

Simone Veil, President of the European Parliament,

28th November 1981, in Dublin

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As the long black limousine pulled up outside the Ballsbridge hotel and the Garda outliers who had accompanied us from the airport pulled to one side, their blue lights still flashing, I saw a crowd gathered at the entrance. My initial reaction was excitement but as I turned to the woman sitting beside me, I saw she had a puzzled expression.

‘What are they doing?’ she asked me, in French.

I looked again, more closely. And then I saw the banners. The angry, contorted faces. The bottles held aloft.

‘Are they....?’

‘Foetuses. Yes.’

A face appeared at the car window. It was the organiser, looking harassed. The Gardai cleared a passage for us past the group of men and women screaming abuse and we were hustled into the lobby, where the other members of the association were waiting.

‘Madame, I’m so sorry. We had no idea this would happen,’ the organiser stammered.

Simone Veil smiled at her - her “official” smile, the one that gave nothing away – and reassured her that it was fine.

After all, I thought, what were a few demonstrators waving bottles compared to the insults launched at her in the Assemblée Nationale, where her opponents accused her of sending babies to the gas chambers?

I had worked so hard to persuade her *Directeur de Cabinet* to let her accept this invitation to address the Women’s Political Association. ‘She has already made an official visit to Ireland,’ he said, looking at me sternly over his steel-rimmed glasses. ‘But that was almost two years ago,’ I said. ‘And this is important. It’s important for Irish women to know they have support at the highest level in Europe. And Simone Veil is an icon for so many.’

‘And you have no personal, vested interest in this, n’est-ce pas?’ I detected a twinkle in his eye. Of course I did.

On the plane she told me how much she had enjoyed her first visit to Ireland and how glad she was to be able to attend this event. I think she saw it as a welcome opportunity to relax in the company of other women, away from the intense meetings and official visits that filled her diary. That was what made this unexpected protest more galling. I was embarrassed and upset.

She delivered her speech in English, exactly as we had written it, only occasionally stumbling over an unfamiliar word. The words ‘contraception’ and ‘abortion’ were never mentioned and she ended by saying ‘I have not come here today to offer you solutions, but rather to encourage you to re-open the debate.....We, the women of Europe, must seek the solutions together.’ There was a standing ovation, and, afterwards, unusually for her, she mingled happily with the women who came to shake her hand.

When we left, there was no sign of the protesters. I accompanied her to her hotel suite and we sat for a while, going over the day's events. She kicked off her shoes and let her hair fall loose. She pulled out a cigarette – something she was careful never to do in public – and told me how she was glad she had come, and how good it was to be able to let her hair down – literally -with me.

We spoke about the protesters, and she brushed my apologies aside.

That evening, for the first and only time, she talked to me about Auschwitz. That conversation has stayed with me all these years and I feel privileged to have been part of it, to have caught a glimpse of the real Simone Veil.