

In 19th-century France, all clergy wore priestly garb. Rabbi Zadoc Kahn in his official chief rabbi's robes, including the decorations he'd received for his social activism, 1904



WITNESS FOR THE DEFENSE

Rabbi Zadoc Kahn stood firm against the rising tide of French anti-Semitism following the Dreyfus trial. Accomplished philosopher and fearless Zionist, Kahn was proud to count among his friends not only Baron Rothschild, but France's most notorious "traitor" | **Tamar Hayardeni**

Rabbi Zadoc Kahn was born February 18 (4 Adar), 1839, in Mommenheim, a small town in Alsace, in northeastern France. The modest local synagogue still stands, having survived Nazi occupation, and testifies to the small Jewish community (fewer than two hundred) that existed here in the 19th century.

Kahn's family was extremely religious. His mother descended from a French rabbinic dynasty; her father, Rabbi Jacob Meyer, served as chief rabbi of the Lower Rhine Valley and sat on Napoleon's Grand Sanhedrin (see "Napoleon's Jewish Court," *Segula* 29). Great expectations therefore surrounded Zadoc, who was sent at the tender age of eleven to study with Rabbi Itzig Baer in the nearby village of Bischheim. The young genius quickly moved on to the town of Brumath, where Rabbi Salomon Lévy prepared him to qualify for the rabbinical school in Metz. At age nineteen, he relocated to Paris together with the school.

Ahead of His Time

Kahn's career track was extraordinarily speedy. Ordained at age twenty-three, he was snapped up to head his rabbinic institute's Talmud Torah, educating the cream of French religious youth. Four years later he was appointed deputy chief rabbi of Paris. He taught and researched Talmudic literature, publishing an outstanding paper – translated into English and Hebrew – on slavery in Judaism. His erudition and oratory earned him the position of chief rabbi of Paris when Rabbi Lazare (Eliezer) David Isidor stepped down in 1867. The appointment required a special dispensation, as Kahn was not yet thirty.

Rabbi Zadoc was soon as famous for his charity work as for his learning. Fleeing pogroms in southwest Russia (mostly in today's Ukraine) in the 1880s, Jewish immigrants flooded Germany and France. The new chief rabbi responded by setting up an orphanage and agricultural school for boys from poor families and a



Lawyer Adolphe Crémieux, founder of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, is considered French Jewry's most outstanding 19th-century leader. Jean-Jules Antoine Lecomte du Nouÿ, oil on canvas, 1878

Flyleaf of *Slavery*, the treatise that established Rabbi Kahn's reputation

shelter for young women. In 1879, these initiatives won him France's highest accolade, the French Legion of Honor Award.

Politician Adolphe Crémieux (1796–1880) was the acknowledged leader of the French Jewish community in this era. Founder of the Alliance Israélite Universelle Jewish solidarity organization, Crémieux also served as French minister of justice, combatting anti-Jewish discrimination. His achievements showed just how deeply France's revolutionary emancipation of its Jews had penetrated. Crémieux labored tirelessly on behalf of his coreligionists, representing them faithfully on many levels, but after his death, he had no heir – he had been totally secular, and his sons had converted to Christianity.

Rabbi Kahn stepped unhesitatingly into Crémieux's shoes, establishing the Society for Jewish Studies and producing its first



journal, *Revue des Études Juives* (Jewish Studies Review), in 1880. (Still published every six months, the *Revue* is one of the oldest active journals of Jewish scholarship and remains a respected resource.)

Ben-Yehuda and the Barons

Rabbi Kahn's complex communal and economic safety net helped absorb the influx of eastern European refugees into the Jewish community. Other philanthropic organizations, especially the Alliance Israélite, opposed his activities as a drain on the communal purse, but Kahn insisted that the Alliance live up to its motto, "All Israel are fellows one to another." (This body's Hebrew name, *Kiah*, was a contraction of those very words.) At the same time, he sought a permanent solution to worldwide anti-Semitism.

Turning to Baron Maurice de Hirsch, a German Jewish millionaire transplanted to France, Rabbi Zadoc suggested that he give up on rebuilding Russia's devastated Jewish communities. Since the Russian government was clearly more than happy to see these Jews go, a different strategy was urgently required. Thus, under Kahn's influence, Hirsch began setting up agricultural colonies for the refugees



Rabbi Lazare David Isidor speaking in the Paris Central Synagogue early in 1867, the year of his retirement. His replacement, Rabbi Kahn, is leaning on the cantor's podium at right



Much more than mere acquaintances. Left to right: Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, and Baron Maurice de Hirsch

elsewhere – mainly in Argentina – with some success.

