

Simone Veil: Holocaust survivor and first female President of the European Parliament (1927-2017)



Lawyer, politician and feminist, Simone Veil served as France's Health Minister between 1974 and 1979. In that year she became a Member of the European Parliament and was elected its President, remaining in the role until 1982. This made her the President of the first directly elected Parliament and the first female President.

Veil is recognised in France in particular for the legalisation of abortion and for improving the lives of women and the conditions of prisoners. She is also known across Europe for honouring and preserving the memory of Jewish people killed in the Holocaust during the Second World War, and for her commitment to European values and unity. She is admired for both her political and personal courage, having survived the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

Veil's childhood and traumatic experiences during the Second World War sowed the seeds of a commitment to a unified Europe, a cause she would champion for the rest of her life.

Early Life

Simone Jacob was born on 13 July 1927 to a Jewish family in Nice, France. She and the other members of her family were arrested in 1944 and sent to the Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bobrek, and finally Bergen-Belsen. While she and her two sisters survived, her parents and brother died in the camps. She returned to Paris in May 1945 and began her studies in law and political science. She married Antoine Veil in 1946.

Entry into politics

Veil became a magistrate and in this capacity advised successive ministers for justice, including François Mitterrand. In 1970 she became the first female secretary general of the *Conseil supérieur de la magistrature* (Council of the magistrature). Legend has it that when Valéry Giscard d'Estaing became President of France in April 1974 he went to Antoine Veil's house with the intention of inviting him to join his new government. Deciding

there and then not to appoint Antoine, the President chose his wife Simone instead.

She joined Giscard d'Estaing's government as Minister for Health. Soon after her appointment, she fought a bitter battle to legalise abortion in France and only succeeded when the opposition in the national assembly joined her cause to push through the law in 1975. It was seen as a significant achievement and the law would become widely known as *la loi Veil*.

Committed to a unified Europe

After the war, as a survivor of the Holocaust, Veil found it hard to understand how one European country could wage war on another. As her political career in France progressed, she became more committed to the idea of a Europe in which such atrocities could never happen again. So, when President Giscard d'Estaing asked Veil to head his party list in the first direct elections to the European Parliament in 1979, she jumped at the chance.

Veil was duly elected to the European Parliament, which chose her as its President, thus becoming leader of the first directly elected European Parliament and the first woman at the head of any EU institution. She also served as chair of the legal affairs committee and as a member of the environment, political affairs, foreign affairs and security committees, and the sub-committee on human rights. In addition, she was a member of the special committee on German reunification set up in 1990.

During her time at the Parliament, she was also chair and vice-chair of the Liberal and Democratic Group, which later became the Liberal and Democratic Reformist Group. She won the Charlemagne Prize in 1981, the award given to honour a person's contributions to European unity.

Later years

After 14 years in the European Parliament, Veil returned to French politics in 1993, serving as Minister of State and Minister of Health and Social Affairs until 1995. In 1998 she was appointed to France's Constitutional Council. From 2001 to 2007 she served as the first president of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah (*Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah*). In 2005 she campaigned in favour of the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe.

When Veil was elected to the *Académie Française* in 2008, one of only a handful of women to receive such an honour, she had three things engraved on the ceremonial sword that is crafted for each member of the academy. These were: her Auschwitz tattoo number, 78651; the motto of the French Republic, 'Liberty Equality, Fraternity'; and the European Union motto, 'United in Diversity'.

In 2011, the esplanade in front of the main European Parliament building in Brussels was named Agora Simone Veil in her honour, and in 2012 she was awarded the Grand Cross of the *Légion d'honneur*. Following her death on 30 June 2017, Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament, paid tribute to Veil, calling her '*the great President of the European Parliament, conscience of the EU, campaigner against anti-Semitism and defender of women's rights. Her message on women and anti-Semitism remains relevant to this day*'. In July 2018 her remains were interred in the Panthéon mausoleum in Paris. She was only the fifth woman to receive this honour.



European Parliament President Simone Veil talks with Altiero Spinelli in 1981.