

Simone Veil

Simone Veil, former French Minister and President of the European Parliament from 1979 to 1981, took part in the Round Table on Xenophobia organised by the High Commissioner's Office in Geneva on 11 April 1984. In an interview with REFUGEES she talks about this subject in the European context.

REFUGEES: The Round Table had a wide-ranging discussion on the evolution of xenophobia as regards refugees. Has this subject come up in the European Parliament?

Simone Veil: It has come up on various occasions, at first particularly in relation to migrant workers. People have been specially concerned about their status: what should be done to ensure that in the host country they get the social, economic and political status which can make them feel as much at home as possible. I am intentionally avoiding the term "integration", which might be taken to mean assimilation. For this is not necessarily the objective. Indeed, the European Parliament drew attention to the case of immigrants who want to return to their own countries, as well as those who want to keep their customs, habits, religious observances and other features of their life. The Parliament has prepared reports which look at all aspects of this problem, so that in each situation one can see how best to encourage the best possible reception, while respecting the personality and the rights of all foreigners, whoever they are.

REFUGEES: How does the local population accept these differences of culture and customs?

Simone Veil: At the present time, in Europe as a whole, differences of culture and customs arise in the large urban centres or in some districts. There is no doubt that they give rise to frictions.

Very simple things can cause trouble: different kinds of food which produce smells to which one is not accustomed, noises, different timetables, a type of music which, even if it does not necessarily actually produce a louder noise than one is used to, nevertheless shocks one more... these are small things, but they are differences which people find hard to

accept. It's sometimes a problem where there are so many people working together at the same place, and even more, living on top of one another. Just as at school, when there are children who don't speak the local language correctly, for example, this quickly leads to reactions which can turn into xenophobia, animosity and rejection. This is a very great danger, because these rejection syndromes can take violent forms.

REFUGEES: What are the answers?

Simone Veil: It's very difficult. I think we should call together a large Europe-wide conference composed of politicians, sociologists, academics, psychiatrists, etcetera, who should come from the various communities concerned, otherwise it would be useless. It should consider the ways in which people can live together more happily and can accept others who have a different pattern of life.

How can this goal be achieved: should it be by getting to know one another better? Should we, as some people have proposed, try to group together as far as possible people who are most likely to get on with one another?... It is worth-while considering all the suggestions that have been made in order to find out how to improve the conditions of this co-existence which, after all, is a fact of life.

REFUGEES: Have governments begun to do anything in this direction, because one sometimes has the impression that they use xenophobia as an excuse for restricting the admission of foreigners, including refugees?

Simone Veil: One has to realise that the economic conditions have a lot to do with this situation. When someone loses his job and believes that a foreigner doing the same work is able to keep his position, he has the



feeling that someone has stolen his job from him. This is the first reaction. We see this particularly in the case of shopkeepers. Some of them accuse foreigners of stealing their customers because they work illicitly and avoid paying taxes. Similarly, with the increase in the number of unemployed, the fact that some of them are foreigners who have the normal right to unemployment benefit provokes remarks such as: "Why should I, a tax-payer, pay for him?" So governments have been obliged to limit the number of foreigners admitted and even to prohibit any more foreign workers from coming in.

REFUGEES: This is where the problem gets worse for the refugees, who are affected indirectly, although in their case they have had no choice but to leave their country.

Simone Veil: Exactly. They are subject to the same restrictions and unless they can prove that they were obliged to leave their country for overriding political reasons they can find it difficult to be accepted. It's not always easy to prove this. While they are still in their own country it's impossible, as they would be exposing themselves to even more danger. And if they arrive as tourists or as clandestine immigrants who left their country illegally - which is most often the case - they find it very hard indeed to regularise their position.

REFUGEES: There's another problem they face: the fact that the rules often vary from one country to another. A refugee who is not admit-



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ted to one country then tries to get into another, which creates difficult situations. Daniel Fabre, the new French Government Inter-ministerial delegate for refugees, recently told us¹ that one should try to harmonise the rules at the European level. What do you think about this?

Simone Veil: I'm a bit unhappy about European rules. I'm afraid they might be very restrictive. In some countries the rules are at present rather more liberal. For example, I would say that France has traditionally been more open to political refugees than other countries, and I'm afraid that, as is often the case for European Community rules, it is the most restrictive countries, which don't really want to open their frontiers any further, which will carry the day, and that it will be very difficult to get the most liberal system accepted by all.

As a matter of fact I have observed that when the Community adopts

standards, one doesn't always know what is going to be the effect, especially in matters of security and the police. If there are some countries which are looking for an excuse to be more restrictive, I fear that they could even take advantage of such an opportunity.

REFUGEES: In such a context, are you nonetheless optimistic about the future of Europe?

Simone Veil: Europe is much more united than one thinks. Of course there are limits, of the kind we have been talking about. But we must remember that this question of admitting foreigners is closely linked with national sovereignty. Anything that involves police matters remains entirely outside the Community field of action. But in the economic and social field, Europe has come into being, to a greater degree than one imagines.

I would also say that the crisis in Europe today obliges us to be op-

timistic. Not one of the countries is reacting by saying "We have failed". On the contrary, people everywhere are clinging to Europe and everyone is claiming to be more European than ever. Fundamentally, there is an awareness of the need for Europe, even when one has to deal with such a severe programme of measures as those affecting the steel industry. These have required sacrifices from every one of the countries concerned. They have accepted these, which shows that they are convinced of the need for Europe to continue as an entity. What one can no doubt say is that those responsible for policy lack courage, as what prevents us from going ahead further is an unwillingness to accept those compromises which are necessary for all parties. But nobody is prepared to sacrifice Europe.

Interview by ANNICK BILLARD

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In the presence of Hans Erni, the world-famous Swiss painter, the United Nations Postal Administration presented its latest series of stamps – dedicated to refugees – to the press.

The ceremony took place at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 29 May 1984. The six stamps were designed by Mr. Erni, whose museum in Lucerne attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year.