



Breaking the Silence: A Testimonial of Resistance to Jewish Invisibility in Simone Veil's *Une jeunesse au temps de la Shoah*

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Abstract

Simone Veil had a remarkable career as a public figure in France, but her personal life was shrouded in profound trauma as a victim of the Holocaust. Veil's autobiographical narrative reveals a unique form of testimonial writing in which she uses her agency, as a survivor, to demonstrate resistance to Jewish absence and 'otherness'. As will be shown, a close study of the writer's autobiography reveals a multilayered text in which the author acts as a spokeswoman for the victims to impart global awareness of the Shoah, especially to young people. This essay will focus on the pedagogical objective of Veil's memoir, the impossibility of conveying unimaginable suffering, and the power of feminine solidarity as a survival strategy. The latter part of the analysis will broaden the perspective, with emphasis on how writing a testimonial narrative serves as a way in which the autobiographer can recover the shattered self.

Keywords: testimonial, self, invisibility, suffering

Simone Veil (1927-2017) had a remarkable career as a lawyer and politician in France and was actively involved in fighting for human rights. Most notably, she was a magistrate in the French Ministry of Justice and served as Minister of Health (1974-1979) at the relatively young age of forty-six. She was also renowned as a champion of women's issues, and, in fact, played a key role in passing legislation to legalize abortion in France. This groundbreaking decree was known as the Veil law and was ratified in 1975. In her commitment to public service, Veil continued to forge a path as a pioneer; she was the first woman to be elected to the European parliament in 1979 and even served as president for a little over two years. Most importantly, she was inducted into the elite *Académie française* in 2008, a distinguished honor because she was only the sixth woman to join the prestigious 'Immortals'. But in sharp contrast to the limelight cast on her public achievements, Veil's private life was shrouded in profound suffering. Veil was born in 1927 in Nice and was deported in 1944 to Auschwitz-Birkenau with several members of her family. She remained in the death camps with her mother and sister, Milou, until they were liberated by the British in 1945. After decades of silence about the war, Veil composed a lengthy autobiographical text, *Une vie (A Life, 2007)*, to chronologically document not only her imprisonment but her extraordinary life experiences. This discussion will concentrate on the abridged version of *Une vie (A Life)*, *Une jeunesse au temps de la Shoah: extraits d'une vie (Childhood during the Shoah: excerpts from a Life, 2010)*, as the author's autobiographical account deals exclusively with the Holocaust. In this work, she divides the text into four sections: the Occupation, deportation, imprisonment at Auschwitz-Birkenau, and the postwar period.

Although there are numerous memoirs in the vast field of Holocaust literature, Veil's *Une jeunesse au temps de la Shoah* is a work that has been overlooked. However, Veil's account offers a unique form of testimonial writing in which the author not only shares her story of survival but writes beyond the self, revealing an emphasis on collectivity within the fabric of the work. A close look at the narrative shows that Veil creates a multilayered text to fulfill a broader socio-political objective in which she acts as a spokeswoman for the victims to impart global awareness of the Shoah. Most importantly, the author breaks the silence of unspeakable suffering by using her agency, as a survivor, to demonstrate resistance to Jewish absence and 'otherness', thereby assuring that the victims of the Shoah remain eternally present. To achieve this objective, Veil emphasizes the importance of viewing her testimonial narrative as a pedagogical tool, which is directed at her contemporary audience. To structure this study of survival, the introductory part of the discussion will examine some salient stylistic aspects of testimonial writing to provide insight on the interactive

relationship between the autobiographer and the reader. As will be shown, the author tells the story for those erased by mass genocide, transmitting it in print to those who will become the recipients of her narrative. The core part of the analysis will concentrate on Veil's recollections of the internment period at Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen to examine how survival was, in part, predicated on solidarity with others in the camps, especially fellow women victims. The latter part of the study will consider the author's postwar re-entry into French society, with emphasis on her anti-Semitic experiences and social alienation, thus underscoring her problematic position of 'otherness'. The concluding part of the discussion will focus on how Veil writes beyond the self, and, in so doing, demonstrates that composing a testimonial narrative constitutes an affirmation of the survivor's existence. For the survivor of unimaginable suffering, the act of putting pen to paper also offers the possibility of recovering the shattered self.

It is important to situate the context for Veil's testimonial narrative by noting that male survivors such as Primo Levi, David Rousset, Elie Wiesel, and Robert Antelme penned their testimonial accounts not long after they were liberated, mainly between the mid-1940s to the 1950s.¹ However, female survivors tended, for the most part, to write much later. For example, Edith Eger composed her memoir of Auschwitz some forty years later and Henriette Cohen gave oral testimony to young people forty years after the war.² The celebrated French resistance participant, Charlotte Delbo (non-Jewish), documented her imprisonment at Auschwitz in a trilogy, which was published in a variety of editions between 1965 and 1995.³ But Veil's decision to pen her story came to fruition after decades of silence. Although the author does not provide a clear explanation as to why she waited nearly forty years to share her life story, her textual production demonstrates resistance against oblivion. In any event, it was not until the author was in her eighties that she composed her autobiography, and, in the process, directly confronted some of her most painful experiences. She describes this personal textual encounter in an interview: 'Moi, je m'y retrouve, mais je comprends qu'un certain nombre de choses que j'écris puissent choquer.'⁴ With these words, Veil not only recognizes her own documented experiences but points to an awareness of her readers' reactions. In a speech to commemorate the Holocaust (also included in this abridged edition), Veil underscores the importance of transmitting her harrowing ordeal to her readers: 'Comme tous mes camarades, je considère comme un devoir d'expliquer inlassablement aux jeunes générations, aux opinions publiques de nos pays et aux responsables politiques, comment sont morts 6 millions de femmes et d'hommes' (157-8).⁵ In referencing her *devoir* [duty], Veil acts as a socio-political spokesperson for the diminishing group of Holocaust survivors. In

