

Liberated

Obituary: Simone Veil died on June 30th

The French stateswoman was 89



Print edition | Obituary

Jul 8th 2017

LIKE the other children, she should have been slaughtered on arrival. But with whispered advice from another prisoner, she claimed to be 18, so instead they sent her to forced labour, tattooing her arm to show that she was no longer a schoolgirl from Nice but a numbered slave, awaiting death by starvation and exhaustion.

The deportation to Auschwitz shaped her life, Simone Veil said; it would be the event she would want to recall on her deathbed. As a magistrate, civil servant and politician, she heard echoes of that humiliation in the trampled dignity of women. It spurred her to end the mistreatment of female inmates, particularly Algerian prisoners of war, and to push through contraception reform, making the Pill available at taxpayers' expense. Foreshadowing her greatest achievement, she set up an organisation to defend women being prosecuted for terminating their pregnancies.

Latest updates

Cyprus may have missed its last chance for reunification

EUROPE

Convincing injured tennis players to withdraw is a tricky matter

GAME THEORY

Can a baker refuse to make a gay wedding cake?

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

[See all updates](#)

Her arrival in politics was accidental. It was her husband, Antoine, whom President Giscard d'Estaing intended to invite to the government when he came to visit in 1973. But she proved an inspired choice as his health minister. Legalising abortion was the defining defeat of the old order—censorious, hypocritical, male—in post-war France. Theoretically banned since 1920, terminations took place annually in

the hundreds of thousands: secretly, shamefully and dangerously. She introduced what became known as the *Loi Veil* into a National Assembly with just nine women deputies and 481 men. Some, she said caustically, were even then secretly trying to arrange abortions for mistresses or family members.

Cowards daubed swastikas on her car and in the lift in her apartment block. A deputy called Jean-Marie Daillet asked her if she supported throwing embryos into a crematorium oven. No woman ends a pregnancy lightly, she responded calmly. Though the issue split the ruling conservatives, her steely persuasion rallied centrists and left-wingers behind the bill. Pierre Mauroy, later a Socialist prime minister, complimented her, without irony, as “the only man in the government”.

For years she was France's most popular politician. She could—should, many thought—have been prime minister or even president. But she lacked the necessary tribal instincts. Instead, her political career peaked in 1979 as president of the first directly elected European Parliament. She delighted in the post's symbolism—of reconciliation among wartime foes, and that a Jew and a woman could hold the continent's highest elected office.

“Simone always starts by saying ‘no,’” her father said. Some found her impatient and demanding. But she spied a double standard: the features that people admire in men are a point of criticism in women.

In 1979, when National Front thugs attacked a meeting where she was speaking, she shouted, “You do not frighten me! I have survived worse than you!” She had. Of the 75,000 Jews deported from wartime France, she was one of only 2,500 to return. Her father and brother perished, somewhere, in the east. But the most painful and powerful memories were of her mother Yvonne, her lifelong inspiration, dying slowly of typhus in Belsen after a 45-mile death march at the war's end.

The abyss had opened in 1944, days after she passed her *Baccalauréat*; she worried all her life that taking the exam under her real name had led to her family's arrest. “I found myself thrown into a universe of death, humiliation and barbarism,” she wrote. “I am still haunted by the images, the odours, the screams, the humiliation, the blows and the sky, ashen with the smoke from the crematoriums.” On liberation, a British soldier thought the emaciated young woman was 40. For a month, she could sleep only on the floor.

She returned home fired by a “rage to live”, and also infuriated by selective amnesia. Reconciliation trumped justice. Members of the anti-Nazi resistance were honoured, but in what she called “Gaullo-Communist France” nobody seemed willing to believe that the Germans—and their local accomplices—had persecuted people simply for being Jewish. The silence was mixed with mockery. At a diplomatic reception, a senior French official jokingly likened the tattoo on her

arm to a cloakroom ticket. She wept, and thereafter favoured long sleeves.

Optimist, without illusions

The Holocaust was unique in its scale and its senselessness, she used to say. Her father had raised his four children to be proud above all else of their Frenchness; in the secular Jewish tradition, he told them, being “people of the book”, meant special attention to reading and thinking.

She will be interred alongside Victor Hugo, Voltaire and Émile Zola in the Paris Panthéon. Her previous great honour was to become a member—one of five women among 40—of the Academie Française, guardian of the language’s purity and precision. On appointment, each “immortal” is given a ceremonial sword. Hers bore two mottos: the French Republic’s *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité* and the European Union’s *Unie dans la diversité*. The third engraving was the number from her arm: 78651.

This article appeared in the Obituary section of the print edition under the headline "Liberated"