Dreyfus –
The love story

By HAGAR HAYU

A new exhibition opening on Tuesday at Beit Hatfutsot in Tel Aviv reveals the unknown part of the Dreyfus Affair: the fascinating personal story of those who believed in Alfred Dreyfus’s innocence and worked behind the scenes on his behalf. In addition to the legal aspects of the case and the stubborn struggle to obtain his acquittal, the exhibition raises the discussion regarding terms such as “anti-Semitism,” “racism” and “persecution.”

The exhibition follows the story of the Dreyfus family from the beginning of the affair in 1894, through the trial and his ultimate acquittal. It encompasses the lives of the family during the two world wars up until the present.

Alfred Dreyfus was the first Jewish officer in the French army. He was a true French patriot and a loyal citizen. At the end of 1894, he was accused of handing over secret documents to the Imperial German military. Accused of treason, he was sentenced to life imprisonment at a secret trial and was sent to Devil’s Island. Meanwhile, it was discovered that the real traitor was Major Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy, but the General Staff refused to reconsider its judgment.

Dreyfus and his family never gave up hope and kept up their battle until Dreyfus was proven innocent. His family had the support of a large group of intellectuals, which included French writer Emile Zola. His brave article “J’accuse ...!” almost ruined his career and personal life.

On display in the exhibition, for the first time in Israel, are personal items, such as Dreyfus’s wife’s prayer book; an embroidered carpet representing the Jewish holidays made by a 10-year-old girl, from the Dreyfus family collection; and rare family photos from the family album. The items have been loaned to the exhibition by the Jewish Museum in Paris and by Yaël Perl Ruiz, the great-granddaughter of Alfred Dreyfus.

The items on display offer a personal aspect to the story. The exhibition includes letters from the private Dreyfus family collection, courtesy of the National Library of Israel. The correspondence includes love letters that Alfred sent to his wife, Lucie, while he was imprisoned on Devil’s Island. One of them was selected by The New York Times as one of the 50 greatest love letters of all times. The letters will be dramatized by two actors as an audio presentation.

The family story is interwoven with the story of the Jews in France and their integration into French society and culture. The focus of the exhibition turns to the story of Jewish artists and philosophers who were leading lights of French culture during that period.

The exhibition concludes with a short documentary film that deals with the various ways descendants of Alfred Dreyfus and Jews in France implement their French-Jewish identity. Thus the cycle that began with the struggle of a single Jew to prove his loyalty as a Frenchman comes full circle with the challenge of his descendants to realize their Jewishness.

Emile Zola’s great-granddaughter, Martine Le Blond-Zola, will take part in the opening event. March 11 through September.