the opening pages to this same edition, she reiterates the importance of telling her story, but she omits the political aspect noted above by underscoring her personal objective. Veil states that she hopes some of the passages from her text ‘peuvent être regardés comme d’utile pédagogie vis-à-vis de la jeunesse d’aujourd’hui [...]’ (preface to *Une jeunesse au temps de la Shoah*).⁶ With the overarching goal of instructing young people in mind, Veil positions herself as a witness who is committed to composing a testimonial account of the unconscionable events that took place between the late 1930s until 1945, the year in which she was liberated. To explore the subtle and more intricate underpinnings of testimonial texts, Annette Wieviorka explains that ‘what fuels this writing is a protest against death, a need to leave a trace and to assure a legacy’ (Wieviorka: 23). She also posits that testimonies can be transformed into literary works so that these works can become eternal (22). In concert with Wieviorka’s concept of the survivor’s narrative as a legacy, Veil’s testimonial account resists the erasure of time for her, other survivors, and her readers. In this way, the author’s text creates a permanent textual imprint, akin to an immortal monument. James Young echoes Wieviorka’s idea of the textual legacy. Young speaks to this notion by positing that ‘words signify experiences [...] they become—like the writers themselves—traces of their experiences’ (Young: 22). Since the testimonial aspect is seminal the analysis of the text, it is useful to examine several key elements of this intricate conception.

Theoretical Aspects of Testimonial Narratives

A close look at Veil’s testimonial narrative reveals some stylistic characteristics that resemble the perspective of Shoah survivor Elie Wiesel. His view of testimony shows a universal objective, as he emphasizes the moral obligation of Holocaust victims towards humanity. As Wiesel explains, ‘I knew that anyone who remained alive had to become a storyteller, a messenger, had to speak up.’⁷ Here, Wiesel firmly believes it is the storyteller’s duty to communicate experiences that others either could not express or did not endure as fellow victims of the Shoah. These ideas are shown in Veil’s autobiographical narrative, as she shatters the silence surrounding the incomprehensible suffering that affected millions of Jews. In penning her testimonial account, Veil commits to Wiesel’s idea of ‘speaking up,’ thereby demonstrating that responsibility is conferred. Most importantly, Veil fulfills her social duty to relive her personal tragedy by transcribing her experiences into words on the page, thereby creating visible proof that she survived to tell her story to future generations. As the words fill the blank spaces of the page, Veil becomes the *messenger*—the scribe for those who never had the opportunity to speak. But, for the autobiographer, there is also a

dual purpose, a more personal aspect associated with the solitary act of composing one's story. Young notes that there is a connection between testimony and the discovery of the self, which he examines within a general context of Holocaust literature. As Young explains, 'A survivor's writing after the Holocaust is proof that he has defeated the 'final solution'; it is indisputable evidence that he now exists, a notion that no survivor ever takes for granted' (Young: 37). Young also maintains that the writings of Holocaust survivors point to an affirmation of the self. To apply Young's ideas to Veil's text, she seems to write herself back into existence by composing her narrative of personal suffering, which holds the promise of self-discovery, and, at the same time, constitutes a form of self-preservation.

There are other noteworthy theoretical aspects of testimonial writing that relate directly to Veil's textual production. For instance, it is important to look more closely at the relationship between the testimonial writer and the intended listener of the author's narrative. In her study of testimony, Shoshana Felman adds insight to Wiesel's concept of 'speaking up,' explained by the idea of speaking beyond one's self. According to Felman, the concept of bearing witness implies 'to speak *for* others and *to* others' (Felman: 3). In other words, the survivor in putting pen to paper to tell his or her story speaks for those who have perished and thus engages in an act of commemoration, while searching to connect with a listener. As Felman's co-author Dori Laub observes, 'Bearing witness to a trauma is, in fact, a process that includes the listener. For the testimonial process to take place, there needs to be a bonding, the intimate and total presence of an *other*—in the position of one who hears' (Laub: 70-1). In her autobiographical text, Veil seems to subscribe to these various theories by endeavoring to not only find a listener but one who will learn and benefit from the traumatic events of her own life. In this way, Veil's responsibility as a survivor who documents her story and shares it with others shows that the events described within the body of the text reach beyond herself to resonate with her audience. In this interactive relationship between the testimonial writer and the listener, Veil also sustains the pedagogical intention of her text because the reader, as the recipient, inevitably deepens his knowledge of the Holocaust. Most importantly, this relationship between the autobiographer as a survivor and the reader constitutes another form of taking responsibility as a witness for the unrepresentable events that took place during the war, assuring that they will never be erased through the passage of time. But perhaps the most salient example of accountability is to tell her story, as Hitler's intention was to ensure the complete eradication of European Jews from the earth, thus rendering them invisible and unheard. In referencing the Nazis, Veil states that they wanted to 'nous faire disparaître par les moyens les plus discrets' (92).⁸ In

