Portraits

Highlighting the exceptional contribution of European Jewish Women

Simone Veil
Politician and Holocaust survivor
(1927-2017)

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"It's here, where absolute evil was perpetrated, that the will must resurface for a fraternal world, a world based on the respect of man and his dignity."

Simone Veil was born Simone Jacob on 13 July 1927 in Nice. Her father, André Jacob was an architect and her mother, Yvonne Steinmetz had a baccalaureate in science and intended to study chemistry, but she gave up her ambition when she married. The couple had four children: Madeleine, Denise, Jean, and Simone. Parisians by birth, the Jacobs moved to Nice in 1924 so that André could work on the construction projects on the Côte d'Azur.Simone completed her baccalaureate in Nice two days before the Germans arrested her on 30 March 1944. She was deported to Auschwitz and later to Bergen-Belsen, together with her mother and sister Madeleine. Her mother died in Bergen-Belsen, but the daughters survived until Auschwitz was liberated on 27 January 1945. The third sister, Denise, had joined the French resistance and was deported to Ravensbrück as a resistant. She survived and returned to Paris on 1 May 1945. Simone's father André and brother Jean were deported on 15 May 1944 to Kovno, Lituania, and did not survive. Simone returned to her studies after the war and earned a diploma in law and political science. She married Antoine Veil in 1946 and became a magistrate in 1954. The couple had three sons: Jean, Nicolas, and Pierre-François.

Simone Veil was Minister of health in Giscard d'Estaing's government and played a crucial role in legalising abortion in France (Loi Veil) on 17 January 1975. During the abortion debate in 1974, she was violently attacked and much of the aggression smacked of antisemitism (comparing abortion to the Holocaust, swastikas on her car and the elevator of her building, etc). From 1946 to 1974, Simone Veil relentlessly championed women's rights: as a penitentiary administrator, she improved the treatment of female prisoners; as the director of civil affairs, she established dual parental control of family legal matters, rights for mothers and their illegitimate children and adoption rights for women. As Minister of Health, she expanded health coverage, maternity benefits, and childcare allowances. In 1979, Simone Veil became the first woman president of the European Parliament. She was re-elected to the European Parliament as an MEP and in 1984, as deputy president. In 1993, she returned to the French government as Under-secretary of state for Social affairs and was named to the Conseil Constitutionnel in March 1998. She was elected to the Académie française in November 2008. She died on 30 June 2017 and was buried in the Panthéon on 1 July 2018

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