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University of Paris and Simone Veil

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Editor's note: This Jefferson Publications series examines ancient universities that thrive today – how they have shaped the world and influenced education methods, citizenship, the meaning of government, and cultural life. Today's article features Simone Veil and the University of Paris.

Seventh in a Series

The historic University of Paris (French: *Université de Paris*) first appeared in the second half of the 12th century, but was in 1970 reorganized as 13 autonomous universities (University of Paris I–XIII). The university is often referred to as the Sorbonne or La Sorbonne after the collegiate institution *(Collège de Sorbonne)* founded in 1257 by Robert de Sorbon, but the university as such was older and was never completely centered on the Sorbonne.

Of the 13 current successor universities, four have a presence in the historical Sorbonne building, and three include "Sorbonne" in their names.

The original university had four faculties: Arts, Medicine, Law, and Theology. The students there were divided into four *nationes* according to language or regional origin. This faculty and nation system of the University of Paris (along with that of the University of Bologna) became the model for all later medieval universities in Europe. Remarkable for its teaching, the University of Paris also played an important role in both religious and political affairs in France.

However, with the French Revolution the ancient University of Paris was swept away along with the *Ancien Régime,* becoming part of the University of France. Reestablished in 1886, without its faculty of theology and with the addition of new faculties such as science, the university became secular. It again became a preeminent academic center, not just of France but of Europe in the mid-20th century.

The faculty of Arts was the lowest in rank, but also the largest as students had to graduate from there to be admitted to one of the higher faculties. The students there were divided into four *nationes* according to language or regional origin, those of France, Normandy, Picard, and England, the last one of which later came to be known as the Alemannian (German) nation. Recruitment to each nation was wider than the names might imply: the English-German nation in fact included students from Scandinavia and Eastern Europe. The faculty and nation system of the University of Paris (along with that of the University of Bologna) became the model for all later medieval universities.

Originally instruction was grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy. To the higher instruction belonged dogmatic and moral theology, whose source was the Scriptures and the Fathers, and which was completed by the study of Canon law. The plan of studies expanded in the schools of Paris, as it did elsewhere. In the course of the 12th century, medicine also began to be publicly taught at Paris: the first professor of medicine in Paris records is Hugo, *physicus excellens qui quadrivium docuit.*

Besides Notre-Dame, Ste-Geneviève, and St-Victor, there were several schools on the "Island" and on the "Mount." [This refers to Île Saint-Louis, Île de la Cité, and the Latin Quarter]. "Whoever," says Crevier "had the right to teach might open a school where he pleased, provided it was not in the vicinity of a principal school." Thus, a certain Adam, who was of English origin, kept his "near the Petit Pont"; another Adam, Parisian by birth, "taught at the Grand Pont which is called the Pont-au-Change."

The Collège de Montaigu was founded by the Archbishop of Rouen in the 14th century, and reformed in the 15th century by the humanist Jan Standonck, when it attracted reformers from within the Roman Catholic Church (such as Erasmus and Loyola) and those who subsequently became Protestants (John Calvin and John Knox).

By the mid-20th century the University of Paris had once again become a preeminent academic center, with numerous distinguished professors. In May 1968, a protest by students at the University of Paris, beginning with conflicts between students and authorities in Nanterre and then an organized protest at the Sorbonne, led to the closing of the university and a serious national crisis. This led to major educational reform and the decentralization of schools.

After the protests of 1968, which the University was significantly involved in, however, the French higher education system was again reformed, and the University of Paris was separated into 13 universities. Thus, despite their historical ties and some administrative functions of the *Académie* of Paris with offices in the Sorbonne, there is currently no University of Paris system that binds the universities at an academic level. Yet, the ideal of the University of Paris, the archetype of so many significant universities and the center of such historical intellectual development, continues to inspire and inform many. For although reform, such as that invoked by the French Revolution, has often been necessary in history to remove corrupt and outdated institutions, the wisdom and spirit of their founders is often of value to humankind.[1]

The Night of the Barricades – May 10–11, 1968 – remains a fabled date in postwar French history. By then the number of student protesters in the city had reached nearly 40,000. After police blocked the marchers' path toward the Right Bank and the national broadcasting authority ORTF (Office de Radiodiffusion Télévision Française), the students again began removing cobblestones and erecting barricades for protection – a scene that remains one of the May movement's enduring images. At about 2 a.m. on May 11, the police attacked, firing tear gas and beating students and bystanders with truncheons. The bloody confrontation continued until dawn. By the time the dust had cleared, nearly 500 students had been arrested and hundreds of others had been hospitalized, including more than 250 police officers. The Latin Quarter lay in ruins, and public sympathy for the students, already considerable, increased.[2]

Some say the student movement arose to demand free speech on college campuses, but as American involvement in Vietnam expanded, the war became the main target of student-led protests.

