



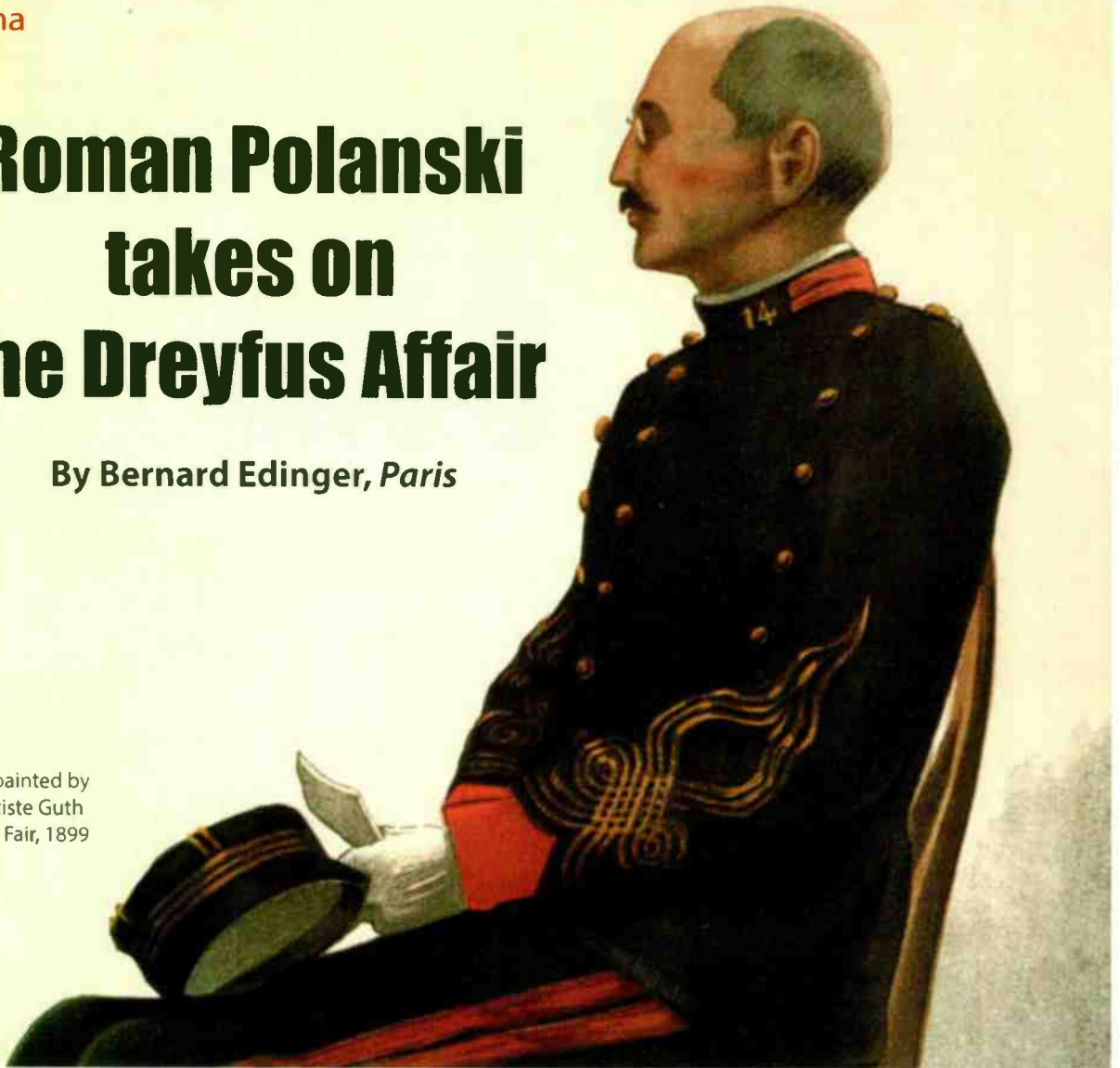
17.82x24.29	1/5	עמוד 32	the jerusalem report	01/12/2019	70969212-6
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Cinema

# Roman Polanski takes on the Dreyfus Affair

By Bernard Edinger, *Paris*

Dreyfus, painted by Jean Baptiste Guth for Vanity Fair, 1899



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**ROMAN POLANSKI**, the French-Polish film director whose personal life has been as dramatic as some of the masterpieces he has produced, has marked a new milestone in his career with the release in Paris on November 13 of his latest film, a lavish screen rendition of the Dreyfus Affair which split France in half at the end of the 19th century.