Meanwhile Rabbi Zadoc joined the fledgling Hibbat Zion movement, heading its Paris branch. Determined to resettle persecuted Jewish communities in self-sufficient agricultural villages in the land of Israel, he brought together another illustrious friend of his, Baron Edmond de Rothschild, and Lithuanian Zionist Rabbi Samuel Mohilever. Their historic 1882 meeting launched the Baron's extensive activities in the Holy Land, beginning with the funding of the

village of Ekron, later renamed Mazkeret Batya in honor of Rothschild's mother. Rabbi Kahn's constant encouragement was crucial to the Baron's support for these pioneering Zionist settlements. Rothschild's involvement progressed from one-time gifts to adoption of most of the colonies as their permanent patron, providing the farmers with a stipend they could count on even when crops failed.

Another Zionist project that excited Rabbi Zadoc was Eliezer Ben-Yehuda's effort to revive the Hebrew language. The rabbi urged Ben-Yehuda to complete

When Ben-Yehuda's Hebrew dictionary project ran into financial difficulties, Rabbi Kahn enlisted Baron Rothschild

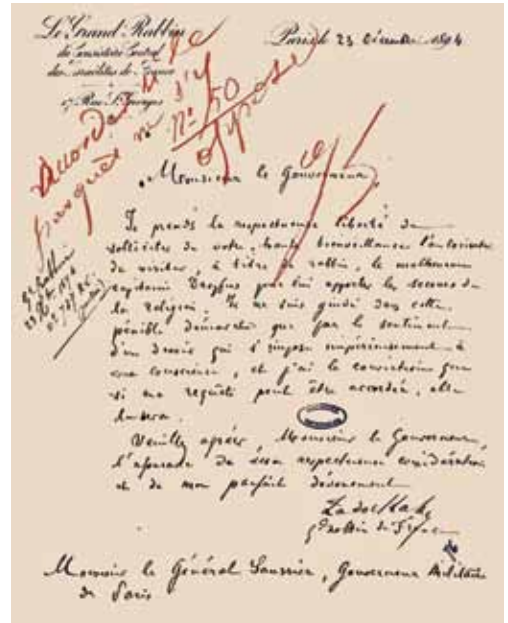


Alfred Dreyfus

Portrait of Rabbi Kahn made up of the text of his inauguration oath. Postcard from 1889



Rabbi Kahn's request to meet with Dreyfus immediately after his conviction. The letter is marked boldly in red, "Refused"



the first modern Hebrew dictionary, and when the initiative ran into financial difficulties, Kahn once again enlisted Baron Rothschild. In his preface to the introductory volume explaining the method and purpose of his *Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, Ben-Yehuda acknowledged both men:

This is the place to express my deep thanks and gratitude, from the bottom of my heart, to all those who helped me in my endeavor, whether spiritually, morally, or materially ... and in Europe, first and foremost, the generous Baron Edmond de Rothschild, who supported me for many years ... so I could continue my work; and Rabbi Zadoc Kahn, who facilitated the labor of compiling the dictionary with all his might. (Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, *The Complete Dictionary of Ancient and Modern Hebrew*, main introduction, p. 52 [Hebrew])

