

French Jews demonstrate against wreath-laying at Vichy head's grave

News Agencies

PARIS - French Jews and war veterans demonstrated yesterday against the presidential wreath laid at the grave of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the World War I hero who headed the Vichy collaborationist regime during World War II.

The protesters gathered at the site of the former Velodrome d'Hiver, the indoor cycling stadium where more than 12,000 Jews were interned by French police without food, water or sanitary facilities for three days before being shipped to Nazi death camps in 1942.

A floral wreath bearing a presidential inscription was laid on Pétain's tomb late Wednesday in the tiny cemetery of Port-Joinville on the Isle of Yeu off France's western coast, as part of national Armistice Day celebrations.

The wreath laying tradition, which predates President Francois Mitterrand has long been a sore point among Jews who have lobbied hard to abolish it.

"We do not understand this act ... we consider the gesture completely incomprehensible," said Jean Kahn, president of CRIF, the representative council of France's 700,000 Jews.

Jewish groups had called on Mitterrand not to lay the wreath but the president insisted it was meant sole-

ly as a tribute to Pétain as victor of the 1916 battle of Verdun.

A group of Jews led by Nazi hunter Serge Klarsfeld went to the island to protest the gesture. But the government representative waited until the Jewish demonstrators had left before arriving in a helicopter to lay the wreath.

Last summer Mitterrand attended commemorations of the 50th anniversary of the round-up of Paris Jews by Vichy police on Nazi orders.

Klarsfeld, whose father died at the Auschwitz concentration camp, said afterwards that Mitterrand could not continue to "honor the executioner after honoring his victims." He said after Wednesday's gesture it was unthinkable that Mitterrand could visit a memorial at Rogit to 75,000 French Jews who died in Nazi camps.

"The real symbol is that the president's wreath was laid next to a wreath put there in the name of [extreme right-wing leader] Jean-Marie Le Pen," Klarsfeld told Radio France Info.

He called the ceremony "a step towards Vichy," especially since 1992 marks the 50th anniversary of the first deportations of Jews from France.