SIMONE VEIL: Holocaust survivor who championed women's rights [3]

A widely respected figure across the political divide, Someone Veil was the first female leader of the European Parliament and the recipient of France's highest distinctions, including a seat among the "Immortals" of the Académie française, the prestigious state-sponsored body overseeing the French language and usage. She was renowned for her endeavors to advance women's rights and the gracious but steely resolve with which she overcame male resistance throughout a remarkable life scarred by personal tragedy.

As one of the more than 76,000 Jews deported from France during World War II, Veil appears on the *Wall of Names* at the Shoah Memorial in Paris, under her maiden name Simone Jacob. So do her father André, her mother Yvonne, her sister Madeleine, and her brother Jean. Of the five, only Madeleine and Simone

survived the ordeal, though Madeleine would die in a car crash just seven years after the war.

Simone was the youngest of four siblings, born in the French Riviera resort of Nice on July 13, 1927, in a family of non-practicing Jews. Her father, an award-winning architect, had insisted her mother abandon her studies in chemistry after they married. Like most other Jews in France, he reluctantly obeyed orders once the Nazi-allied Vichy regime came to power in June 1940, registering his family on the infamous "Jewish file" – which would later help French police and the German Gestapo round up France's Jews and deport them.

As French nationals living in the Italian occupation zone, the Jacob family avoided the first roundups, which targeted foreign Jews, mainly in the northern half of France that was occupied by German troops. But they suffered the sting of anti-Semitic laws, which forced André Jacob out of work and led to Simone adopting the name Jacquier to conceal her origins.

The situation worsened after September 1943, when the Nazi occupiers swept all the way down to the Riviera. Simone, then aged 16, had only just passed her baccalaureate when she was arrested by two members of the SS on March 30, 1944. The Gestapo soon rounded up the rest of the family with the exception of Simone's sister Denise, who had joined the Resistance in Lyon. Denise would later be detained and deported to the Ravensbruck concentration camp, from where she returned after the war.

While Denise was treated as a resistance fighter, Simone and the rest of the family were forced to suffer the fate reserved for France's Jews during that dark period in history. The women were deported to Auschwitz, the largest of the Nazi death camps, on April 13, 1944, arriving after a ghastly three-day journey trapped in an overcrowded cattle cart. A month later, André and Jean boarded Convoy 73, the only train from France to head for the Baltic States. Simone would never hear from them again.

Youths of her age were normally sent straight to the gas chambers at Auschwitz, but Simone lied about her age, heeding the advice of an inmate who spoke French. She was registered for the labor camp, shaved from head to toe, and tattooed with the serial number 78651 on her arm. "From then on, each of us was just a number, seared into our flesh," she recalled years later in her memoirs. "A number we had to learn by heart, since we had lost all identity." For several months, Simone, her mother and her sister endured the ritual humiliation and hellish work routine of deportees, lifting boulders, digging trenches, and building embankments – all the while battling to stay upright and avoid the dreaded gas chambers. When Auschwitz was evacuated in January 1945, as Soviet tanks approached, they took part in the grisly "death marches,"

eventually reaching Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, where Simone worked in the kitchens.

On March 13, the typhus epidemics that raged through Nazi camps took Yvonne's life. Madeleine also fell ill, but was saved in extremis when Allied troops liberated Bergen-Belsen on April 15. When a British officer asked an emaciated Simone her age, she told him to guess. "He said I must be in my 40s," she later recalled. "No doubt he thought he was being polite."

Still only 17, Simone returned to France devastated by the loss of her parents and sister but determined to pursue the career her mother had been denied. She studied law at the University of Paris and the Institut d'études politiques, where she met Antoine Veil (1926-2013), a future company manager and auditor. The couple married in October 1946, and would go on to have three sons, Jean, Nicolas, and Pierre-François.

Simone Veil began work as a lawyer before successfully passing the national examination to become a magistrate in 1956. She then took on a senior position at the National Penitentiary Administration, part of the Ministry of Justice, thereby securing a first platform to pursue a lifelong endeavor of advancing women's rights. She notably strove to improve women's conditions in French jails and, during the Algerian War of Independence, obtained the transfer to France of Algerian female prisoners amid reports of widespread abuse and rape. Switching to the ministry's department of civil affairs in 1964, Veil continued to push for gender parity in matters of parental control and adoption rights. A decade later, her appointment as health minister in the center-right administration of President Valéry Giscard D'Estaing paved the way for her biggest political test. She first battled to ease access to contraception, then took on a hostile parliament to argue in favor of a woman's right to have a legal abortion.