Sticking to His Guns

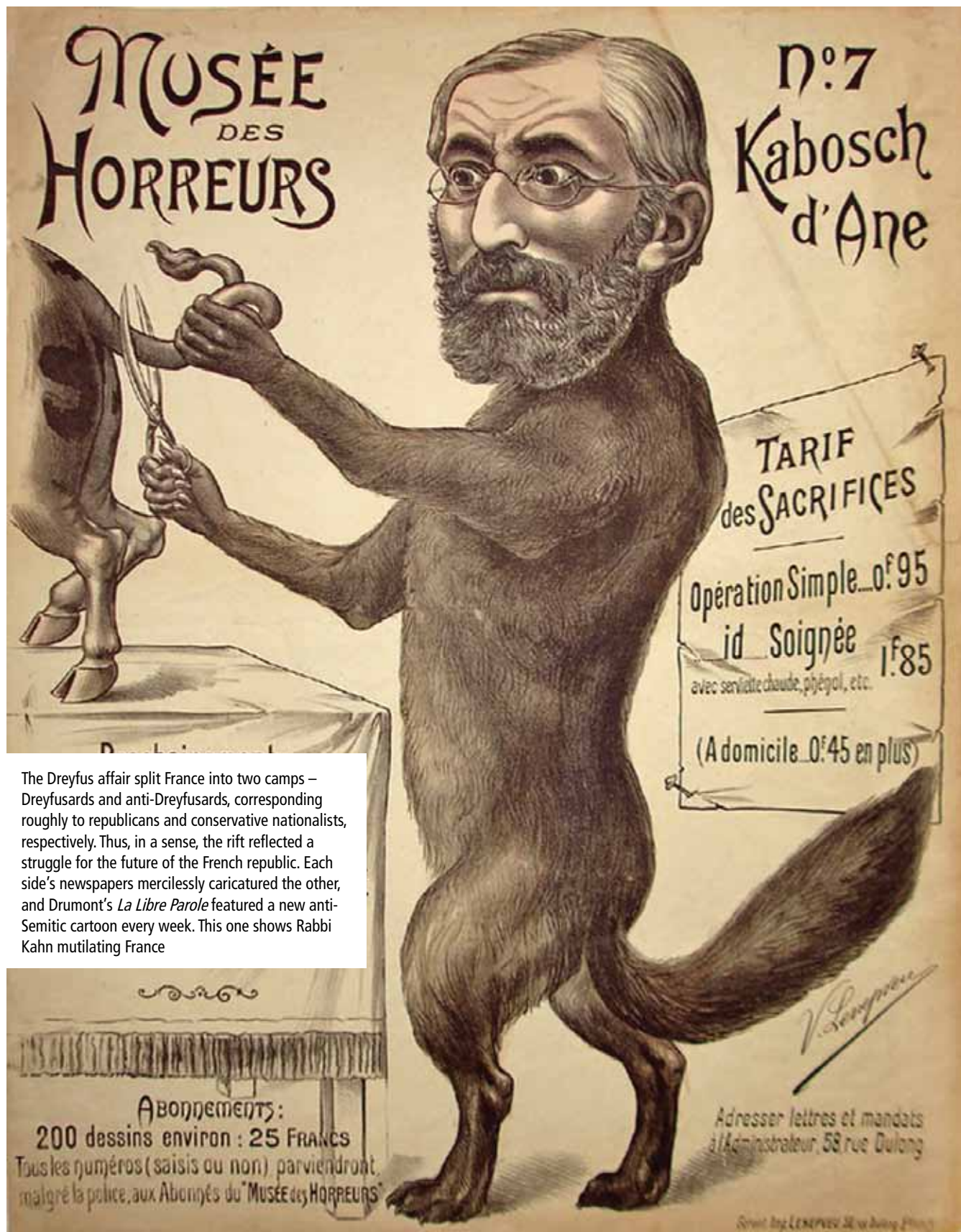
In 1889, at age fifty, Zadoc Kahn was chosen by the Central Consistory of French Jewry to be chief rabbi of France. Once again he was relatively young for the post. In this government position, he drew a state salary and donned the

official robes of the clergy, similar to those worn by the Christian patriarchs. Rabbi Kahn took his new responsibilities very seriously, tapping the country's preeminent rabbis to translate the Bible into modern French. He also oversaw and contributed to the compilation of a French Jewish encyclopedia.

In 1895, Rabbi Kahn's undisputed leadership suffered a severe blow when he publicly expressed unswerving support for French Jewish captain Alfred Dreyfus, accused of spying for Germany. Kahn knew Dreyfus personally from Alsace and had even officiated at his wedding in 1890. Convinced of his friend's innocence, Rabbi Zadoc insisted on testifying as a character witness, affirming Dreyfus' honesty and loyalty to France. The rabbi claimed, correctly, that the French press had condemned the young man even before the trial was over, giving in to popular anti-Semitism.

Even after Dreyfus was convicted of treason, Rabbi Kahn stuck by him. The trial had been a foregone conclusion and a travesty of justice, the rabbi said, asking to visit Dreyfus in prison. The request was denied. Édouard Drumont, a journalist and author who ran an anti-Semitic newspaper called *La Libre Parole* (Free Speech), attacked Rabbi Kahn in a

After Rabbi Kahn testified to Dreyfus' honesty, an anti-Semitic journalist attacked him in print, caricaturing the rabbi as a pig