sharp contrast to Hitler's master plan, Veil and other survivors (such as Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel) demonstrate resistance to this ideology of collective erasure. In this text, Veil retrieves her shattered self and performs a scripted resurrection of other Jewish survivors by not only bearing witness to unimaginable suffering but also by revising this invisible image of the Jewish people that was perpetuated by Nazi propaganda. With pen in hand, she recasts the absent representation of her fellow victims, proclaiming them visible through the socially engaged act of breaking the silence to tell 'their' story. Veil alludes to this idea in a speech that she gave in 2007 to commemorate the Shoah (included in one of the appendices in this edition). Here, she situates the image of incomprehensible loss by a textual retrieval of their unforgettable arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As she puts it, 'Ce qui nous hante avant tout, c'est le souvenir de ceux dont nous avons été brutalement séparés dès notre arrivée au camp [...] qu'ils avaient été directement conduits à la chambre à gaz' (161).⁹ As Terrence Des Pres posits, 'the survivor allows the dead their voice; he makes the silence heard' (Des Pres: 36). The fact that Veil is not only composing her story but that of other survivors shows that a testimonial narrative can, at times, be polyphonic. Through a restricted lens, the duality of writing for the self and for those that perished resembles Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of double-voiced discourse.¹⁰ This theoretical notion is buttressed by Thomas Trezise; he maintains that a survivor's testimony is inherently polyphonic and 'dialogic' (Trezise: 78). In other words, the survivor's discourse is not unitary, for the writer absorbs the social and historical voices of others, the victims who were slaughtered during the Shoah. In speaking for the dead, Veil, once again, shows that her responsibility as a survivor and a scribe is conferred.

Laub's view of the listener's salient role seems to be connected to another aspect of Bakhtin's theory of dual discourses. According to Laub, 'testimonies are not monologues; they cannot take place in solitude' (Laub: 70-71). As an integral part of the testimonial process, Laub also maintains that survivors must speak with an interlocutor, thereby engaging directly with the listener. But, in Veil's autobiographical text, there is, at times, a problematic aspect, one which revolves around finding a listener and getting other survivors to speak about their experiences. In the postwar part of her testimonial, Veil describes the difficult situation for those who wanted to speak: 'Nous souhaitons parler, et on ne voulait pas nous écouter' (110).¹¹ She provides further insight about her fellow survivors in an essay devoted to witnessing: 'la plupart ont eu la volonté de parler, de témoigner, mais ils se sont heurtés à un mur de silence et longtemps d'indifférence.'¹² As shown in these examples, Veil, and other survivors, attempt to carry out Laub's idea of bonding with a listener to perform the testimonial process, but the victims fall short of finding an

audience in their daily experiences after the war. In any case, she does emphasize the necessity of speaking about the Holocaust but can only do so with fellow victims. As she puts it, 'J'avais besoin de parler du camp, et il n'y avait guère qu'avec eux que c'était possible' (120).¹³ For survivors, the obstacle of not only finding an interlocutor but deciding to speak or not points to another key aspect of Holocaust testimonials. According to Wieviorka, the events at the nexus of Holocaust narratives tend to elude words: 'these events are said to be unnameable, unrepresentable, unsayable' (Wieviorka: 40). Veil mirrors this idea in a personal reflection on the dilemma of discussing it: 'Parler de la Shoah, et comment; ou bien ne pas en parler, et pourquoi? Éternelle question' (113).¹⁴ She channels Wieviorka's notion of the Shoah as 'unrepresentable' and 'unsayable' but nonetheless asserts that 'La Shoah est omniprésente. Rien ne s'efface' (114).¹⁵ On a textual level, this key concept of unspeakable suffering is represented as an indelible dark image in the author's documentation of the events leading up to her family's inevitable deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The Occupation Period and Internment at Auschwitz-Birkenau

The first two chapters concentrate on Veil's childhood and life during the Occupation. In the opening chapter (*Une enfance niçoise*) [A niçoise childhood], she provides details about her family background. Veil was raised in a bourgeois, culturally Jewish family, with emphasis on education and independence for the children. However, Veil's education and her family's peaceful lives were abruptly shattered by the onset of the Second World War. It is important to note that the 1930s was a period when there was a rise in anti-Semitism, albeit decades old, which may have been exacerbated by the rise to power by Léon Blum, a Jew, who served as a three-time Prime Minister of France. Blum, a Socialist politician, was heavily influenced by the Dreyfuss affair of the late nineteenth century. In 1939, France officially entered the war, an act that foreshadowed significant changes for French Jews during the Occupation. When the Nazis occupied France in 1940, they divided the country into two zones: the occupied northern and western regions and the unoccupied southern territory.¹⁶ Southern France was designated as a free zone and, in fact, was occupied by the Italians from 1940-1943. It is important to point out that it was also in 1940 that the Vichy collaborationist regime was established in July under Henri Philippe Pétain's authority. In any case, it was after the Italians were forced to give up control of this territory in 1943 that the Nazis took over, thus triggering an increase in the persecution of the Jewish population. Veil documents the radical changes in a recent book about

