

DOCUMENTS OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

THE EXECUTION
OF
GUSTAVE CHAUDEY
AND THREE GENDARMES



EXÉCUTION DE GUSTAVE CHAUDEY

[WORKING TRANSLATION BY SHAWN P. WILBUR, 2014]

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PREFACE

If I only consulted the desire of sincere republicans to erase from their memories some funereal days during which, alas! so many people suffered, and following which so many suffered more, I would begin by pushing from my mind a crime committed against a publicist, one of our brothers in the Republic whom I personally held in high esteem. But I do not consider as belonging to myself alone what History can place in my during the course of my experience existence, et, ma parole à part, I would regard it as a theft made from historical criticism to keep to myself what was left to me by Préau de Védél, who was shot for having participated in the murder of Gustave Chaudey.

The tale of Préau de Védél is, incidentally, consistent with his deposition before the council of war, but it is more complete and more detailed.

Here is how I collected what I publish:

In 1871, I through myself into the insurrection when it broke out; is shared with the Parisians some of the sentiments that gave rise to it.

Once in the current, I followed it, not wishing to leave it before the certain danger and increasing at every hour, retained by an absurd self-esteem, since I soon condemned some acts that would surpass all that I had supposed possible.

Bit by bit, as I will publish the pieces that I have in hand and that I do not want to produce so long as they could harm certain people, I will explain myself at greater length regarding the Paris Commune. Each thing must only come in its time. That is sufficient explanations for the moment, and in order to make it understood how, made prisoner on May 24, in the morning, at the composition of the RAPPEL, how, led out to be shot with some writers and around twenty of our typographers, all guilty of having written or printed a republican sheet, I escaped death; and how I was able to meet, in prison, at the ambulance of Satory, with Préau de Védél.¹

Préau was a boy around a meter and four-fifths tall. He was thin, nervous, slightly stooped, very brown; his long hair curly, his beard silky and well trimmed, his nose thin, his eyes big and bright, the expression intelligent.

The prisoners were all under capital convictions, and, they showed towards one another, when they did not know each other incidentally, a mistrust that the events sometimes justified. I was uncommunicative. Despite some rebuffs, Préau attached himself to me as well as to a companion in misfortune, Fourmage, my devoted friend, and we promptly became interested in him.

He told us that his case had been investigated, but that the instructing officer having asked for a order of dismissal in his favor, they had substituted another office. — “They didn’t have, they couldn’t have,” he said to us, “any proof against me. I was there. I saw Chaudey fall. After? Does that make me a criminal? They claim that I shot him. It is false, I swear to you. but there is only me that they can make atone for the crime, and they will kill me.”

I asked him why he was at Pélagey? If the Commune had given him a task?

He responded that he was detained at the moment of the insurrection, that he did not want to profit from the circumstances in order to escape and had continued to keep the records of the court registry.

— “Why were you under lock and key?” I asked him.

He remained silent. It did not seem appropriate to insist.

Someone told me a few days later that had been convicted of breach of faith. I asked him if that was true, because it was painful for me not to see him as a political prisoner without blemish in his private life.

— “No,” he responded, “I was there for assault and battery against a substitute prosecutor. As for what you want...”

he stopped.

— “Yes,” he said, “and if you would known... After all! what does it matter!... what does it matter!... one cannot leave his mother to starve.”

The love of his mother! It was obviously the motivation of the life of this poor man of around thirty years of age. He only thought of her. He spoke of her only with tears in his eyes, sobs in his throat, and he spoke of her constantly. He cried:

— “Me, it is nothing. I will be dead. But what will become of my mother?”

And when he could see her, joy came out of all his pores.

The filial love was such with this unfortunate boy, that never, my friend Fourmage and I, have we spoken of Préau without thinking of his mother, dead, fortunately, perhaps, from the shots that struck her son, and the effect that that love produced in us always prevented us from being able to imagine that the one who possessed it in his heart was capable of perpetrating the abominable crime for which they shot him.

However, the second instructing officer discovered some proof of his culpability more convincing than those discovered by the first; there was enough to establish the judgment of a council of war, and Préau de Védél, condemned to death, bravely saluted the bullets at the post of Satory and fell.

Before leaving the ambulance, he left me an account of the night of the 23 to the 24 May 1871 at Sainte-Pélagie, which I promised to publish as soon as possible. He assured me that, save for some figures, like those of the age of the gendarmes, which he did not recall, all that he told me was scrupulously exact, and as I personally knew the two main characters of the drama, Gustave Chaudey and especially Raoul Rigault, whom one of my friends had so well baptized a *sinister gamin*, I have always accepted that Préau had told the truth.

