



4. The Shoah: A Survivor's Memory— the World's Legacy



Deportees are separated from their families and belongings upon arrival at the extermination camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Some were murdered immediately, while others were condemned to forced labour.

Photo: Courtesy of the Yad Vashem Photo Archives



Photo: Michel DIEUZAIDE, Paris

Simone Veil

Simone Veil was 16 years old when she and her family were deported from France to concentration camps in Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen, where most of them perished. Madame Veil has held a number of public offices in France, including Minister of Health, Social Affairs and Family, fighting to defend the rights of women, prisoners, orphans and children. In 1979, she became the first President of the newly elected European Parliament, a position that she held until 1982. She also served as President of the French Council for Integration in 1997 and became a member of the Constitutional Council in 1998.

From 2000 to 2007, Simone Veil served as President of the Foundation for the Memory of the Shoah. Since 2003, she has chaired the Board of Directors of the Trust Fund for Victims at the International Criminal Court. On 28 January 2007, Madame Veil delivered the keynote address at the observance of the second universal International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust that was held in the United Nations General Assembly Hall. Simone Veil has received many awards in recognition of her lifelong fight for human rights and was elected to the French Academy on November 2008.

The Shoah: A Survivor's Memory— the World's Legacy

by *Simone Veil*

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As a deportee and survivor of the concentration camps, I believe it is my duty to talk about the Shoah and continuously explain to the younger generations, our nations' public opinion-makers and our politicians how six million men and women, including one-and-one-half million children, died simply because they were born Jewish.

Five years ago, the Council of Europe decided to organize a European Day in memory of the Holocaust and for the prevention of crimes against humanity. The Council selected 27 January, the day a unit of Soviet soldiers arrived at Auschwitz. On the premises, these soldiers found only ghosts, a few thousand dying, terrified people, left behind because the SS¹ thought that hunger, thirst, the cold or disease would do their job for them more quickly. Ten days earlier, most of the survivors had been forced to walk away from the camp, in the snow, risking execution at every step. These were the "death marches", where so many of our comrades succumbed.

1 The "Schutzstaffel", or "SS", was the elitist paramilitary organization within the Nazi party tasked with implementing the security and population policies of the Third Reich, and in particular the mass systematic murder of Jews, known as the Final Solution. Its main modes of operation were repression, terror and murder.

On the first of November 2005, the United Nations decided to institute an “International Day of Commemoration in memory of the victims of the Holocaust”, thus remaining true to its founding principles. It was a highly symbolic decision for this institution, which was born out of the ruins and ashes of the Second World War. We speak not of an image, but of a reality. It was in a European country, long admired for its philosophies and its musicians, that the decision was made to gas and burn millions of men, women and children in crematory ovens. Their ashes also rest at the bottom of graves in the Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and elsewhere. These were graves that the Jews had to dig with their own hands, before being sent into them by the bullets of the Einsatzgruppen and then burned, in an attempt to erase all traces of the crimes.

With this decision, which today involves the entire world, the United Nations reminds us of the specific and universal character of the Shoah—the planned extermination meant to eliminate an entire people—the Jewish people. This objective was largely attained and flouted the very foundations of our humanity.

For those who had been deported, including myself, there is not one day that goes by that we do not think of the Shoah. More than the beatings, the exhaustion, the hunger, the cold or the fatigue, it is the humiliations that remain, to this day, the worst in our memories. We no longer had names, just a number tattooed on the arm that served as identification. What also haunts us is the memory of those from whom we were brutally separated upon our arrival in the camp and who, we were told shortly afterwards, were led directly to the gas chambers.

I was deported with my mother and sister to Auschwitz in April 1944. After spending one week in Drancy, a transit camp for French Jews, we were piled for three terrible days into sealed animal wagons, practically without food, without water, and without knowing our destination. My father and brother were deported to Kaunas in Lithuania in a convoy of 850 men, of which only about 20 survived.

We never found out the fate of the other men, including my father and brother.

We arrived at Auschwitz in the middle of the night. Everything was done to terrify us: blinding searchlights, the barking dogs of the SS, the deportees dressed like convicts that dragged us from the wagons.

Dr. Mengele, the SS master of selection, decided who would enter the camp and who would be led directly to the gas chambers. Miraculously, the three of us entered the camp.

We were working more than 12 hours a day on excavation work that proved to be mostly useless. We were barely fed. But our fate was not the worst. In the summer of 1944, 435,000 Jews arrived from Hungary. As soon as they got off the train the major-

ity of them were taken to the gas chamber. For those of us who knew what awaited them, it was a vision of horror. I still remember their faces, these women carrying their children, these masses ignorant of their destiny. This is the worse thing I had witnessed in Auschwitz.

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In July, my mother, my sister and I were fortunate to go to a small camp where the work and discipline were less harsh. And on the evening of 18 January 1945, we left the camp, forced to march for more than 70 kilometres under the menace of the SS rifles. After two days of waiting in Gleiwitz in a huge camp, we were piled into open air wagons, crossing through Czechoslovakia, Austria and Germany, all the way to the Bergen-Belsen camp. When we arrived, nearly half of us were dead from cold and hunger. At Bergen-Belsen, there were neither gas chambers nor selections. Instead, typhus, the cold and hunger killed, in just a few months, tens of thousands of those who were deported.