her life. She describes the striking transition, as the Italians did not impose stringent limitations upon the Jewish population in Nice. As she explains, 'Tout s'est accéléré en septembre 1943, lorsque les Italiens ont signé un armistice et évacué la ville de Nice. Les Allemands les ont remplacés et nous avons basculé dans un autre monde' (61).¹⁷ In contrast to the Italians' lenient authority, the Nazis implemented strict measures for the Jews of southern France, such as mandatory identity cards, thereby stripping Jews of their identity as French citizens. Like other Jews in Nice, it was not long before most of the author's family was arrested, detained, and inevitably sent to Drancy, the transit camp before deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau.¹⁸ As Veil writes, 'nous descendions une nouvelle marche dans la misère et l'inhumanité' (57).¹⁹ With this description, Veil transitions to a more somber atmosphere, which is exemplified by the allusion to the descent into misery. This image evokes the ominous image of Dante's inferno and prefigures the descent into *la misère* [misery] (57), referencing the death camps. But before turning to the core chapter entitled *L'enfer* [Hell], Veil, once again, engages pedagogically with her readers by interpolating a political commentary aimed at the collaboration between the Vichy regime and the Nazis. As she candidly states, 'Jamais, jamais on ne pourra passer l'éponge sur la responsabilité des dirigeants de Vichy qui ont prêté main-forte à la 'solution finale' (61).²⁰ Here, the image of the phrase 'on ne pourra passer l'éponge' [one can never erase] reinforces Wiesel's idea that survivors must engage in the struggle to resist the erasure of the Holocaust from the world, but Veil shifts the focus to her fellow citizens by reminding French readers that the Vichy regime should not be absolved of their crimes. In the passage cited above, the author's emphasis is directed to not only exposing the complicity of the Vichy regime but also to condemn their involvement with the Nazis. Here, Veil subscribes to Wiesel's belief in a survivor's obligation to not only 'speak up' but to fulfill personal responsibility for the sake of educating people of all ages.

In the main chapter (*L'enfer*), Veil sustains the pedagogical objective of her testimonial account by directing the reader's attention to her battle to survive, with emphasis on self-preservation. However, within the body of this chapter, she, here again, deviates from her survival instincts to write beyond the self. She broadens her perspective to show how survival also relied on her ability to foster valuable connections with others, thus underscoring the importance of collectivity. In the opening pages of this key chapter, the author charts a chronological account of deportation to Auschwitz-Birkenau by cattle car in which the conditions were excessively inhumane, resulting in the deaths of countless Jews before they reached the camp itself. Veil was spared the gas chambers, mainly because another deportee advised her to lie about her age. When asked by an SS officer about her age, Veil

claimed she was eighteen, thus concealing the fact she was only sixteen. The Nazis had little use for women, children, the infirm and the elderly; therefore, thousands of Jews were immediately gassed as they disembarked from the trains. Upon arrival, victims were separated by gender and either destined for the gas chambers or selected for hard labor, but the uncertainty of extermination loomed inevitably over their heads. Veil captures the impossibility of conveying the horrific plight of these deportees: 'Nous ne comprenions pas; nous ne pouvions pas comprendre' (72).²¹ Here, the author suggests that the reality of what they encountered upon arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau was simply beyond the limits of human comprehension, thus impossible to articulate in words so that readers could attempt to grasp the immense tragedy of the deportees' fate. She also reprises some aspects seen in the previous chapter on the Occupation, specifically the loss of identity which is significantly amplified here. She describes the numbers that were tattooed on their arms, designed to initiate the process of erasing personal identity. As Veil puts it, 'Nous ne sommes plus des personnes humaines, seulement du bétail. Un tatouage, c'est indélébile' (73).²² The reference to the word *bétail* [cattle] not only reinforces the dehumanizing treatment by the SS but suggests that their intent was to rob the victims of their dignity. Most importantly, she emphasizes the dehumanizing aspect of this registration process, as the women suffer the loss of their individual 'je' to a collective 'nous': 'Chacune d'entre nous est devenue un simple numéro, inscrit dans sa chair; un numéro qu'il fallait savoir par coeur, puisque nous avons perdu toute identité. Dans les registres du camps, chaque femme était enregistrée à son numéro avec le prénom de Sarah!' (73).²³ Here, the use of the name Sarah reveals unexpected gender implications in Veil's autobiographical narrative. In the Old Testament, Sarah, who was Abraham's wife, embodies an overarching matriarchal figure, as she signifies the universal mother of the Jews.

Female Solidarity in the Concentration Camps

For female deportees, the emphasis on this maternal gender role in captivity is a salient aspect because it is associated with the necessity of collectivity in order to survive in extreme conditions.²⁴ Veil affirms this idea in describing survival strategies in Auschwitz-Birkenau. She initially states that prisoners were capable of doing horrible things to one another to preserve their own lives but could also do the opposite. As she writes, 'Mais une grande solidarité régnait aussi, au moins dans les petits groups. [...] des liens étroits se nouaient, des liens extraordinaires se nouaient qui ont permis aux gens de conserver un certain sens moral et d'affronter les pires

situations' (71).²⁵ In the camps, one of the roles that women maintained was their ability to take care of others, thus channeling the matriarchal archetype associated with Sarah. Despite the inhumane conditions, female prisoners still offered help and attended to others, thus adhering to their gender assigned roles. As Sybil Milton explains, 'Since women had been primarily responsible for their families as housewives and cooks, there was some direct correlation between their own survival and previously acquired skills' (Milton: 227). To expand on Milton's point, Margaret-Anne Hutton notes that survival of the self also depended on the deportee's ability to form effective bonds with others, while building a sense of community (Hutton: 57-58). Hutton also underscores the importance of a woman's domestic role. To explore this image of female 'domestic' identity from a gendered perspective, Joan Ringelheim reinforces the idea of building communities within the camps. She buttresses Hutton's and Milton's observations by positing that women played a key role in 'creating' families in captivity. Although there is a lack of evidence pertaining to survival rates between the genders, Ringelheim provides some perspective on this question. She notes that while women retained their maternal roles in captivity, men did not take on the role of fathers in the camps because the Nazis divested them of their protective role (Ringelheim: 747). In any case, these various theories on feminine survival chances are textually shown by three members of the Veil family, as the author was imprisoned with her mother and her sister, Milou, until the end of the war. As Veil states, 'La première des solidarités était la solidarité familiale' (71).²⁶ For the three Veil women, it is also possible to look at survival chances from another gendered perspective. Female solidarity in the blocks may have enabled women to increase their motivation to survive longer. The author points to several examples of feminine solidarity, one in which she recalls a Polish inmate who gave her a dress that came from the Canada stock room. This storage area was where the Nazis compiled the belongings of their victims, as scores of deportees were exterminated after their arrival at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The darkness of this chapter is offset by this fleeting moment of genuine brightness. As Veil writes, 'Je portais donc une vraie robe, ce qui constituait un bonheur sans nom' (83-84).²⁷ The acquisition of a garment to replace her prison rags is a pivotal moment, for it signifies a partial recovery of the author's feminine identity.

