

Simone Veil - Woman of the Century

Frances Cowell

A homage and a timely reminder of how close we always are to the nightmare of totalitarian hell.

If you have not already done so, go and see Simone Veil - Woman of the Century. If you're not already a stout supporter of the European Union (EU), you will be after seeing this biopic of one of the most remarkable people of her generation. Action speaks louder than words, as they say, and superlatives fall flat compared to what one woman actually got done in her lifetime.

You don't associate Simone Veil with noisy, headline-grabbing protests and street marches: she did what she did without fanfare or disrupting the lives of ordinary folk. Yet those folk, ordinary and otherwise, all benefit from her dedication, hard work and intelligent persistence. Her efforts, such as ensuring that prisoners and the mentally ill have access to proper medical treatment, may not have disrupted traffic, but they did disrupt entrenched injustices and prejudice. Her achievements in putting women's rights and gender equality firmly on the agenda of the EU and its member states speak for themselves.

The film does a fine job of illustrating how her happy, middle-class childhood terminated brutally in the institutionalised nastiness of Nazi death camps that she and a sister were lucky, although starved and half frozen, to survive - and that both her parents and her brother, as well as millions of other people, didn't.

Still a teenager, but now ferociously determined to apply her prodigious talent to building a better world, her ambition clashed with the mindless expectation that she, like all women, should devote her life to home-building and child-rearing. As one of the first women elected to public office, that determination was again called on to command the respect and loyalty - accorded automatically to men of lesser talent - to bring about the big changes needed to build that better world.

Simone Veil was one of the first to understand that the EU, democratic and founded on the rule of law, even with all its flaws, is the best weapon we have to protect us from the barbarism of totalitarian regimes. No other polity has the critical size, the wealth and the philosophical traditions needed to translate fine ideals into practical laws that guarantee our freedoms in everyday life - both on its own soil and in its near neighbourhood; and to serve as the model for aspiring democracies everywhere. By the time she was elected the first woman President of the EU Parliament, her resolve and willpower were beyond dispute.

Highly effective use of flashbacks ram home the message of how fragile liberal democracy is and how the continent that gave us The Enlightenment, can so easily descend into hellish dark ages.

This film makes you think, and one of its messages is how much we owe to Simone Veil. Her commitment to our future freedom and prosperity is a work in progress; it is for us to ensure that it is never abandoned.

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