"No woman resorts to an abortion with a light heart. One only has to listen to them: it is always a tragedy," Veil said in a now-famous opening address on November 26, 1974, before a National Assembly almost entirely composed of men. She added, "We can no longer shut our eyes to the 300,000 abortions that each year mutilate the women of this country, trample on its laws and humiliate or traumatize those who undergo them."

After her hour-long address, the minister endured a torrent of abuse from members of her own center-right coalition. One lawmaker claimed her law would "each year kill twice as many people as the Hiroshima bomb." A second berated the Holocaust survivor for "choosing genocide." Another still spoke of embryos "thrown into crematorium ovens."

"I had no idea how much hatred I would stir," Veil told French journalist Annick Cojean in 2004, reflecting on the vitriolic debate decades earlier. "There was so

much hypocrisy in that chamber full of men, some of whom would secretly look for places where their mistresses could have an abortion."

The bill was eventually passed, thanks to support from the left-wing opposition, though Veil had to withstand the affront of swastikas painted on her car and home. Today, the "loi Veil" enjoys overwhelming support in France, where few mainstream politicians dare to challenge it.

Veil dedicated much of the latter part of her political career to the cause of European integration, leaving the government in 1979 to stand in the first direct elections for the European Parliament. She won the first of three consecutive terms that year, and became the parliament's first female president, a post she held until 1982.

After returning to her job as health minister between 1993 and 1995, Veil was appointed to France's Constitutional Council, the country's highest constitutional authority, three years later. In 2005, she put herself on leave from the council to campaign for a "yes" vote in a referendum on Europe's constitutional treaty – a move that drew criticism because it contravened the council's rules on political neutrality. When the "no" won in a shock result, she lamented a "catastrophe" for both France and Europe.

In the run-up to the 2007 presidential election, Veil surprised many observers by coming out strongly in favor of right-wing candidate Nicolas Sarkozy. However, she openly criticized his decision to set up a Ministry of Immigration and National Identity. She also took a position against Sarkozy's controversial proposal to make every 10-year-old school child honor Jewish child victims of the Holocaust, calling it, "unimaginable, unbearable, dramatic and, above all, unfair."

In 2008, Sarkozy changed the rules governing the Legion of Honor, France's top distinction, to ensure Veil could be awarded the medal of Grand Officer without going through the lower orders. The same year, she was elected to the *Académie française*, becoming only the sixth woman to join the prestigious "Immortals" who preside over the French language. Her ceremonial sword was engraved with the motto of the French Republic ("Liberty, Equality, Fraternity"), that of the European Union ("United in diversity"), and the five digits tattooed on her forearm in the inferno of Auschwitz, which she never removed.

On July 5, 2017, Veil was honored with a national ceremony and military honors in Les Invalides courtyard, after which she was interred next to her husband, who died in 2013, at Montparnasse Cemetery. The ceremony at les Invalides was attended by President Emmanuel Macron, Holocaust survivors, politicians, and dignitaries. In his speech during the ceremony, President Macron announced the decision to rebury Veil and her husband in the Panthéon, which was done on July 1, 2018.

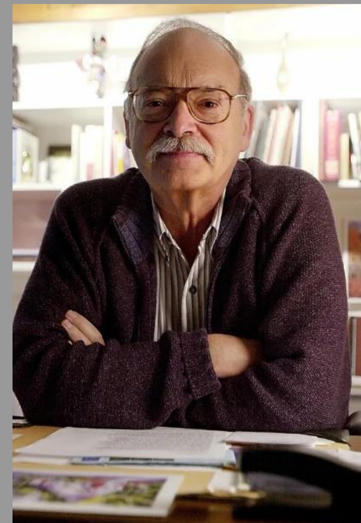
In summary, we have another remarkable woman who was given due recognition by France and the rest of the world. The University of Paris can be proud of its product and so much of what she stood for, given her terrible experiences and work for the good of the world. She used her education and experience to the benefit of humanity.

As mentioned, the University of Paris at its beginnings had the faculty of Arts as the lowest in rank, but also the largest as students had to graduate from there to be admitted to one of the higher faculties. This made some guarantee that their education was broad, and specialization was later in their academic career. **The students** in the 1968 protests (and the streets were dangerous when I was there) had a major voice in educational reforms. May 1968 ushered in both the women's movement and the sexual revolution in France. Workers got higher salaries, better working conditions and stronger unions in response to their protest demands.

The students' demands were diffuse – more philosophical than political. Fifty years on, polls show that most French people say May 1968 was a good thing, a brief moment when everything seemed possible. Free speech was also a crucial point for the students, and we are still fighting this battle in our universities today.

[1]*University of Paris*, New World Encyclopedia online with minor grammar changes by author
[2] Richard Wolin, *Events of May 1968,* Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017, online
[3] Benjamin Dodman, *A report by for France 24,* no date (online) with some additions from Wikipedia

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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