In this chapter, Veil also points to another key form of feminine solidarity, enhancing her chances of survival. She received some unusual assistance from a former prostitute, Stenia, who was brutal with the prisoners but had limited power to make life and death decisions for the inmates. She, in turn, not only spared Veil from the gas chambers but played a key role in relocating her to Bobek, a factory where conditions were less harsh. Above all, prisoners did not die at Bobek but could be sent

back to the extermination camps. Veil recalls this encounter with Stenia, representing a moment of grace for her, Milou, and their mother. As Stenia singled her out from the other prisoners, she said to Veil: 'Tu es vraiment trop jolie pour mourir ici. Je vais faire quelque chose pour toi, en t'envoyant ailleurs' (84).²⁸ Veil managed to persuade Stenia to send her to Bobek with her family members, thus marginally improving the possibility of survival. In a subsequent recollection, Veil describes Stenia's intervention again after the death marches in which the three Veil women had to walk in brutally cold temperatures, without proper clothing or shoes, to Bergen-Belsen. Veil points out that, in 1945, the Nazis were moving their prisoners around, as the Russians were advancing across enemy lines and the Allies were bombing in and around the camps. Although conditions were horrific at Bergen-Belsen, Stenia, unbeknownst to her, played an important role in saving the Veil women from dying. She gave Veil a kitchen job, which enabled her to clandestinely obtain more food to care for her fragile, ailing mother. As noted above, the author reinforces Milton's and Hutton's idea that female family members could survive longer when remaining together. As she writes, 'Pendant toute cette période, Maman, Milou et moi avons réussi à ne pas être séparées. Même si Maman a commencé alors à s'affaiblir, elle a toujours travaillé. Nous faisons tout pour la protéger' (87).²⁹ Most importantly, Veil's mother exemplifies the image of the maternal archetype (discussed above). In the same interview cited previously, Veil speaks to this point about her mother: 'Quand nous avons été déportées à Auschwitz-Birkenau, ma mère, ma soeur et moi, maman était devenue la mère de presque toutes les filles'(4).³⁰ As shown in Veil's testimonial narrative, survival in traumatic conditions went beyond self-preservation and, in part, was due to the ability to interact with others. This core part of her autobiographical account demonstrates her overarching pedagogical intent, while pointing to Laub's theory on the importance of engaging the reader as an informed recipient of the author's testimonial narrative. To return to the text, Veil interrupts her testimonial recollection of overwhelming anguish to reflect on some of the philosophical implications of the Shoah, triggered by the unimaginable suffering of the inmates in these brutal death marches. Above all, she contemplates this question: 'Pourquoi les nazis n'ont-ils pas tué les Juifs sur place, plutôt que de les embarquer dans leur propre fuite? La réponse est simple: pour ne pas laisser de traces derrière eux' (92).³¹ She sustains the emphasis, again, on Hitler's master plan—to eradicate the presence of Jews from the face of the earth. Here, the author demonstrates resistance to Jewish absence by articulating the intention of the Nazis for her readers, thus fracturing the silence shrouding the reality of mass genocide.

This seminal idea of absence and presence manifests itself on several levels in Veil's autobiographical text. Here, she not only bears witness, with emphasis on her visual recollections, but also interpolates a more personal reflection on loss. In this latter part of the chapter, she heightens the textual descriptions by deploying her journalistic style, which can be characterized as documentary realism, to describe the grim conditions at Bergen-Belsen. As the end of the war was now imminent for the SS, chaos was ensuing in the camps. For the inmates, conditions had significantly deteriorated beyond the limits of human comprehension. Here again, the horror of the situation is etched in impossibility; Veil cannot articulate this unspeakable reality of witnessing dead bodies strewn about among the living. Here, it is this unrepresentable element that reveals a tension in Veil's text. To delve into this notion, Laub observes that an integral part of the Nazi system was to ensure that survivors of the Shoah could not communicate the events to themselves or to others (Laub: 82). Nevertheless, Veil, as a testimonial writer, feels obligated to reach beyond herself to *tell* readers, thus fulfilling the pedagogical objective of her narrative. In any case, Veil sustains the focus on unconscionable suffering at the end of the war. Typhus was approaching epidemic levels, starvation was widespread, and the dead were no longer being removed from the camps. As she writes, 'les morts se mêlaient aux vivants' (95).³² But for Veil this tragedy was even more traumatic, as her mother succumbed to typhus because of her weakened physical condition. However, Veil's mother resists the effacement of death, and, in fact, retains her textual presence, as her indomitable spirit remains eternally alive. This idea is shown by the reference to her mother's lucidity during the unspeakable suffering the three women had endured at the hands of the Nazis. As the author describes, 'Elle conservait la même lucidité sur les choses, le même jugement sur les êtres, la même stupeur face à ce que des hommes étaient capables de faire endurer à d'autres hommes' (97).³³ Veil also incorporates an intimate confession about the loss of her mother: 'je me rends compte que je n'ai jamais pu me résigner à sa disparition' (97).³⁴ For the author, her mother's wisdom lives on as an enduring role model, which would further influence the trajectory of her life after the war.

