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## SIMONE VEIL – A PASSIONATE BELIEVER IN EUROPE

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In an age of political vacuousness, we often ask what has happened to the quality of our leaders. Many believe that we deserve such poor leaders because we live in trivial, reality television-addled times dominated by consumerism. Electors across Europe seem, more often than not, unhappy with the leaders of their respective political parties. The French however were never unhappy with Simone Veil, who has died at the age of 89. She was a – reluctant - politician of stature whose appeal transcended age, class and region. She was respected and held in immense affection ever since, as minister of health of President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974 she won the bitter battle to make abortion legal, at a time when most French male politicians, especially if they were conservative Catholics wanted women as tokens in ministerial office –government was a man's business.

Simone Veil survived Auschwitz and though never a campaigner for Jewish causes knew that being Jewish was central to her life. She did not take kindly to the brutal killing fields of the Balkans in the 1990s or Gaza being called genocide. She witnessed the Holocaust and knew the difference. She refused to accept General de Gaulle's decision to cover up French complicity in the Holocaust and objective to his disdainful rhetoric about Jews as eternally "domineering" people, that owed rather more than it acknowledged to the 1930s right and which she made after Israeli victory in the Six Day World in 1967. She was bitter that it took the French state till 1995 to acknowledge that it was the French government, not simply a perverse band of Petainists that organised the deportation of Jews from France till 1944.

She is remembered today as the first president of the European parliament – to which she was elected MP in 1979. She was a passionate believer in the European project because history and her family's life – she lost her parents and brother in the gas ovens of Germany and Lithuania – told her it was the only way to prevent another war in Europe. She never had a rude word about Germans, thus helping to reconcile a generation of young French people to their country's erstwhile enemy.

It is totally in keeping with the ideals of the French republic that she should be laid to rest, with her husband Antoine Veil, who died in 2013, in the Pantheon. Not

since the late 19th century and the death of the poet Victor Hugo has the French head of state decided to honour a French citizen so fully and upon her death. What may be more surprising is that the Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika should have praised her in such emotional terms. As a young magistrate during the war of liberation of Algeria, she was sent in 1957 to visit prisons there and was so appalled by what she witnessed that she wrote her report to the ministry of justice by hand, not trusting a typed copy not to go astray. She pleaded for Front de Liberation National prisoners who were condemned to the guillotine – who numbered a few hundred - to be moved to French prisons as she was afraid that they might be murdered in prison by enraged French officers. After all, François Mitterrand had allowed many executions of FLN prisoners not long before, when she was minister of justice. She ensured that FLN women prisoners were regrouped in one prison in France to ensure greater protection.

When they married, her husband saw the role of his wife as that of a mother at home but Simone Veil would have none of that and was determined to become a judge. Her husband gave up his wish to go into politics and went into business but his wife was always a reluctant politician. When it was suggested she should stand for the presidency she demurred, the French were not ready to elect a women president. She was a tower of moral rectitude like that other great Jewish figure of French post war politics, Pierre Mendès France.

Personally she had a capacity to engage seriously with all those she met. After testifying to the UN Commission of Eminent Persons on Algeria, of which she was a member, at a meeting in Lisbon in June 1998, she came over to congratulate me and make a few remarks about what I had said. Over dinner, presided by the Portuguese president Mario Soares, her comments were pithy and sometimes very funny. Her capacity to empathise and engage with someone she did not know, her deep intelligence and luminous eyes across which flicked a sudden sadness - as if pictures of Auschwitz were coming back, made a few hours with her unforgettable. She was a *grande dame* to her fingertips. When receiving her at the Académie Française in 2012, Jean d'Ormesson struck the right note : *“Comme l’immense majorité des Français, nous vous aimons Madame. Soyez la bienvenue au fauteuil de Racine, qui parlait si bien de l’amour.”*