



Simone Veil, Ex-Minister Who Wrote France's Abortion Law, Dies at 89



Simone Veil, a Holocaust survivor who served as health minister of France and as president of the European Parliament, in 2008.
SUSANA VERA / REUTERS

By SEWELL CHAN
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Simone Veil, an Auschwitz survivor who as health minister of [France](#) championed [the 1975 law that legalized abortion](#) in that country, and who was the first woman to be chosen [president of the European Parliament](#), died on Friday in Paris. She was 89.

The death was confirmed by President Emmanuel Macron, who [offered condolences to her family on Twitter](#) and called her life an exemplary inspiration.

“Her uncompromising humanism, wrought by the horror of the camps, made her the constant ally of the weakest, and the resolute enemy of any political compromise with the extreme right,” his office said in a statement.

Trained as a lawyer, Mrs. Veil (pronounced vay) rose to the top ranks of public life, drafting legislation expanding the rights of prison inmates, people with disabilities and disadvantaged children, as well as measures that barred discrimination and expanded health benefits.

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In 2008, she became one of few politicians to be [elected to the Académie Française](#), the august 40-member body that is the authority on the French language; [Valéry Giscard d’Estaing](#), the president under whom Mrs. Veil served as health minister, is another.

Opinion polls routinely showed Mrs. Veil to be [one of the most admired](#) people in France.

The abortion law, still known as the Veil Law, was one of the most divisive actions taken by the government of Mr. Giscard d’Estaing and his first prime minister, [Jacques Chirac](#).

In three days of debate before the National Assembly [passed the law](#) on Nov. 29, 1974, by a vote of 284 to 189, phrases like “an act of murder,” “monstrous” and “France is making coffins instead of cribs” were hurled in the chamber. Critics likened abortion to Nazi [euthanasia](#); one asked, “Madame Minister, do you want to send children to the ovens?”

Mrs. Veil told lawmakers: “I say this with total conviction: Abortion should stay an exception, the last resort for desperate situations. How, you may ask, can we tolerate it without its losing the character of an exception — without it seeming as though society encourages it? I will share a conviction of women, and I apologize for doing it in front of this assembly comprised almost exclusively of men: No woman resorts to abortion lightheartedly.”

Abortion had been criminalized in France since the Napoleonic era. The new law, which took effect on Jan. 17, 1975, made the procedure legal during the first 10 weeks of pregnancy (later extended to 12), and required that the procedure be carried out by a doctor at a hospital or a clinic. Girls under 18 were required to obtain parental consent.



Mrs. Veil delivered a speech before the French Parliament in 1974 defending a bill allowing abortion.
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Mrs. Veil, whose parents and brother died in the Holocaust, rejected the comparison of abortion to murder as absurd.

Simone Jacob was born in Nice, France, on July 13, 1927, the youngest of four children of André Jacob, an architect, and the former Yvonne Steinmetz. She completed her baccalaureate, the diploma required to pursue university studies, on March 28, 1944, days before her arrest by the Germans.

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She was deported, with her eldest sibling, Madeleine (nicknamed Milou), and their mother, to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp and then to Bergen-Belsen. The two sisters were freed on Jan. 27, 1945, but their mother had died of typhus days earlier.

Another sister, Denise, who entered the Resistance at the start of the war, and was arrested and deported to the Ravensbrück camp in Germany, survived.

But no trace of their father, André, and brother, Jean — last recorded in Lithuania on a convoy of French Jews bound for Estonia — was ever found.

“I’m often asked what gave me the strength and will to continue the fight,” Mrs. Veil told an interviewer in 2005. “I believe deeply that it was my mother; she has never stopped being present to me, next to me.”

Her left forearm forever carried the number tattooed on it at Auschwitz; she tended to wear long-sleeve dresses.

Resuming her studies in law and political science in Paris, Simone Jacob met Antoine Veil, who was enrolled at the École Nationale d'Administration, which trains France's top civil servants. He later became a businessman.

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They married in 1946 and had three sons: Jean, Claude-Nicolas and Pierre-François. The middle son died in 2002; Mr. Veil, in 2013.

Mrs. Veil is survived by her two other sons and 12 grandchildren. Her sister Milou died in a car accident in 1952; her sister Denise died in 2013.

Mrs. Veil in 1974, when she was health minister.
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In 1954, Mrs. Veil passed the extremely competitive national examination to become a magistrate. As an official in the Justice Ministry, she helped improve living conditions for female prisoners, including Algerians detained during their country's war for independence.

At age 47, she was plucked from the Civil Service by Mr. Giscard d'Estaing to serve as health minister, becoming only the second woman to hold full cabinet rank in

France. (The first was Germaine Poinso-Chapuis, health minister from 1947 to 1948.)

Mrs. Veil left the government in 1979 to run for the European Parliament, in the first direct elections to that legislative body, for what was then the European Economic Community, a precursor to the European Union.

In her July 17, 1979, [speech](#) accepting the presidency of the Parliament, she said: “Whatever our political beliefs, we are all aware that this historic step, the election of the European Parliament by universal suffrage, has been taken at a crucial time for the people of the Community. All its member states are faced with three great challenges: the challenge of peace, the challenge of freedom and the challenge of prosperity, and it seems clear that they can only be met through the European dimension.”

Mrs. Veil was president of the Parliament until 1982 and remained a member until 1993. She returned to the French government in 1993, as the under secretary of social affairs, health and urban issues, under Prime Minister Édouard Balladur, serving until 1995.

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From 1997 to 1998, she was president of the [High Council for Integration](#), a body devoted to the assimilation of immigrants, and in 1998 she began a nine-year term as a [member of the Constitutional Council](#), the country’s highest legal authority.

Mrs. Veil was also the president of the [Fondation pour la Mémoire de la Shoah](#), France’s Holocaust remembrance organization, from 2000 to 2007, and chairwoman of the board of the [Trust Fund for Victims](#) from 2003 to 2009. The group supports victims of genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity in cooperation with the International Criminal Court.

She published an autobiography in 2007, in which she criticized the long delay in the French government’s acceptance of responsibility for the murder of French Jews, whose deportations were organized by the collaborationist regime based in Vichy. [The French state affirmed its “collective error”](#) for the crimes only in 1995, during Mr. Chirac’s presidency, after decades of equivocation.

When Mrs. Veil was elected to the Académie Française, the novelist [Jean d’Ormesson](#) paid her tribute, saying her “capacity to bring about support among the French” was crucial to her popularity.

“This support does not rest on mediocre and lame consensus among the countless opinions that never cease dividing our old country,” he said. “It rests on the principles that you affirm and, against all odds, without ever raising your voice, manage to convince everyone of. We can say this without airs: In the heart of political life, you offer a moral and republican image.”