Beyond the Veil of tears

Interview

by Helena de Bertodano

She survived Auschwitz and rose to high political office. Yet Simone Veil is famed for a moment of weakness — crying in the French Parliament

THE DAY that Simone Veil broke down in tears in Parliament is engraved on the hearts of the French. It was a moment both shocking and defining: for it was the only time she allowed a glimpse into the personal tragedy that has underscored her journey from a Nazi death camp to high political office.

The incident occurred when, as Health Minister, she was steering through the pro-abortion bill. An enraged opponent shouted at her: "Madame Minister, do you want to send children to the ovens?" The haunting allusion to the camps, where she lost her Jewish parents and her brother, struck her to the core.

An awareness of the devastation of her family is central to understanding Simone Veil. Her motivation as a politician — her desire for justice, equality and, above all, freedom — dates back to her days in Auschwitz. It may sound contradictory, but even her struggle to give women the right to abort sprang from her deep respect for life — her horror of the degradation of women both in the death camps and at the hands of backstreet abortionists. "She did the impossible," said President Giscard of her eventual victory over fierce Catholic opposition.

Since *la loi Veil*, as the pro-abortion law became known, she has rarely been out of the public eye. She was the first president of the European Parliament — another intensely personal role for someone who suffered at the hands of a feuding continent and has since devoted much of her life to its integration.

Until the French presidential elections earlier this year, during which she supported the losing candidate Edouard Balladur, she was No 2 in the government as Minister of Health, Towns and Humanitarian Action. A highly respected independent centrist, she was often described as "the conscience of the Government". Although she does not hold a post now, she is still active politically, and has spoken critically about the new administration. Yet she remains on friendly terms with the President, Jacques Chirac, and dined with him 10 days ago. Some even believe she has an outside chance as a future President herself, a post never yet held by a woman.

Tomorrow she will be international guest of honour at the 40th Women of the Year Lunch in London and will make a speech on the theme: *Forty Years On, Have We Come a Long Way?* As regards Veil, the question seems absurd. She has made a success of her life against all the odds. The chairman of the lunch, Paddy Campbell, says she was chosen because she is a "true survivor". "I mean that in every sense of the word: not only has she survived Auschwitz but she has also triumphed in a male-orientated system."

Veil, 68, agrees that French society still does not promote women, especially politically. "Even today only six per cent of Parliament is female. We may be equal on paper but the reality is very different."

We meet in her Paris office next to the Hôtel des Invalides. Dressed in a Chanel suit and heavy jewellery, she is brisk at first, both in manner and speech. She talks in rapid French; as my French is rickety, I was relieved when her secretary told me beforehand that she would happily conduct the interview in English. Yet now I am here she refuses point-blank to speak anything but her native tongue. "Your French is perfectly adequate," she says decisively, although I have uttered fewer than 10 words.

She is not the sort of woman with whom you argue lightly, so I do not press the point. But after asking her twice how certain phrases could be best expressed in English, she relents, only reverting to French when talking about things close to her heart.

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Maurice Szafran's biography of Veil, *Destin*, published in France last year, emphasises her overwhelming desire to avenge the fate of her mother, Yvonne — not only her death but also her thwarted career. Yvonne was a brilliant chemist, but her husband forbade her to work and the young Simone Jacob always sensed in her mother a deep sorrow. I ask her if it is fanciful to say that she is continuing the life of her mother, doing things for her.

"It is absolutely true. My mother was *very* frustrated. But before the war it was very difficult for women to work. Even after the war it was not easy. I had great difficulties with my husband and in the end I had to accept a compromise.

"I wanted to practise as a lawyer but he said that was not acceptable. So I became a judge instead." (She rose to become Secretary General of the Higher Court of Judges before being chosen as the Minister of Health in 1974.)

No such compromise was possible for Yvonne, who brought up her four children in Nice, while her husband André worked as an architect. Simone, the youngest, was the only one who dared to contradict her strict father. She was particularly irritated by his refusal to believe that the French would allow any harm to come to Jewish families at the hands of the Nazis. For a 15-year-old she showed immense perspicacity; I ask her how she knew what was going to happen to France's Jews.

She thinks for a few moments and answers slowly. "Even as a child I tried to consider situations impersonally, without feelings or emotions, so that I could not be deceived. It is the same for me now in politics and with people. I try to consider everything with distance. That is why I could never be a militant. I have never belonged to a party. Sometimes it is lonely but at least I do not have to accept the dictat of anyone else."

She believes that it is partly due to her independence that she has always topped opinion polls as the most trusted politician. But she does not agree that she lacks passion. "I am very passionate. But I try not to be swayed by whatever it is the fashion to think at the time."

