Simone Veil: From Survivor to World Leader

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Simone Veil (1927-2017) was born in Nice, France, into a secular middle class Jewish family. Her pleasant childhood was abruptly ended by the rise of the Nazis and the fall of France to German control. In 1944 she was deported to Auschwitz. Her father and brother were deported and murdered. Her mother died of typhus before the concentration camp was liberated in April 1945. She and two sisters survived.

Veil considered herself to be French; she felt betrayed that France allowed its Jewish citizens to be oppressed, deported and murdered. Yes, there were good French people who saved Jews, who spoke up for their Jewish neighbors. But too many did not. Moreover, after Jewish survivors began to return to their homes in France, they were not greeted with the warmth and understanding that Veil expected. Even the government remained aloof. “From top to bottom of the government, the same attitude prevailed: no one felt concerned by what the Jews had suffered. You can imagine how shocking this was for everyone whose lives had been disrupted by the Holocaust” (*A Life: A Memoir by Simon Veil*, p. 87).

After the liberation, she decided to study law at the University of Paris, where she met her future husband Antoine Veil. They were married in October 1946, and had three sons. She practiced law for several years, and in 1956 she passed the national examination to become a magistrate. She received a senior position at the National Penitentiary Administration, under the Ministry of Justice. From May 1974 to March 1977, she served as Minister of Health, and was responsible for advocating a number of significant laws, including legalizing abortion in France.

In 1979 she was elected as a member of the European Parliament; in the first European parliamentary election she was elected President, a position she held until 1982. She continued with her active political life, including years of service in the cabinet of France's Prime Minister. During the course of her remarkable career, she won many awards and honors. When she died, her funeral was conducted as a national ceremony. It was attended by President Macron and many dignitaries, along with Holocaust survivors. President Macron announced the decision to rebury Veil and her husband in the Pantheon, a rare honor, and this was done on July 1, 2018.

Veil devoted her career to efforts to improve society. "No doubt what I suffered in the camps developed my extreme sensitivity to anything in human relations that generates humiliation and loss of human dignity" (Ibid. p. 101). She worked for prison reform; she advocated for women's rights; she was a champion of environmental issues. Her devotion to France was central to her life…even though France had betrayed her and its Jewish citizens during World War II. She was sympathetic to Israel and saw its role as "a home for people who no longer had one, to provide a haven of peace for all those who had been displaced and lost families, houses and professions, and to give them a piece of land where they could finally put down roots" (Ibid., p. 118).

In 2003, she accepted the Presidency of the International Victims' Claims Fund in the International Criminal Court. She made it clear that she was doing so in defense of the rights of victims, not to pose as a judge of actions from which they had suffered. "After the war, when the survivors of the Holocaust returned to France, they had to provide proof of the expropriations they had suffered. Even so, they were poorly compensated and only after a struggle. Seldom did money deposited in banks or contracts underwritten by insurance companies result in the payment of damages" (Ibid., p. 171).

It was not until 1995 that France officially recognized its complicity in the crimes against its Jewish citizens during the Second World War. President Jacque Chirac, on July 16, 1995, called on France to face its past and to make amends to the extent possible. A commission was established to deal with the immense losses of Jews whose property was expropriated during the war. The commission found that 50,000 Jewish businesses had been "Aryanized" and 90,000 Jewish bank accounts and insurance contracts had never been honored; 38,000 Jewish apartments had been looted of their furniture. Restoration of assets to Jewish families was arranged, to the extent possible. The commission pointed to France's responsibility to perpetuate the memory of the Holocaust, and Simone Veil was asked to serve as the first President of the Foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust.

On January 27, 2005, she spoke at Auschwitz on the sixtieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. To an audience including survivors of the Nazi concentration camps, she recounted the horrors of those days; she remembered the more than one and a half million people murdered here, simply because they were born Jewish. "Today, sixty years later, a new pledge must be made for people to unite at least to combat hatred of other people, anti-Semitism and racism, and intolerance….It is the right and duty of us, the last survivors, to put you on your guard and to ask you to turn our companions' cry 'never again' into reality" (Ibid., pp. 248-49).

She not only worked to foster an understanding of the Holocaust and its victims; she also strove to highlight the heroism of those righteous people who fought against Nazism, who saved Jewish lives, who behaved honestly and admirably during a very difficult period of time. On January 18, 2007, she spoke as President of the Foundation for the Memory of the Holocaust at a ceremony honoring the righteous of France. "All of you, the Righteous of France, to whom we pay tribute today, illustrate the honor of our country which thanks to you, found a sense of fraternity, justice and courage….For those of us still haunted by the memory of our loved ones who vanished in smoke and have no gravestone, for all those who want a better world, more just and more fraternal, cleansed of the poison of anti-Semitism, racism and hatred, these walls will resonate now and forever with the echo of your voices, you, the Righteous of France, who give us reasons to hope" (Ibid., pp. 284-85).

Although she was fully and personally aware of human viciousness and cruelty, Simone Veil wanted very much to believe in the ultimate victory of a righteous, compassionate and humane society. She stressed the role of righteous French non-Jews who acted nobly during the war years. "I am

convinced that there will always be men and women, of all origins and in all countries, capable of doing what is right and just. Based on the example of the Righteous, I should like to believe that moral strength and individual conscience can win out" (Ibid., p.295).

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Although Simone Veil did not identify herself as being religious, her life embodied significant elements of a religious worldview. If faith in God was not part of her mindset, her faith in humanity was remarkable. After all she witnessed in Auschwitz, it might have been expected that she could no longer trust the goodness of human beings. After the cold reception she and other survivors experienced upon returning to France after the war, it would have been natural for her to feel alienation from France and the French people. But she did not lose faith in humanity, in the French people, in France. This faith was—in religious terms—messianic. She believed in a future age when humanity would overcome its hatreds and prejudices, when people of all nations, religions, races would live in peace and mutual respect.

But her faith was not merely a matter of lip-service to high ideals. She devoted her life to working for the betterment of her society. She strove to enact policies that enhanced human rights and human dignity.

In my more than fifty years of rabbinic service, I've learned to pay more attention to what people do rather than to what they say. Professions of faith and pious preachments may be fine, but they do not define one's religiosity. Righteous action is the true test.

Reference

A Life: A Memoir by Simone Veil, Haus Publishing, London, 2007.