I also made, according to his indications, a drawing of the execution that gives the position occupied by the actors of the drama, taking account of the grouping of the persons in the midst of which we have to leave the necessary space to glimpse Chaudey. It is this drawing, redrawn with talent for Tauzin, which is reproduced at the beginning of the brochure.

THE EXECUTION OF GUSTAVE CHAUDEY AND OF THREE GENDARMES

THE ACCOUNT OF PRÉAU DE VÉDEL

May 23, 1871, at exactly eleven o'clock at night, I wasⁱⁱ part of a game of cards in the office of the director of the prison of Sainte-Pélagie, with Benn, clerk, and Clément, under-clerk, when the night-warden at the front gate, Berthier, came to announce the arrival of citizen Raoul Rigault.ⁱⁱⁱ

Benn descended immediately to meet the Prosecutor of the Commune.

Clément and I, thinking that the citizen Rigault came for a communication and that he would go up to the office of the director,^{iv} who was in bed, we left by a back door, and, arriving on the ground floor, we entered the registry.

Rigault was there with a secretary^v and a police *commissaire*.

Benn was with them.

At the moment when we entered, Rigault said:

— "We come to execute Gustave Chaudey and the three gendarmes who are here. Give me the prison register that so I may know their names and call them."

Benn showed him the prison register.

He only found Chaudey's name there.^{vi}

Rigault asked me then if I knew where the names of the gendarmes had been recorded.

I immediately passed him the register on which they were recorded.

Rigault kept that register in front of him and sent eight guardsmen and an officer to look in the prison post.

He sent Berthier to seek the citizen Chaudey.^{vii}

While Berthier carried out his commission, Rigault took a piece of paper from his writing-desk and dictated the following statement:

In the presence of ourselves, member of the Commune,
prosecutor of the aforementioned Commune,

Have been summoned:

Gustave Chaudey, age of..... years, ex-deputy to the
mayor of Paris;^{viii}

Pacotte..... age of..... years, ex-republican guard;

Capdevielle, age of..... years, ex-republican guard;

Bonzon, age of..... years, ex-republican guard;

To whom we have declared,

While the Versaillais entered Paris;

That there friends shot at us from the windows;

That it is time to be finished with these schemes;

That consequently they would be immediately executed
in the court of this prison.

Paris, May 23, 1871.

The Prosecutor of the Commune,
(Signed) RAOUL RIGAULT.

*The Personal Secretary of the Prosecutor
of the Commune,*
(Signed) SLOM.

It was while this record was being written that Gustave Chaudey entered.

The following dialogue was immediately established between Raoul Rigault and him:

RIGAULT. — Citizen Gustave Chaudey I inform you that you will be executed immediately as a hostage.

CHAUDEY. — I must suppose that you are joking with me, for I do not know why you would shoot me.

RIGAULT. — I am not joking any more than you were, when, on January 22, you fired on us, from the windows of the Hôtel-de-Ville.^{ix}

CHAUDEY. — But, Raoul Rigault... citizen Raoul Rigault, what you say this is not serious, for you know very well that I had no military power, and consequently could have commanded nothing of the troops, having only civil authority.

RIGAULT.. — You will be shot.

SLOM (*speaking at the same time as Rigault*). — It was you who gave the order to sweep the square.

CHAUDEY. — Citizen Raoul Rigault, have you thought well about what you are about to do? You will have me shot! What good will that do you? Have you considered that you will compromised the sanctity de la cause that we all defend? For, in the end, you cannot question my republican opinions. You know very well that I only want one thing: the Federal Republic, my writings aim for that end, all...

RIGAULT (*interrupting*). — Do you want to confess?

CHAUDEY. — Don't kid about this matter; you know what I think.

RIGAULT. — Enough! Not so many remarks! You will be shot! You have been identified as guilty of having fired on the people, and it has been decided, yesterday and the day before yesterday, in the Council of the Commune, that you will be executed.

CHAUDEY. — Do you want to suspect my execution, I will provide you news of Blanqui ?

RIGAULT. — You know well that Blanqui is dead, that he has been murdered. So, you will be shot!

CHAUDEY. — Well! You will see how a republican can die!

Rigault asked if the firing squad had arrived, and, at the affirmative response given to him by brigadier Gentil, he rose and said:

— "Go on! March!"

And, turning to me, he order me to lead the squad under the outer walls. But, as I did not wish to miss any of what was said, I transmitted the order to the guard Berthier, who took a lantern and left.