In the latter part of *L'enfer*, Veil shifts the personal tone of her testimony to, once again, record historical facts by underscoring the importance of a specific date, signifying the defeat of the Nazis by the Allies and, at long last, emancipation from the camps. On 17 April 1945, Bergen-Belsen was liberated by the British but the inmates experienced far from true freedom. As Veil writes, 'Nous étions libérées, mais pas encore libres' (99).³⁵ She also describes the horrific crisis that the British soldiers were forced to confront—the burial of over 10,000 bodies that were scattered across the camp. Here, the author highlights the chaotic atmosphere of trying to organize the

survivors for repatriation. The Allies organized the victims by nationality, assigning a French officer to the survivors bound for France. When the camps were liberated in 1945, there were only 2,500 victims who emerged from unimaginable suffering out of the 76,000 Jews who had been deported from France.³⁶ In any event, one of Veil's key recollections is the pivotal moment during liberation in which her identity was restored, signifying that she was no longer an anonymous victim. As she notes, 'C'était la première fois depuis des mois que nous utilisions nos propres noms. Nous n'étions plus des numéros. Lentement, nous retrouvions notre identité' (101).³⁷ It is the reinstatement of the author's name that empowers her with the possibility to ultimately recover her shattered self. But with the restoration of her name and national identity, Veil was unprepared for the lengthy delay in returning to France. Most importantly, she describes several examples of betrayal by the French government. After the victims had recovered physically from debilitating illness and weakness, she recalls that France did not bring them home expeditiously. They transported their soldiers back to France by plane but, to her astonishment, did not even provide trains for the victims. Veil testifies that the French compounded her predicament by sending trucks to bring the survivors home. To her way of thinking, this constituted 'un scandale' [a scandal] (101). As a witness to this outrage, Veil shifts the tone of the text, interjecting a political commentary directed at the French government. As she states, '[...] aux yeux de notre propre pays le sort des déportés n'avaient guère d'importance [...]]' (101).³⁸ Here, Veil's impression of national abandonment seems to highlight the image of the invisible or absent Jew. Moreover, this lack of recognition or visibility characterizes the reception from her fellow French citizens. Veil references this unexpected reaction in the opening pages of the last chapter (*Revivre*) [To live again], which amplifies the indifferent attitude described at the end of *L'enfer*. As she writes, 'Nous nous serions dispensés de certains regards fuyants qui nous rendaient transparents' (108).³⁹ The effective use of the word *transparent* highlights the 'otherness' of the Jewish survivor from the viewpoint of French society. Veil also notes that in conversations people did not exhibit empathy or interest in the plight of French-Jewish victims: 'les gens préféraient ne pas trop savoir ce que nous avons vécu' (118).⁴⁰ As the passage shows, French people preferred to avoid any verbal acknowledgement of the atrocities committed by the Nazis. As noted above, it is the use of the pronoun 'nous' (us) that demonstrates how Veil writes beyond the self to resist Jewish invisibility, which unveils another discourse interwoven into the body of the text, one that is inherently dialogic. In other words, she absorbs the voices of others, and, in turn, speaks for them, thereby taking on a socio-political role as a

spokeswoman who discloses widespread insensitivity towards the plight of the victims of the Shoah.

Repatriation

These troubling questions of invisibility are further explored during the repatriation period. Although the author had survived great suffering during the war, her return to France did not alter her status as a categorical 'other', thus hindering her from being accepted as a French citizen and a woman. But, despite this social obstacle, Veil sustains the pedagogical intention of her narrative for her audience by apprising them of other social problems after the war. On a historical level, it is important to note that this hostile reception was not limited to France; it was similar for other survivors across postwar Europe. After liberation from the camps, Jews were regarded as outsiders and were received with malevolence in the Netherlands, Belgium, Poland, and other Eastern European countries.⁴¹ Most importantly, the autobiographer reveals instances of anti-Semitism directed towards the survivors. As she writes, 'les gens disaient des choses épouvantables. Nous avons oublié tout l'antisémitisme rampant dont certains faisaient étalage' (109).⁴² Here, Veil modifies the representation of the invisible Jew, as her personal confrontation with anti-Semitism in postwar France signifies a jarring reality, one in which all 'illusions' of achieving re-integration are abruptly stripped away. From the point of view of non-Jewish French citizens, the portrayal of the Jew here, again, can be characterized as the 'other'. Another noteworthy example of considering the former deportees as the 'other' also revolves around the indifferent reaction by many French citizens. Veil vividly recalls people talking about them in the street: 'Comment, ils sont revenus? Ça prouve bien que ce n'était pas si terrible que ça' (108).⁴³ But even in the rare conversations she had with compatriots, Veil notes that other people really did not want to know what the victims had endured. As the author writes, 'Ce sentiment d'incompréhension teintée de reproche était pénible à vivre' (119).⁴⁴ Veil seems to draw a conclusion from this social perception of incomprehension infused with reproach, as described in the passage above. She suggests that Holocaust testimonials remain incomprehensible and inherently unrepresentable: 'La Shoah demeure un phénomène absolument spécifique et totalement inaccessible' (109).⁴⁵ As pointed out, the victims' experiences remain 'inaccessible' to non-victims who did not experience profound loss and traumatic suffering. But at the same time, there is an inherent tension associated with this notion of the Shoah as an 'inaccessible,' untellable tragedy. As a testimonial writer, Veil demonstrates resistance to silence by adhering to her overarching textual

objective—to inform her readers to permanently impact future generations of readers. In their position as recipients of her personal account, the readers share the pedagogical objective, for they are responsible for the continuation of Veil's story to ensure a sense of eternal presence for the victims.⁴⁶ In this way, Veil's testimonial narrative resists the effacement of time by leaving an indelible trace.