"J'Accuse" (English-language title: "An Officer and a Spy," based on a book of that name by Robert Harris) is the 35th film made by Polanski, whose extraordinary career began in Poland in 1955.

Now 86 and still as sharp as ever, Polanski was born to a Jewish father who survived concentration camps and a partly Jewish mother murdered at Auschwitz. He was only 10 years old when he escaped alone from the Krakow ghetto in 1943 to be hid-

den by local Catholics in the Polish countryside.

The subject of "J'Accuse" (I Accuse) is the case of French-Jewish army Captain Alfred Dreyfus, who, while serving on the French Army General Staff in 1894, was falsely accused of passing secret information to then-arch enemy Germany.

Dreyfus was sentenced to life imprisonment on the notorious Devil's Island penal colony off the coast of South America, where he was held in total isolation from 1895 to 1899, including periods when he was shackled to his bed with leg irons at night by guards forbidden from speaking to him.

In a controversy in which antisemitism played a leading part, France tore itself into two opposing camps for years over his guilt or innocence. He was freed after

a re-trial, but complete exoneration came only in 1906. He was then reinstated in the army and made a Knight of the Legion of Honor, France's national order, in the same compound where he was initially degraded in public.

Asking to be recalled to active duty in 1914 when he was 55, Dreyfus participated as a lieutenant-colonel in World War I. He died in 1935, aged 76.

"Big stories often make great films, and the Dreyfus Affair is an exceptional story," Polanski said in a statement included in the film's press kit. "The story of a man unfairly accused is always fascinating, but it is also very much a current issue, given the upsurge in antisemitism."

The film begins with a reenactment of the degradation ceremony on the huge, open



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parade ground of the École Militaire, the French Army war college in central Paris where the scene was filmed exactly as it took place there in January 1895.

For many viewers at a press preview of the film, this first scene was like a blow to the solar plexus, as powerful, impressive and as well made as the extraordinary bloody opening scenes of D-Day 1944 in Normandy in the Steven Spielberg classic "Saving Private Ryan."

The first shot in "J'Accuse" takes in the full width of the École Militaire with possibly close to a thousand soldiers standing shoulder-to-shoulder at attention in a single rank. Not a sound is heard until in the distance a small party advances toward the middle of the parade ground, their boots crunching on the cobblestones in unison.

The advancing soldiers are members of a guard detail in the middle of which stiffly marches the hapless Dreyfus played by French actor Louis Garrel.

When they reach the center of the grounds, a general on horseback reads Dreyfus's sentence while the condemned man stands to attention, listening to the order for him to be publicly stripped of his rank.

A helmeted warrant officer then rips Dreyfus's braid and insignia of rank from his shoulders and uniform, and breaks the officer's ceremonial sword across his knee.

Finally, unable to withstand the humiliation, Dreyfus suddenly shouts: "Soldiers! An innocent man is being degraded. Long live France! Long live the army!"

In the distance, crowds of civilian onlookers standing behind the spiked gates of the parade grounds shout back: "A mort! A mort" [Death! Death!]. Down with the traitor, down with the Jew!"

Among the onlookers at the real ceremony was Austrian journalist Theodor Herzl, who would later write, "The Dreyfus Affair made me a Zionist."

An assimilated Jew, Herzl said he was astounded to see the revival and perniciousness of antisemitism in France, the first European country to have granted its Jews full rights, in 1791.

A year later Herzl would publish *The Jewish State (Der Judenstaat)*, in which he wrote that only an independent Jewish state could provide freedom from persecution for Jews. Herzl founded the Zionist movement in Basel, Switzerland, in 1897, and died in 1904, 44 years before the creation of Israel.

Polanski's film does not mention Herzl

or Zionism. But antisemitism is strongly depicted in the film that does, however, abide by the historical truth, which was that the Jewish aspect of the affair always took back stage to the Left-Right nature of the struggle. This became a reenactment of the French Revolution of a century before, though without the bloodshed.