We followed in the following order: the police commissaire, Slom, Raoul Rigault, Chaudey, Clément (who had taken a chassepot), Gentil, Benn and myself.

No word was spoken until the arrival in the *chemin de ronde* [probably the drive just inside the outer walls]. There, Chaudey said to Rigault :

— “Raoul Rigault, I have a wife, a child.”

RIGAULT. — What is that to me?

CHAUDEY. — I will show you how a republican can die.

Chaudey went to stand under the lantern hung on the opposite wall, facing the firing squad.

The officer commanding the squad having placed himself behind his men and making no gesture of command, Rigault drew his saber and commanded:

— “Present, arms!”

CHAUDEY. — Long live the Republic!

RIGAULT. — Aim!

CHAUDEY. — Long live the Republic!

RIGAULT. — Fire!

Chaudey fell face down on the ground.

Several of those who were there shouted:

— “The *coup de grâce!* The *coup de grâce!*”

Deputy clerk Clement advanced four or five steps and fired.

Chaudey, rising, as if by a violent aspiration, let out another weak cry of “Long live the Republic!”

From all sides they cried:

— “Finish him! Finish him!”

PRÉAU. — So finish him then, the poor wretch! You don't have the right to make him suffer!

Clément, who had reloaded his weapon, then approached closer and fired, but Gentil had already discharged his revolver in Chaudey's ear.

Rigault and the others withdrew. I remained beside the corpse of the victim. The men of the firing squad were dumbfounded, trembling.

They said:

— “So what have we done? — What work have we done? — Let's go.”

PRÉAU. — Ah! My poor friends, you still have three to kill.

I returned to the Registry, where I found all the men I have spoken about. They awaited the police that Rigault had sent for.

I warned Rigault of the mood of the men of the firing squad.

Slom went out immediately and gave them a speech to encourage them to continue their task. I was not able to grasp all his words from inside; I do recall, however, this phrase:

“We are making just reprisals for the murder of Versailles.”

The gendarmes entered, preceded by Berthier.

Rigault asked their names and told them:

— “You will be shot.”

The gendarmes cried:

— “Why? — What do you mean? — What have we done? — We just want to go home.”

RIGAULT. — Yes, in order to fuck us with rifle shots! Well! Before that we’re going to fuck you. Let’s go, forward, march!

We returned to the covered walk.

The three gendarmes were placed against the wall; again, Rigault gave the command to fire.

One of the gendarmes fell dead; another, who had hidden his head with his hands, was only wounded; the third escaped in the *chemin de ronde*.

Clément and a *fédéré* approached those who had fallen and gave them the *coup de grâce*.

The one who had fled was pursued. Slom to the revolver of the *commissaire* de police and walked in front of Rigault. Gentil followed them.

The gendarme was found in a sentry box, at the end of the *chemin de ronde*.

Rigault shouted to Slom not to kill him there and to “bring him back to die with the others.”

The gendarme was brought back. For the third time, Rigault gave the command to fire, and the last victim fell on the others. One *fédéré*, who had still not fired, approached quickly than and gave him the *coup de grâce*, although, alone of the four who had been shot, this gendarme appeared to have been struck down as if by lightning.

Everyone returned to the registry.

Before crossing the threshold, Berthier shouted:

— “Citizen Raoul Rigault, now that all was done, let us cry all together: Vive la Commune!”

Only a few voices responded.

Returning, Rigault ordered Benn to go take the stretchers and the men necessary to carry the bodies to the Hôpital de la Pitié, and to come the next day to the Hôtel-de-Ville, to affix the seals to the report.

He left, followed by Slom and the *commissaire*.

We went to the Hôpital de la Pitié to seek a stretcher. We placed on the stretcher the body of Chaudey, and, on the body of Chaudey, that of one of the gendarmes. The stretcher buckled. We took off the gendarme, and Chaudey was transported alone, on that trip.

We came back with the stretcher and, in order not to make a new trip, we took the trash cart. We put one gendarme on the stretcher, and we put two in the cart.

All the corpses were deposited at the Pitié.

It was May 24, in the morning.

Returning, as the trash the cart contained was bloody, we dumped it at the first pile.

ⁱ See the *Souvenirs de la Commune*, by Edgar Monteil. Charavay frères, publishers.

ⁱⁱ Extract of the prison register of the prison of Sainte-Pélagie, for the year of 1871.

For Préau de Védel.

Prisoner No.: 268.

(1st column). Préau de Védel, Gustave-Simon, son of Jean-François and Sophie de Védel, bachelor, born in Paris, September 18, 1844, residing Boulevard de Clichy, 48, profession engineer-builder. Entered March 11.