Even though she feared the worst for her family during the Nazi occupation, their actual arrest was deeply shocking to her. When I ask her if she still dreams about Auschwitz, she shakes her head. "What I dream about over and over again, even now, is the moment of my arrest. Not the life in the camp, that is absolutely lost to me."

She was arrested in the street in Nice in March 1944, two days after finishing her baccalauréate, and deported to Auschwitz with her mother and eldest sister, Milou. Her second sister, Denise, escaped arrest and joined the Resistance. Her father and brother Jean were also deported; no trace was ever found of them.

She always wears long sleeves to cover the number 78651 tattooed on her arm. At the camp she was renowned for her spirit: Marceline Loridan, a fellow deportee, remembers being made to do pointless jobs such as lugging stones across the camp, only to be ordered to return them to their original place the next day. "Simone and I were very provoking. We sang instead of crying as we carried out the task."

Her mother died of typhus while a prisoner. Veil's eyes fill with tears when she speaks of her. "Everyone who knew her said she was absolutely extraordinary; she always felt that other people were more important than herself."

Of the 100,000 French Jews deported, only 2,500 returned home. Simone was one of them. She settled in Paris where she soon met and married Antoine Veil, also Jewish, a fellow student at the Institute of Political Science. Loridan says of her: "She wanted to recreate a family quickly, have kids quickly, re-establish a social universe quickly."

Perhaps it is not surprising to hear that after such an experience she has no religious faith. Yet she has managed to assimilate not only the loss of most of her family to the Nazis but also the death of her beloved sister Milou, who survived Auschwitz only to be killed in a car crash with her two-year-old son in 1951.

Her husband, who survived the crash, has a vivid memory of Milou just before she died. They were travelling home from a visit to Simone's family. "Milou had a piece of paper on her knee and was writing to Simone. They had only just said goodbye to each other and yet they already felt the need to communicate."

The one surviving member of her original family, Denise, says: "Milou was far more than a sister to Simone."

Veil says that she learnt to "accept to live" because of an unshakeable belief in "*l'humanité*" and in man's propensity towards goodness.

"In fact the other day I had a big argument with a Minister who said it was impossible to be philanthropic and work for charities if you don't have faith. I was horrified by that. I don't think you need religious feelings to have human feelings and to refuse to accept the poverty and the suffering of others. That was always my mother's attitude, too."

She says that she often dwells on the way in which one person, placed in different circumanstances, can be both good and evil. "Everyone has some humanity," she says. Even the SS at Auschwitz? She falters. "Well no, not them... And yet, even one or two of them perhaps. Every day, after they had finished their job in the camp and killed a few more children, they would go home and be wonderful fathers to their own."

She describes herself as French first, a patriot second and Jewish third and says that she would never have been particularly conscious of her Jewish ancestry if it were not for the war. It is still not of importance to her.

"My ideas and my sensibilities about many things are different, not because I am Jewish but because I am a former deportee. When I came back, I no longer had the same feelings about anything. Once you have been humiliated like that, nothing can be the same again. Everything becomes relative. Things that may seem important or disastrous to some people do not seem so to me."

Everyone who knows her underlines her integrity and single-mindedness. The word formidable — both in its French sense of "tremendous" and its English sense of "daunting" — comes up often in conversation about her. If she has a fault it is that she lacks a sense of humour; few people have seen her laugh — but perhaps that is too much to ask in one who has endured so much.

And yet she is an optimist. She says she cannot understand people who insist that the world is going from bad to worse. "For the first time in Europe, we have lasted 50 years without a war between countries. People like to think the past was better but it is not true."

Despite her husband's initial opposition to her career aspirations, he has handled the indignity of playing second fiddle to his wife very well. In his own field, as a high-flying civil servant and then director of an airline company, he has won respect. Indeed the Veil family, with their three sons and numerous grandchildren, is very close-knit and all live in Paris. After our meeting Veil is off to have lunch with her eldest son Jean, named after her lost brother.

Before seeing her I had thought that she might refuse to dwell on the past; in fact it is the present that disconcerts her more. She is elusive about what she has been doing since losing her job as a minister in May. "Many, many things. Many different things." Foundations, charities, those sorts of things, I ask? "Yes, those sorts of things. I am preparing a report of the situation in the Balkans."

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But she will not be drawn further. When I refer to her recent comments about "*la grande deception*" of the French people under the new government, she says tersely, "I don't speak about the French situation to other countries."

I ask whether she can envisage herself as a future President of France. It is a question too far and she looks at me silently for a few moments. "It is over," she says, suddenly rising from her chair. Whether she is referring to her political career or just to the end of the interview, I cannot tell. That, no doubt, is her intention.

ALISON HARRIS

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