Two lives

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Simone Veil

UNE VIE

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Maupassant's first novel, *Une Vie* (1883), a sentimental tearjerker that by its narrative simplicity and emotional honesty nevertheless retains the power to move, tells the story of a young woman in Restoration France, released at the age of seventeen from the sheltered innocence of a convent school into a world that soon reveals itself to be a jungle of human selfishness, sordid hypocrisy and base cruelty.

At the outset of her memoir, *Une Vie,* Simone Veil asks forgiveness of "Maupassant, Maupassant que j'aime" for borrowing his title. Evidently by this she means to tell us something. Like the fictional Jeanne Le Perthuis des Vauds, Veil was plunged as a teenager "into hell": she was deported to Auschwitz. She survived, but her mother died in Bergen-Belsen and her father and brother met an unknown end somewhere in Lithuania.

The daughter of an architect of Alsatian origin, Veil had a cosseted middle-class upbringing in Nice in the waning years of the Third Republic. Her family was Jewish – but not very. Her brother was not circumcized, and when a relative took the young Simone to a synagogue, her father was so cross he threatened to turn the cousin out of the house if she ever did such a thing again. During the Italian occupation from 1940 to 1943, Jews in south-eastern France enjoyed a degree of protection from the Nazi mass murder apparatus. But once the Germans arrived, neither spiritual nor physical *laïcité* availed the Jews anything and most were deported to their deaths.

Veil's description of the "Kafkaesque incoherence" into which she and her family were plunged is precise but restrained. Her endurance through horror must command respect. At the same time some of her retrospective judgements seem questionable. She finds the consistency with which the International Red Cross has tried to justify its conduct at that period "perplexing". No doubt that was true for many decades. But in the past few years the IRC has tried to render a more honest accounting. She pronounces herself dubious about the proposed bombing of Auschwitz, writing that when the Allies tried to bomb the gas chambers the operation achieved little. But in fact the Allies never attempted such an operation. US bombers did attack industrial targets in the area, but there was no effort to destroy the killing installations. Veil maintains that when the news of the camps became known, the American Jewish community "hardly did anything, no doubt out of fear of a massive inflow of refugees". This is to lay at the door of the American Jewish community a charge that belongs elsewhere. By the time the facts were known, in late 1942, refugee movement across the Atlantic was impossible. The real barrier to large-scale refugee entry to the US was not the Jewish community but rather a Congress resolute in its determination to block any change in the "national origins" quota system governing immigration – in this reflecting deep currents in American society.

When Veil returned to France after the Liberation she found that nobody was interested in hearing what had happened to her. Actually, the truth was more complicated. She recounts how, in post-war Paris, she would sometimes hide behind curtains to avoid talking to people. Like Maupassant's Jeanne she appears to have felt "a kind of insulation of conscience [or consciousness: Maupassant's phrase is 'isolement de sa conscience'] in the midst of all those failing consciences".

In spite of her wartime ordeal, Veil embarked with remarkable ease on a successful career in post-war France. After distinguished service in the judicial and penal bureaucracy, she was plucked by Jacques Chirac (serving as Prime Minister under President Giscard d'Estaing) in 1974 to be his only woman minister. She played a historic role at the Ministry of Health in shepherding through parliament a law legalizing abortion. She overcame opposition with eloquence, firmness, and a sure political step. The measure justly became known as the *loi Veil.* She became the most popular politician in France.

Veil's seven years in government, followed by her election to the presidency of the European Parliament, and then service on the Constitutional Council, gave her an inside view of a turbulent and fractious period in French politics. But her narrative of these years is too discreet, characterized mainly by accounts of her *prises de position* on the issues of the day that often seem stale. Occasionally, however, she surprises: she sympathized in 1968 with the student rebels milling outside her home at the corner of the rue Danton and the place Saint-André-des-Arts. Later, as a member of the council of the ORTF (the state television monopoly), she opposed the financing or broadcasting of Marcel Ophüls's great documentary *Le Chagrin et la Pitié:* she considered its portrayal of widespread collaboration in occupied France biased and unfair. She avows lack of sympathy with "militants of the rights of man" and professes herself dubious about efforts to promote human rights through international courts. Maurice Papon and Paul Touvier, she points out, were judged by French courts rather than "a supranational justice claiming to assert universal truth" (eventually, one is obliged to add). More recently she embraced the presidential candidature of Nicolas Sarkozy, who, she believed, would administer the "électro-choc" that a stultified society required. She is one of the few professionally competent jurists to express admiration for his inept and besieged minister of justice, Rachida Dati.

Veil reveals little about her personal feelings or her private life after the war. Unlike Jeanne, she does not bare her soul. The photographs in the book show her in a succession of chic, sensible suits and the text too leaves the impression of a buttoned-up sensibility. As the self-portrait of a pathbreaking woman politician, this book lacks the fiery vivacity of Barbara Castle's diaries or the shameless candour of Edwina Currie's. Yet since its publication last year it has sold more than 400,000 copies. Alas, one fears this is a tribute more to the author than the work.