Description: age 27 years, height 1 meter 80, black hair, eyebrows and forehead low, brown eyes, average nose, average mouth, round chin, oval face, brown complexion, distinguishing marks (nil)

(2nd column). This 11th day of March eighteen hundred seventy-one was presented at the registry of the house of Sainte-Pélagie Mr. Préau de Védel, in execution of an order delivered by the Prefect on the date of March 11, by virtue of which the named Préau de Védel has been imprisoned by me, director, as well as recording the act.... (signed) de Lasalle.

(3rd column). By judgment of the Criminal Court of Paris, dated September 29, 1870, the named Préau de Védel, declared guilty of fraud, has been condemned to 13 months in prison (a)...

(Last column). Escaped May 24, 1871 with the director and clerks appointed by the Commune (b).

(a) He had been transferred from Mazas.

(b) In the handwriting of M. de Lasalle. This director has since taken his retirement.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rigault showed some qualities in his administration of the former prefecture of police. He was perhaps the only one who, in those days, knew what he was doing. He marched straight ahead without worrying about others and did what he had decreed to be done. However, if I must believe what I have been told, that fierce prosecutor had become so infatuated with a little actress, toward the end of the insurrection, that he thought of nothing but her and Chaudey.

^{iv} The director named by the Commune was Ranvier, brother of the member of the Commune.

^v That secretary was Slom (abbreviated form of a Polish name). Slom was of medium height, rather large, having a long, blond beard, a soft face, and blue eyes. He was able to escape, reached Switzerland and was employed at Vevey, by Elisée Reclus, for the geography for which he had drawn a certain number of maps. Slom reentered France after the amnesty.

^{vi} No prison register was required for the gendarmes (*Gardes de Paris*).

^{vii} Chaudey occupied cell no. 4 of the Pavillon-des-Princes, which is at the top and which is the worst. He must almost touch the ceiling with his head, the cell is so low. It is rather large and gets light through long, narrow bays, from which the view is fine. We must have no illusion about the famous Pavillon-des-Princes of Sainte-Pélagie; there is only one cell

per story and those cells are large, but they are very terrible; dirty, tiled, the walls whitewashed with lime, the bed narrow, short and foul, the chairs of straw, the little tables wobbly, the broken stoves that would let you freeze in winter, there is nothing in the place you would miss.

It was in cell no. 4 that Cernuschi came quite often to see Chaudey, during his captivity.

viii^{viii} Extracts from the prisoner register of the prison de Sainte-Pélagie, year of 1871.

For Chaudey.

Prisoner No.: 600.

(1st column). Chaudey Gustave, son of Gabriel and Jeanne Antoine Fèvre Marie-Claire Renart.

Born at Vesoul (Haute-Saône), October 15, 1817; dwelling in Paris, rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, n° 50, profession, lawyer. Entered May 19. Description: 53 years of age, height 1 meter 84, hair grizzled, brows.... high forehead, brown eyes, large nose, average mouth, round chin, over face, ruddy complexion. Identifying marks (none).

(2nd column). This day, May 19 eighteen hundred and seventy-one, was presented to the registry of Sainte-Pélagie Mr. Chaudey, pursuant to an order issued by the substitute prosecutor of the Commune, on the date... by virtue of which the name Chaudey has been imprisoned by me, the direction, as is noted on the certificate that has been shown to me and the transcription of which is found opposite (a). The aforementioned Chaudey having been left in my charged, I have drawn up the present act of imprisonment that the gentleman has signed with me after discharge. (Signed) Ranvier.

(3rd column, written across). Mazas. Order of citizen substitute prosecutor of the Commune Dacosta, Detention.

(4th column). By order of the citizen substitute prosecutor of the Commune, on the date of May 19... the named Chaudey, age 53 years, born at Vesoul (Haute-Saône), dwelling in Paris, rue Neuve-des-Petits-Champs, 56, profession of journalist and lawyer... declared guilty of murder...

(Last column). Shot at the outer walls, during the night of May 23, by order and under the command of Raoul Rigault, prosecutor of the Commune (b).

(a) It is useful to note that the register of prisoners bore some printed forms that were filled out for Chaudey as for any other inmate.

(b) M. de Lasalle, director before the Commune, was reinstated upon the reentry of the troops. This annotation is in his handwriting.

ix Extract from an article published by Chaudey, in the newspaper *le Siècle*, March 24, 1871:

“No one could find us blameworthy for having done on January 22 what we judged to be our duty. Let each accept responsibility for their acts; we accept our own. If some recriminatory bullet is reserved for us, we have only to fall, making wishes for the Republic.”