Windows were broken in some Jewish shops, Jews were socially ostracized (see sidebar on pg. 34-35), but the only fatalities came from a handful of duels between Jewish officers and their antisemitic counterparts. Contrary to popular belief, Dreyfus was far from being the only Jewish officer in the French Army, which at the time counted hundreds of Jewish officers, including five generals.

**THE ANTI-CLERICAL** Left emerged victorious from the Affair, since the army general staff was completely purged and a strict legal separation was enforced between church and state, which still exists in France.

"At the time there were anti-Dreyfusards but there were also [pro] Dreyfusards!" Polanski wrote in the film's publicity pack. "And Dreyfus was eventually proved innocent. So France eventually comes out of the affair relatively well, even if the case was only resolved after twelve years and almost plunged the country into civil war."

The promotion for the film recalls that the father of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas advised him when young to leave his native Lithuania for France, saying that "a country that can tear itself apart over the honor of a little Jewish captain is one to which a righteous person should hurry to go."

But the film's main character is not Dreyfus, nor his best-known defender, writer Émile Zola, who penned "J'Accuse," a scathing full-page article on page 1 in the *L'Aurore* newspaper on January 13, 1898, accusing the heads of the army general staff one by one for their individual involvement in Dreyfus's unfair imprisonment.

Rather, the film's hero, now largely forgotten by all but historians, is Lieutenant-Colonel Georges Picquart, the man who discovered the true culprit and risked his career, his freedom and his life to make the truth known.

Picquart is played by Jean Dujardin, a highly popular French actor who won the 2012 Oscar for Best Male Actor for his role in the film "The Artist." Dujardin acts su-



CHARLES PLATIAU / REUTERS

Film director Roman Polanski

perbly in "J'Accuse," and his performance will presumably be recognized as such by audiences outside France. In his native country, he is not known for "serious roles" but more for playing lovable but not too intelligent loudmouths and would-be Casanovas.

At age 40 the youngest lieutenant-colonel in the French army, Picquart in 1895 was appointed head of the army's shadowy "Statistics Section," the cover name for military counter-intelligence.

It was this department that first "broke" the Dreyfus case, when it intercepted the remains of an anonymous letter found in multiple torn pieces in the wastepaper basket of the military attaché at the German Embassy in Paris.

The French cleaning lady at the embassy would empty into the wide pocket of her apron such scraps of torn paper found in her employers' office (shredders did not yet exist), and would turn them over to French intelligence rather than burning them in the embassy furnace.

Counter-intelligence officers would then spend hours, if not days, trying to put the documents back together.

The Dreyfus case began when an unsigned handwritten note torn into little shreds of paper turned out to be an offer of information about a new French artillery piece and troop movements in and outside France.

The officer entrusted with investigating the case, Major Armand du Paty de Clam, was a self-styled handwriting expert who also turned out to be a dyed-in-the-wool antisemite.

He zoomed in on the names of more than a dozen officers on the general staff who might



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## Cinema

have had access to such information, and convinced himself – and all others – that the handwriting most resembled that of Captain Dreyfus, the sole Jew among the suspects.

The army general staff wanted to get the messy affair over with quickly, and they zeroed in on Dreyfus, although he had no motives to betray his country. Dreyfus was independently rich through his prosperous manufacturing family, and he was an especially ramrod-straight super-patriot resentful of Germany's recent annexation of his native province of Alsace.

Soon after Picquart took over his new job, he was amazed to discover that correspondence was continuing between the German military attaché and the true culprit, another French officer, Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, who turned out to have great need for money since he lived way above his means, richly entertaining what were then called expensive "women of small virtue."

Picquart took his findings to deputy chief of staff General Charles-Arthur Gonse, whose reaction was: "No! The army does not want another Dreyfus Affair!" Picquart replied, "This is not another Dreyfus Affair. This is *the* Dreyfus Affair, and Dreyfus is innocent!"

Gonse was adamant that in order to avoid a scandal and embarrassment to the army, the case would not be reopened. "What do you care if this Jew stays on Devil's Island?" he told Picquart. The latter replied with the once-famous words: "Mon general, what you are suggesting is abominable. I shall not take this secret to my grave!"

What happened next lasted more than a decade, and fills Polanski's film.

