

Nooit Meer Auschwitz Lezing 2006 - Simone Veil

LAUDATIO Madame Simone Veil 26.01.2006

61 years ago on the 27th January 1945 the Red Army liberated K.Z. Auschwitz-Birkenau. What they found there, in the wake of the Nazi- mega-death- factories, is documented in thousands of books, ego documents, Red Army films and most important, from the mouths of living witnesses. In the words of Zechariah, the Hebrew Prophet, " brands plucked from the fire". Among those witnesses were some who were able, by some miracle, to change the blood stained, degrading slave uniform and dehumanising number, tattooed in the flesh, into a source for new life and inspiration. People, determined to build a world based on righteousness and rights for all human beings, a world where people could live side by side in trust and truth, love and equality, a world where fear and threat, inequality and injustice would become things of the past.

On that day 61 years ago there was only a human remnant left in Auschwitz Birkenau. The infamous death march was under way. The route is known and the death toll estimated. During that march, fatigue meant death by hunger, freezing temperatures or the bullet. After a while one can imagine that you loose track of the number of corpses on the way.

On the 15th of April the British Armed Forces opened the gates of Bergen Belsen .The Imperial War Museum in London has devoted a section of it's permanent exhibition, to that period of human hell on earth, illustrated by the now world famous films and stills made at that time. From an overpopulated Bergen Belsen where the sights and sounds of the diseased and dying, and an undulating landscape of piled high corpses, unable to be burned fast enough to stem the spreading of typhus and dysentery, our guest speaker, Simone Veil emerged. The formally carefree, young Simone Jacob went first from freedom to slavery, and then back from slavery to freedom. A journey that started in Nice, France, via Poland and Germany was now on route back to a Free France.

She went from that disastrous destruction to take her place in the building of a new Europe. A new Europe based on right living and rights for all human beings. A new Europe where people of all races, religions and cultures could live side by side, indeed in trust and truth, love and equality, a Europe where fear and threat, inequality and injustice would become things of the past.

How do you transform dreams and visions into reality?

How do you arm yourself in a battle for peace, justice, and those important basics, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, brother sister hood? It is perhaps not surprising that the symbol of the French Revolution is MARIANNE, a woman who carries the three coloured French flag full of energy and vigour. The symbol, a woman, fearlessly striding forward, a break with the past but based on personal experiences of the sufferings and loss during that past.

When one asks who is this woman Simone Veil, formally Simone Jacob, there are stock answers; born a day preceding the 14, July, 1927, obviously a vintage year. French lawyer and politician. The first woman cabinet minister in French History. Minister of Health in two French governments, engraved in French history books for her great work in freeing French women from the tyranny of generations of French male law makers. She fought to make access to contraception for women easier by law. She was valiant in her struggle to legalise abortion, her hardest political fight, and the one for which she is best-known, and she won.

On her life's journey from Auschwitz-Birkenau, Bobrek and Bergen Belsen, to becoming president of the European Parliament and President of The French Foundation of Memories of the Shoah, she has a long list of remarkable achievements. To name a few is her contribution to the reform of the criminal justice and incarceration procedures in France; the founding of the Simone Veil Hospital, a fusion of several smaller hospitals in France, where today the most advanced surgical operations are performed, a medical centre that are leaders in the human organ transplant movement, and whose staff were on the Tsunami scene immediately after that disastrous event.

She is the author of a classic study of Adoption. Her book with co- writer Annick Co-Jean published in 2004, tells of her struggle for women's emancipation in the French parliament. Her introduction to Nancy Amis's story of the Orphans of Normandy, as well as the story itself, is something that should not be missed by anyone. Yet she is renown for being more than an intellectual in the footsteps of another famous French Simone, for whom the emancipation and equal rights for women in particular were top of her list, de Bouvoir; because she has also been compared to another famous Simon; Signoret, for her charm, beauty and being a "veritable femme", a fighting, feminine woman.

Our theme today is "Auschwitz Never Again" and so I am obliged to remind us all of the personal consequences of racism and anti-Semitism experienced by Simone Veil. She came from a non practising Jewish family with no synagogue or community affiliation. Being Jewish by birth was the reason for an otherwise carefree young girl to be transported from the streets of Nice to the hell of Auschwitz. Being Jewish was the reason for the murder of her father and brother by the Nazis. Being Jewish led to the death of her mother in Bergen Belsen. After the war she might have emigrated to Israel with so many others of her generation but Simone Veil chose to engage in making France, as a fore- runner of a European Community, a safer place to live in for persons of all descriptions. A Europe without discrimination by gender, race or religion. Some suggest that she recognised the Europe of many generations of Jewish and other settlers, who had enriched and been enriched through the inter relationship of cultures and ideals, and would not settle in a country inhabited by only one special group of people. Whatever the reasons, Europe has been enriched by the efforts and energies of Simone Veil, of that there is no doubt and today we share in that enrichment.

On Friday evenings it is a custom in some Jewish families to recite a text from the book of Proverbs, it begins in Hebrew.

ESHET CHAYIL MI YIMSTA, the french translation reads, QUI PEUT TROUVER UNE FEMME VERTUEUSE, ELLE A BIEN PLUS DE VALEUR QUE LES PERLES

A romantic vision of a hard working woman. The Hebrew text speaks of a woman CHAYIL a word whose real translation is warrior, Chayal.

Chere Madame, you are for us the embodiment of a survivor, warrior. You have faced death many times and experienced the death of your loved ones, but have never given up the fight for the just cause.

You fight on for the humanity of all mankind. Long may you live and continue to fight the good fight. Auschwitz changed you from carefree Simone Jacob to Simone Chayal, warrior for humanity. Your transformation has contributed so much to so many ever since.

There is a story told about Marshal Worosjilov once the most decorated soldier of the USSR. His uniform was so laden with medals that it had a special inner structure to carry them all.

One year before the regular Russian October Revolution parade, the mayor of a small village on the Black Sea wrote to him, asking him to accept an honour from the comrade citizens of that village.

The Marshal looked in his clothes cupboard and replied that there was unfortunately no room on his uniform for another medal, but there was always a corner in his heart for such an honour. He would think of that village while standing next to the other heroes on future days of celebration.

Chere Madame Veil, you hold at least 18 doctorates, you are the recipient of the French National order of Merit, you have been decorated by Queen Elizabeth of England with the Order of the British Empire. You have been honoured by governments across the world with peace prizes and the highest degrees from universities without number.

With humility, I ask you to find a "petit coin dans votre coeur" for us and accept from this corner of the Post- Auschwitz world, the Annetje Fels-Kupferschmid award, for your tireless activities in the fight for a prejudice free world, filled with continued humanity, care and concern for neighbours of every kind. We recognise you among our galaxy of heroes; we thank you, that you have been, that you are, and that you remain, Simone Veil, warrior- woman, who guarantees " Never Again Auschwitz".