Finally, on 15 April, we were liberated by the British army. I can still see the horrified faces of the soldiers who, looking from their tanks discovered the bodies mounted on the side of the road and the staggering skeletons that we had become. There were no cries of joy on our part—only silence and tears. I thought of my mother, who had died one month before of exhaustion and typhus. During the weeks that followed liberation, many more of us died due to the lack of medical care.

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When I returned home to France with my sister, the country had been liberated for months. Nobody wanted to listen to talk of the deportations, of what we had seen and lived through. As for the Jews who had not been deported, about three-quarters of the Jews living in France at that time, the majority could not bear listening to us. Others preferred not knowing. It is true that we were not aware of the horrible nature of our stories. Thus it was among ourselves, those of us whom had been deported, that we spoke about the camps. Even today, it nourishes our spirit, and I would even say our conversations, because in an extraordinary way, when we speak of the camps, we have to laugh in order not to cry.

The Shoah was not just what happened at Auschwitz. It covered the entire European continent in blood. The process of dehumanization inspires an inexhaustible reflection on the conscience and dignity of men, reminding us that the worst is always possible.

Despite the pledge so often expressed, of “never again”, our warnings were in vain. After the Cambodian massacres, it is Africa that has paid the greatest tribute to the follies of genocide over the past 15 years. After Rwanda, it is Darfur and its dramatic death toll: 200,000 dead and nearly 2 million refugees. It is time to find

solutions so that the resolutions and principles of the United Nations will finally be respected in all conflict situations.

Shifting from yesterday to today, I cannot help but discuss those who now say that the Holocaust never happened, who deny the reality of the Shoah and call for the destruction of Israel. We now know the extent to which a nuclear-armed Iran is truly worrisome and how urgent it is for this country to return to the fold of the international community by respecting the laws established by the United Nations and the nuclear non-proliferation treaty to which it is a signatory.²

At the core of radical Islam are profoundly worrisome calls for the destruction of Israel, the ancestral land of the Jews that has become a land of refuge for many survivors of the Shoah. In saying that the Shoah is a lie perpetuated by the Jews to justify the creation of Israel, they breached the truth to justify their will to destroy this State. This denial of the Holocaust, used purely for political gain, permits them to justify their efforts to put an end to the State of Israel. This new denial finds substantial resonance with fanatic and ignorant spirits. New communication technologies are used today, amongst other ways, to spread these harmful ideas, especially to young people, some of whom become convinced that the Shoah never occurred despite all proof to the contrary. Let's hope that the disclosures and publicity surrounding the historical record contained in the Arolsen archives will convince them, if they are willing to believe the archives. Let us also hope that the creation of a Palestinian State next to an Israeli State, each living in peace within its borders according to the terms of a fair negotiation, will put an end to the campaigns waged against the existence of Israel.

Facing the question of the remembrance of the Shoah and the existence of the State of Israel, the international community and individual States must assume their responsibility. They must also

2 The Islamic Republic of Iran signed the Treaty of Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons when it was concluded on 1 July 1968.

take the necessary steps to fight against other genocides, which must be identified and whose victims must be heard. Those who have committed or commit mass crimes must be judged and sanctioned.

Beyond the States and the institutions, there remains the share of responsibility that falls upon each of us. The French people were reminded of this at a ceremony held on 18 January 2007 at the Panthéon in Paris, when President Jacques Chirac, at my suggestion, paid homage to the Righteous of France. The “Righteous” are millions of non-Jewish men and women honoured by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust Martyrs’ and Heroes’ Remembrance Authority, for having saved Jews from deportation during the Second World War. In France, 76,000 Jews were deported. But the remaining three-quarters of Jews who were saved owe their salvation partially to the thousand of Righteous who helped them and embodied the honour of our country.

The Righteous showed us that there will always be men and women, of all origins and in all countries, capable of the best. Based on the example of the Righteous, I would like to believe that moral strength and individual conscience can win.

In conclusion, and rejoicing that resolution 61/255, adopted in January 2007 and condemning Holocaust denial, was so overwhelmingly approved by the United Nations General Assembly, I wholeheartedly wish that this day, created by the United Nations, will inspire all to respect one another and reject violence, anti-Semitism, racism and hatred, as well as all other forms of discrimination.

The Shoah is “our” memory, but it is also “your” legacy.

Discussion questions

1. In her paper, Simone Veil talks about massacres and genocides in Cambodia, Rwanda and Darfur. What lessons can be learned from the Holocaust to understand and combat ongoing genocides, and prevent future ones?
2. In light of the author's personal experience of the Holocaust, what role did humiliation play in the Nazis' strategy to exterminate the Jews?
3. What are the possible solutions Madame Veil mentions to help fight Holocaust denial? What could the international community do to combat Holocaust denial?
4. How does the author describe the reactions of people to the testimonies of Holocaust survivors right after the Second World War? How does this demonstrate the importance of these testimonies, still today?
5. As the Righteous of France demonstrated, to what extent is the responsibility of individuals, beyond States and institutions, vital in helping to combat genocide? How can education foster a greater sense of individual responsibility?