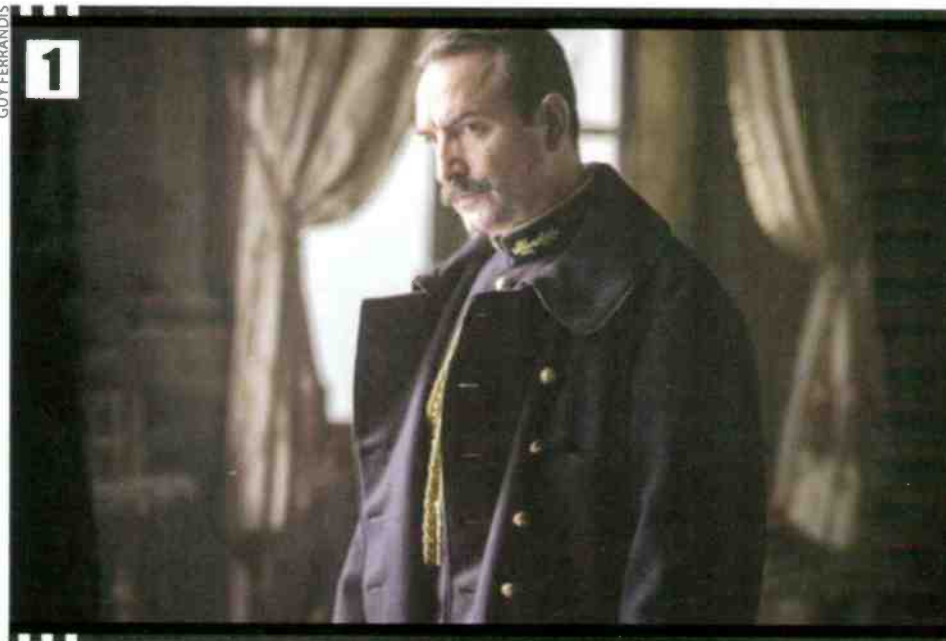
So, is it a good film worth seeing?

Well, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, or as the French say: "To each his bad taste."

This correspondent's personal advice is that it is a very good film with spectacular photography...but (except for the opening scene) it is not a Polanski masterpiece on a par with "Cul de Sac," "Repulsion," "The Tenant," "Tess," "Rosemary's Baby" or even a comedy like "The Fearless Vampire Killers."

The fact is, it is difficult to maintain suspense for more than two hours when everyone knows that Dreyfus was eventually exonerated in the end.

Oddly enough, the film ignores the 1906 ceremony when Dreyfus was honored and decorated at the same École Militaire where he had to undergo such a terrible experience



11 years before. Dreyfus, however, asked and was granted that the new ceremony be held in an inner courtyard and not on the parade ground, which he felt would have been too painful for him.

One person who certainly has not answered direct questions from the press about the film is Polanski himself, who keeps newsmen at a huge distance, probably because many would focus on his continuing legal troubles over the charges of allegedly raping a 13-year-old girl in California in 1977. After pleading guilty to part of the charges and serving 43 days in a California prison hospital pending trial, Polanski fled the United States in 1978 but charges are still open there against him.

Less than a week before "J'Accuse" was released in Paris, Valentine Monnier, a former model, accused Polanski of having raped her in 1975 when she was 18. Polanski's lawyer immediately denied the charge, which, in any case could not be brought to court because it took place too long ago. But feminist groups began an anti-Polanski campaign, which included preventing the film from being shown on two occasions. Media talk shows took up the subject for days but the public flocked to see Polanski's film in large numbers as soon as it was released.

When "J'Accuse" was presented in August at the Venice International Film Festival – where it won second prize – the presentation was completely overshadowed by controversy as Lucrecia Martel, president



of the jury, said she would not attend the gala premiere because she did not want to congratulate Polanski or offend the victims of sexual abuse.

Polanski was absent, apparently for fear of arrest on a US warrant which has sought his extradition since 1978. In 2009, he was arrested on a similar US warrant in Switzerland, where he had come to attend a tribute to his lifetime achievements. He was under house arrest in the Swiss Alps for months until a local court allowed him to return to France, which he has not left since.