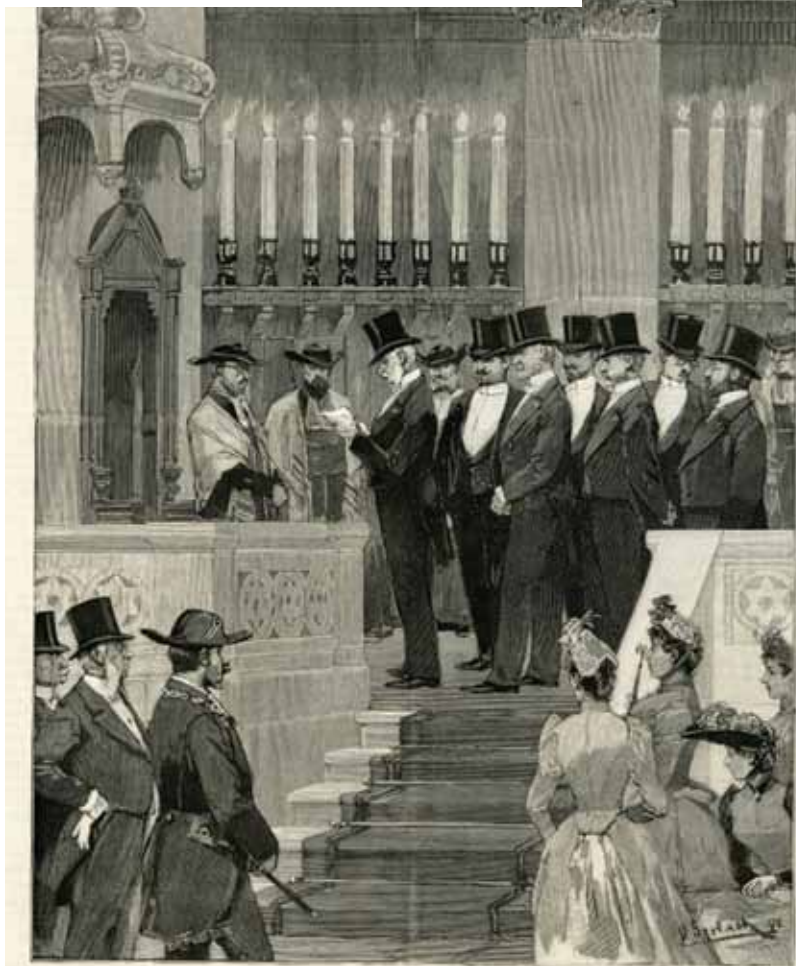


The Dreyfus affair split France into two camps – Dreyfusards and anti-Dreyfusards, corresponding roughly to republicans and conservative nationalists, respectively. Thus, in a sense, the rift reflected a struggle for the future of the French republic. Each side's newspapers mercilessly caricatured the other, and Drumont's *La Libre Parole* featured a new anti-Semitic cartoon every week. This one shows Rabbi Kahn mutilating France



As far as anti-Semites were concerned, Rabbi Kahn stood for all Jews. Caricature of a Free Masonry plot to control the world, with Rabbi Kahn crowning French prime minister Pierre Waldeck-Rousseau. *La Bastille*, January 1903

Rabbi Zadoc Kahn with Baron Edmond de Rothschild and other noted congregants at the main synagogue in Paris. Illustration from *Le Monde* magazine, April 1890



series of op-eds, branding him a traitor and publishing humiliating caricatures depicting the chief rabbi as a pig. This smear campaign led to demands that Kahn's state salary be withheld, and he was widely denounced as another Jewish turncoat.

The French rabbinate begged Rabbi Kahn to keep quiet and minimize the damage to the French Jewish community, at least until the scandal had died down. True to his first name, which means "just," Rabbi Zadoc objected to this small-mindedness, maintaining that the rabbis had nothing to be ashamed of. He viewed his belief in Dreyfus as part and parcel of a wider struggle against rising anti-Semitism in France.

As much as Rabbi Kahn's endorsement of Dreyfus had cost him in status, he was compensated by a surge in popularity when the captain was cleared of all blame seven years after his retrial and pardon in 1899. Rabbi Zadoc's firm stand struck a chord not only in Jewish circles; the French government, too, appreciated his stubborn pursuit of justice and in 1901 promoted him to the rank of officer in the French Legion of Honor.

A Neighborhood of His Own

Returning to Paris after covering the Dreyfus trial, Theodor Herzl began seeking to realize his dream of a Jewish state. Rabbi Kahn's selfless efforts on behalf of Jews in the Holy Land piqued the journalist's curiosity and raised his hopes of finding an ally in – of all places – the French religious Jewish establishment. The two corresponded, and Herzl even met with him, asking that Rabbi Kahn support political Zionism and encourage French Jews to emigrate to Ottoman Palestine. Herzl recorded in his diary on November 16, 1895:

Conversation with Chief Rabbi Zadoc Kahn. I read him the *Address to the Rothschilds* [later published as *The Jewish State*].... Zadoc Kahn seemed to listen to my two-hour reading with interest. Afterwards he also professed

Theodor Herzl tried to rally Rabbi Kahn to the cause of political Zionism, but in vain