In the last two pages of *L'enfer*, Veil fractures the silence, as she speaks for the thousands of victims, thus signaling a shift to a more politically engaged tone. Once again, Bakhtin's theory of polyphonic discourse is applicable here, as her own experiences of self-preservation are fused with the distant voices of the slaughtered victims of the Shoah. It is possible to read these last two pages of *L'enfer* as a partial conclusion of Veil's testimonial narrative, mainly because she composes a powerful textual recapitulation of the unforgettable images imprinted in her memory. She places her emphasis on her recollections of the inhumane conditions in the concentration camps, emphasizing hard labor, illness, imprisonment, the brutal cold, relentless hunger, beatings, and the haunting sound of other inmates' cries that permeated the nights. In the background, Veil recaptures the vision of dark smoke perpetually rising from the gas chambers. She reminds her compatriots and her readers of how many French Jews survived (2,500), while underscoring the unrepresentable aspect of the Shoah, which is commemorated by a profound sense of silence. Within this silence, Veil textually performs a ritual of collective mourning for the victims of this mass genocide, as she lends her voice, once again, to eulogize them in a lyrical way. On a textual level, she seems to channel their voices, thus rendering them eternally present. As she writes, 'Là-bas, dans les plaines allemandes et polonaises, s'étendent désormais des espaces dénudés sur lesquels règne le silence; c'est le poids effrayant du vide que l'oubli n'a pas le droit de combler, et que la mémoire des vivants habitera toujours' (115).⁴⁷

Recovering the Shattered Self

In the final chapter (*Revivre*), Veil underscores the overarching textual importance of collectivity in her testimonial work. As noted above, it was during the postwar period that she took on the role of spokeswoman for the victims, while disclosing the socio-political problems related to intolerance and anti-Semitism. This public role is amplified, to some degree, in *Revivre*, as she briefly describes her decision to become a lawyer to fight for social justice. This decision marks the first step in a remarkable career in which she contributed greatly to society by holding various elite positions as a magistrate and a minister in the French government. Interestingly, it is Veil's

professional trajectory that mirrors Young's notion of the survivor's testimony, which serves as an affirmation of the self. It is important to note that the author also seems to discover herself by choosing to work for the French government. At the same time, Veil finds a way to re-integrate the severed parts of her identity as a woman and a French national. She becomes a unified person with a clear objective, revolving around the commitment to becoming an international spokesperson for women, the oppressed, and most of all, for the victims of the Holocaust, thereby carrying out Wiesel's idea of performing her duties as a survivor.

As shown, Veil's testimonial narrative sustains the focus on the pedagogical intention of her story, which is predicated, in part, on Felman's and Laub's idea of engaging the listener as a recipient of her story. As she describes in the body of the text, her own survival was, to a considerable extent, dependent on her ability to create effective bonds with other prisoners to stay alive, especially her mother and sister as well as other women in the camps. In choosing to tell her story, Veil not only engages with her own self but can recover fragments of her lost identity, while establishing a meaningful connection with her readers. It is the global awareness of her audience that will assure that the suffering of the deportees will not be forgotten but eternally preserved by the impermeable black mark of the words, or *traces*, upon the pages. In this way, her testimonial account also can be viewed as a form of resistance to being categorized as a Jewish 'other'. In penning her autobiographical experiences as a survivor, Veil also demonstrates resistance to silence, for she ensures that the victims will never be forgotten through the enduring creation of her testimonial narrative, one that resists the erasure of time.

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Notes

¹Although these works are not incorporated into this discussion, see Levi, Primo, *If This is a Man*. New York: Orion Press, 1959; Rousset, David, *L'Univers concentrationnaire*. Paris: Editions du Pavois, 1946; Wiesel, Elie, *Night*. New York: Bantam Books; Antelme, Robert, *L'espèce humaine*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.

²Eger, Edith, *The Choice*. London: Rider, 2010. Henriette Cohen was the oldest survivor living in France; she died at 101 but gave oral testimony to various groups in the postwar years.

³See Charlotte Delbo's noteworthy trilogy on the Holocaust, *Auschwitz et après*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970.

⁴See Simone Veil's interview in *Elle* magazine, <http://www.elle.fr/interviews/simone-veil>, (3). 'I find myself in it, but I understand a certain number of things that I write might be shocking.'

⁵Veil, Simone, *Une jeunesse au temps de la Shoah: extraits d'une vie*. Paris: Stock, 2010, Annexe, *Discours du 29 janvier 2007*, (157-8). All subsequent notes are incorporated into the main text. 'Like all of my friends, I consider it my duty to explain tirelessly to the younger generation, to public opinion in our country and to politicians, how 6 million women and men died.'

⁶'Can be considered as useful pedagogy in relationship to today's youth [...].'

⁷Cargas, Henry James, *Conversations with Elie Wiesel*. South Bend: Justice Books, 1992 (87).

⁸'Make us disappear by the most discrete means.'