18.78x22.79	4/5	35 עמוד	the jerusalem report	01/12/2019	70969216-0
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GUY FERRANDIS

- 1 George Picquart, played by French actor Jean Dujardin, in Polanski's new film
- 2 Picquart (on the left) and Dreyfus (on the right), played by French actor Louis Garrel
- 3 Picquart making his case in court
- 4 A newspaper boy holds up the paper with the famous headline on which the movie is based



GUY FERRANDIS

Polanski also caused controversy because the press kit distributed at the Venice festival quoted him as telling French writer Pascal Bruckner: "In the story [of Dreyfus], I sometimes find moments I have experienced myself. I can see the same determination to deny the facts and condemn me for things I have not done. Most of the people who harass me do not know me and know nothing about the case... I must admit that I am familiar with many of the workings of the apparatus of persecution shown in the film, and that has clearly inspired me."

Bruckner, who is a friend of Polanski's, certainly did not help calm the situation because in his question, he described the filmmaker as a Jew formerly hunted by the Nazis before being persecuted by Stalinists in Communist Poland, and who was now the victim of "present-day neo-feminist McCarthysm...chasing you all over the world and trying to prevent the screening of your films...and getting you expelled from the Oscars Academy."

All the above statements were dropped from the press kit prepared for the Paris

release of the picture.

One person who was shocked by reading such statements was Yael Perl Ruiz, great-granddaughter of Alfred Dreyfus.

"I am not at all at ease with Polanski's attitude when he starts comparing himself with Alfred Dreyfus," she told *The Jerusalem Report*. "To compare his case with that of Dreyfus is offensive. I agree that he is a genius, and it is not up to me to judge him on other things in his past, but I do not agree at all that he has a right to compare himself with Captain Dreyfus."



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Dreyfus's great-granddaughter, Yaël Perl Ruiz (left), with Beit Hatfutsot museum curator Simona Di Nepi

A recently retired fashion designer, Perl Ruiz is one of the most active defenders of her great-grandfather's memory.

"My grandmother, who I knew very well since she died in 1981, was Jeanne Dreyfus, the daughter of Alfred Dreyfus and his wife, Lucie. My mother, Simone, knew her grandfather well since she was 18 when he died. My mother was the eldest of Jeanne's four children, who also included my aunt Madeleine Levy, a Resistance fighter arrested by the Nazis and killed at Auschwitz death camp at age 25," she said.

Several other members of the Dreyfus family also died in concentration camps. The captain's great-nephew, Jean-Pierre Reinach, died particularly tragically. An officer in General de Gaulle's Free French forces, he parachuted into Occupied France on a clandestine mission in 1942. But he was killed when the British aircraft dropping him flew too low, and his parachute did not have time to deploy properly.

Captain Dreyfus and his wife also had a son, Pierre, who fought as a captain in World War I and who was killed in a civilian plane crash in 1946.

Perl Ruiz was one of the main organizers of an exhibit and symposium about Captain Dreyfus held at the Diaspora Museum in Tel Aviv in 2014, and again a main promoter of the erection of a statue of Dreyfus near Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv last year.

"I've remained very close to Israel ever since I came as a volunteer for 18 months at Mishmar Hayarden around 1970," she said.

"I've also twice come back as a volunteer with Sar-El, the civilian program that supports Tzahal."

As for her grandfather, she asked rhetorically: "Does the name Dreyfus still ring a bell in France? It depends for whom. But the Dreyfus Affair is taught in all French schools, and most of the French do know about it. They know he was innocent."

Turning to present-day politics, Perl Ruiz said, "Today, antisemitism in France is the work of Islamic extremists, not of the ultra-right as in the past. This radical Islam stands for the destruction of all Jews and cannot be compared with the Dreyfus Affair.

"I cannot imagine another Dreyfus Affair in France today. The French are not antisemitic though, of course, there are some antisemites. But the government is certainly not antisemitic. Alas, elsewhere in Europe there is a frightening return of the extreme-right coming to power in several countries with ideas that are not peaceful and which are rather antisemitic.

Would Captain Dreyfus have been a Zionist?

"It's difficult to say because people did not see things in the same manner during his lifetime. I'm pretty certain he would not have moved to Israel, but perhaps, had he still been alive during the Shoah, he might have seen things differently. What is pretty certain is that at the time of Israel's creation, he would have been very proud of the Israeli Army. What is certain is that he was extremely patriotic and extremely French." ■