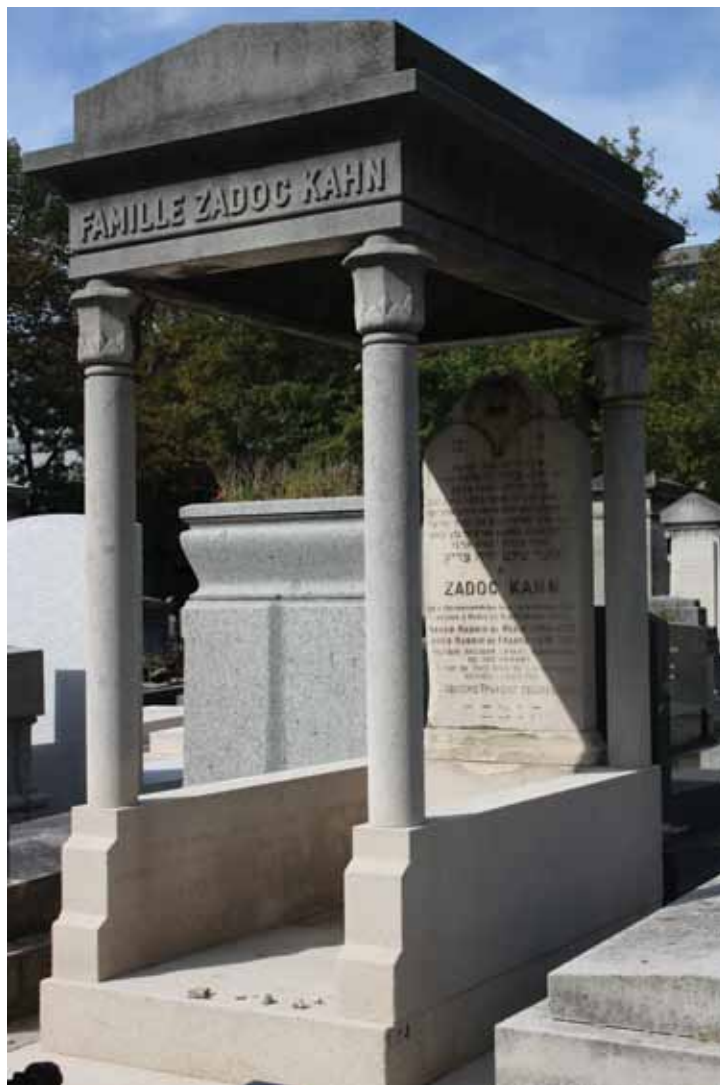
himself to be a Zionist. But he said that a Frenchman's "patriotism" also had its claims. Yes, a man has to choose between Zion and France. Zadoc Kahn is of the breed of little Jews. I shall be surprised if I get any serious help from him. (*The Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, trans. Harry Zohn [New York, 1960], vol. 1, p. 272)

Herzl's disappointment and swift judgment seem a little harsh considering the toxic atmosphere enveloping French Jewry at the time. As a patriotic Frenchman, Rabbi Kahn had little choice but to oppose a sovereign Jewish state. Even among Zionists, the Holy Land was generally seen at this stage only as a refuge for persecuted Jews. French Jews therefore thought they should stay put, remaining loyal to the republic.

On Friday night, December 9 (11 Kislev), 1905, Rabbi Zadoc Kahn passed away in Paris at age sixty-six. He was buried in the Jewish section of Paris' famous Montparnasse Cemetery, alongside France's intellectual and artistic elite: Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Guy de Maupassant, and Samuel Beckett, among others. In 1935, Alfred Dreyfus was laid to rest there too. When news of Rabbi Zadoc's death reached the colonists he'd supported in the land of Israel, a day of mourning was declared and memorial services were held.

Albert Abraham Antébi, a Zionist activist close to French Jewry, had been trying to name a Jerusalem neighborhood for Rabbi Kahn. Now his efforts finally bore fruit: in the winter of 1906, Nahalat Zadok was built on the edge of Jerusalem's picturesque Nahlaot district. The new area was to house Ashkenazic immigrants from Rabbi Kahn's community, and French is still widely spoken there.

Church and state were officially



Rabbi Kahn's grave in Montparnasse Cemetery

Photo: GFreihalter

separated in France not long after Rabbi Zadoc's death, making him the country's last government-approved chief rabbi. He was survived by his wife, three sons, and three daughters, the youngest of whom married Rabbi Julien Weil, who served as chief rabbi of Paris and wrote a biography of his father-in-law. French Jews still take pride in Rabbi Kahn's memory, remembering him as a proud, brave Jew and a true leader whose legacy is studied to this day. □



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