⁹'What haunts us above all, is the memory of those from whom we were brutally separated upon our arrival at the camp. There were directly led to the gas chambers.'

¹⁰Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four essays*. Trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas P, 1981 (295-304).

¹¹'We wanted to speak and they didn't want to listen to us.'

¹²Veil talks about witnessing in 'Réflexions d'un témoin', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 48.3 (1993) (697). 'The majority had the will to speak, to witness, but they confronted a longstanding wall of silence and indifference.'

¹³'I needed to talk about the concentration camp and it was only possible with them.'

¹⁴'Talk about the Shoah or not talk about it and why? Eternal question.'

¹⁵'The Shoah is omnipresent. Nothing is erased.'

¹⁶Kaspi, André, *Les juifs pendant l'occupation* Paris: Seuil, 1997 (286-289).

¹⁷'Everything was accelerated in September of 1943 when the Italians signed an armistice and evacuated Nice. The Germans replaced them and we were pushed into another world.'

¹⁸It is important to note that Veil's sister, Denise, was not deported to the death camps; she was an active member of the Resistance. Her father and brother were deported to a hard-labor camp in Lithuania and subsequently disappeared.

¹⁹'We went down another step into misery and inhumanity.'

²⁰ ‘Never, never can one erase the responsibility of the Vichy leaders who enabled the final solution.’

²¹ ‘We didn’t understand; we couldn’t understand.’

²² ‘We were no longer human beings, only cattle. A tattoo is indelible.’

²³ ‘Each one of us became a simple number, imprinted on our flesh; a number that it was necessary to know by heart, since we had lost our identity. In the camp registrations, each woman was registered with a number and with the name of Sarah.’

²⁴ For more information on solidarity in the camps, see Shamai Davidson’s article, ‘Group Formation and Human Reciprocity in the Nazi Concentration Camps’, in: *Holding on to Humanity—The Message of Holocaust Survivors* (1992) (127-132).

²⁵ Veil, Simone and David Teboul, *Simone Veil: L’âube à Birkenau*. Paris: Les Arènes, 2019.

‘But a great sense of solidarity also existed, at least in the small groups [...] narrow ties were forged, extraordinary bonds were formed that enabled people to preserve a certain sense of morality to confront the worst situations.’

²⁶ Veil and Teboul, 71. ‘The first form of solidarity was family solidarity.’

²⁷ ‘I was wearing a real dress, which gave me happiness beyond words.’

²⁸ ‘You are really too pretty to die here. I’m going to do something for you by sending you elsewhere.’

²⁹ ‘During all of this time, Mother, Milou and I succeeded in not being separated. Even if Mother began to weaken, she always worked. We did everything to protect her.’

³⁰ ‘When we were deported to Auschwitz-Birkenau, my mother, sister and I, my mother became the mother of almost all the girls.’

³¹ ‘Why didn’t the Nazis kill all of the Jews on the spot rather than embark them on their own escape? The answer is simple: to not leave any traces behind them.’

³² ‘The dead were mixed with the living.’

³³ ‘She retained the same clarity about things, the same judgment of human beings, the same astonishment in confronting what mankind was capable of making other humans endure.’

³⁴ ‘I realize that I never could resign myself to her absence.’

³⁵ ‘We were liberated, but not yet free.’

³⁶ *Post-Holocaust France and the Jews, 1945-1955*, ed. by Séan Hand and Steven Katz.

New York & London: New York University P, 2015 (3).

³⁷ ‘It was the first time in months that we used our own names. We were no longer numbers. Slowly, we regained our identity.’

³⁸ ‘[...]in the eyes of our country the fate of the deportees was hardly of importance[...].’

³⁹ ‘We were spared from certain fleeting gazes that rendered us transparent.’

⁴⁰ ‘People preferred not to know what we had lived through.’

⁴¹ In Europe, there was rampant xenophobia and hostility directed at refugees of the Shoah during the chaotic postwar period. Other non-Jewish victims, many of whom originated from Eastern European countries, were also treated with indifference and hatred. For example, Bolsheviks, Slavs, Romas, Poles, Africans, Asians, homosexuals, Jehovah’s witnesses, political prisoners and dissidents were all victims of Nazi atrocities. According to the Nazis, these groups were deemed subhuman races. Michael Mbabuike and Anna Marie Evans discuss these targeted victims in ‘Other Victims of the Holocaust’, in: *Dialectical Anthropology* 25.1 (2000) (3-6). In addition, Veil also acknowledges the extermination of other non-Jewish victims at Auschwitz, mainly the Romas (139).

See also Manfred Gerstenfeld’s article, ‘Postwar Renewal of Jewish Communities in the Netherlands’, *Postwar Jewish Displacement and Rebirth: 1945-1967*, ed. by Françoise Ouzan and Manfred Gerstenfeld. Amsterdam: Brill, 2014 (153-4).

⁴² ‘People said horrible things. We forgot about the rampant anti-Semitism that some exhibited.’

⁴³ ‘How could they return? That proves it wasn’t so terrible after all.’

⁴⁴ ‘This feeling of incomprehension tinted with reproach was painful to bear.’

⁴⁵ ‘The Shoah remains an absolutely specific and inaccessible phenomenon.’

⁴⁶ Davis, Colin, *Traces of War: Interpreting Ethics and Trauma in Twentieth-Century French Writing*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2018 (196-200).

⁴⁷ 'Over there on the German and Polish plains, empty spaces expand where silence reigns; it is the frightening weight of the void that oblivion doesn't have the right to fill and where the memory of the living will always live on.'