to the shame of the century and that of the Republic!

After twenty years of service in the French Senate, Scheurer-Kestner's mandate as Vice-President was revoked. A letter to Lucie documents the personal consideration and continued dreyfusard engagement of the great Republican senator in the League of the Rights of Man. (L.C.12).

An intriguing document from the sinister officer who had played a key role in Dreyfus' condemnation is in the collection. Du Paty de Clam writes in February 1898 to an official at the Zola trial to arrange seating for an audience which would be sympathetic to a return of "guilty." (L.C.15).

Alfred Dreyfus, his family, and the principal figures in the campaign for the revision received letters of support from all over the world. Of the many international testimonies the collection holds a manuscript letter to Captain Freystatter who, like Picquart, had gone against the grain of military esprit de corps by publicly offering evidence in favor of Dreyfus. (L.C.39).

In another letter, from the French ex-patriate community in San Francisco, appeals are made to the French government to remain faithful to national traditions and "defend the cause of liberty." (L.C.40).

An interesting autograph given to the Lorraine Beiliter Collection by Madame Perl appears on an example from Couturier's famous series of postcards: it is addressed to "Monsieur le Capitaine A. Dreyfus, à la Prison Militaire de Rennes" by the author who would later produce his own volume on the Affair, Armand Charpentier. (L.C.33). Also in the collection is the moving tribute by the brother of the great socialist leader Jean Jaures-Louis Jaures writes to thank Dreyfus for his attendance during the ceremony of translation of Jaures' remains to the Panthéon in November 1924 (L.C.4).