

## Simone Weil: A Life by Simone Petrement

(Pantheon; 563 pp.; \$15.00)

### Martin Green

Over a life like Simone Weil's one must wonder and exclaim and weep. To compose sentences, to form a reasoned commentary, feels like an irrelevance or an irreverence. But here are the main facts, relating to the events rather than the thoughts of her life. She was born in Paris in 1909 to a Jewish couple. The family, which included an older brother, André, was unusually talented, generous, and supportive of each other. She had as little as possible to fight against.

When young, the children were mischievous, and Simone in particular was very self-willed and obstinate; but those traits were combined with passionate affection and the desire to sacrifice herself, to suffer whatever other people in the world were suffering. As she grew up she learned to resist so rigidly the assimilative influence of others that she often became rough in manner, wholly self-directed, and unresponsive. Her neck stretched forward, we are told, in intense curiosity. I am ready to guess that some of that intensity was a desire to escape the responsive and acquiescent role. She also dressed to minimize her femininity—and in general denied her body—which profoundly irritated half her acquaintances.

She spent 1928-31 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure and while there began to suffer from terrible headaches, which the doctors couldn't explain and which were to plague her the rest of her life. She taught for a year at Le Puy and took a prominent part in left-wing militant politics there but never joined the Communist Party—she distrusted all large-scale organizations that demanded total obedience. Even that early she came to distrust Stalin and Russian communism for their idolatry of mere industrial efficiency. In 1932 she paid a visit to Germany and, like Orwell, came to the conclusion that communism and nazism were essentially the same political phenomenon.

Inevitably, then, she began to withdraw somewhat from politics. When she explained her ideological position to

Trotsky (he took refuge for a while in her Paris apartment), he asked her if she belonged to the Salvation Army. She spent the year 1934-35 in factory work, which was a great disillusionment to her. She found little fraternity among the workers and, being so physically clumsy and privileged in background, discovered for the first time what it meant to be treated like dirt. Above all, she found in the factory that her intellectual and spiritual life became a by-product, her identity dependent on favorable life conditions.

She then went to Spain to take part in the civil war, but fell ill and let her parents take her away. Later that year she spent some time in Italy, turning her attention increasingly to art and to Catholicism. She went to the Easter celebrations at Solesmes in 1938 and was introduced to the English metaphysical poets, ever after a major source of pleasure to her. That was the year she had the experience of Christ's presence. In the years that followed she often talked with priests about formal conversion, but never carried it through.

When war became inevitable she renounced her pacifism and turned her mind to various kinds of war effort. She had wanted to organize and join a group of front-line nurses, to share the utmost rigors of war with the soldiers, but the authorities would not listen to her. She stayed with her parents in the south of France and then went to America with them in 1942. Finally, she got to England to join the Free French forces and wrote for them papers on the future of France. She fell ill in 1943, refused to eat, and so died.

The large ideology of which she must remind us is Gandhianism. The similarities are in her equal interest in politics and religion, her pacifism—so burning, and yet so readily abandoned in extreme circumstances—her insistence on bodily labor as an ineluctable experience. Indeed, there is much in the personal aspects of Simone Weil, too, that reminds us of the Mahatma; for instance, her negative preoccupation

with food and diet, and her dislike for her sex and body. She and Gandhi felt the same need to have experienced violence in war to be able to act against it. Both had the same love of art, regretfully renounced. Both had a certain inharmoniousness—of voice, primarily, but also of other things—perhaps inevitable when one rebels so intensely against the social contract. This resemblance continued to grow stronger. In the late 1930's Simone became interested in the French colonies and wanted to go to live in Indochina. More theoretically, she, like Gandhi, insisted on duties before rights and came finally to find a certain value, though limited, in patriotism.

The major challenges of a life like this are beyond ordinary discussion. But perhaps I can comment on one fringe aspect, which is fascinating also in Gandhi's case: how such people relate to those around them. Dr. and Mme. Weil seem extremely close to us, they seem like the best of liberal Western culture. The seeds of Simone were in them. Dr. Weil, too, suffered bad headaches and could not eat at such times. He too was hypersensitive, infinitely obliging, suddenly intransigent.

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Mme. Weil was full of energy and love and comedy, always scheming for the happiness of her loved ones, sensitive and responsive to anything that interested them. One spends so much time blaming other parents for not being like these two that one sometimes asks, What happens to the children who actually have such a father and mother, who grow up in a Garden of Eden, with everything done for them that can be done? The answer can be seen here. The Garden of Eden turns into the battlefield at the world's end, where there is no rival, no test, no foe worthy of your steel but Juggernaut, but Leviathan, but Apollyon.

And what happens to the parents? They become aides-de-camp. At least that was true of Mme. Weil. The father, in the last part of the book, is referred to more often as "the doctor," and we hear of how upset he was when the police came to search the apartment. Simone and Mme. Weil sent him away because the situation would be too much for him. On the ship going to America Simone was writing in a deck chair; her parents' part was to occupy the chair

whenever she got up, to keep it for her. Perhaps the most poignant detail is Simone changing luggage with her mother before a customs inspection. "People always distrust me. They'll never open your bag." That is what Mme. Weil had bought by *her* lifestyle—to be trusted by her daughter's enemies.

And then the brother, Dr. André Weil, the distinguished mathematician, still at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, consulted by Lévi-Strauss for his structuralist theory, what can *he* make of being Simone Weil's brother? At a recent MIT seminar he said that he was a mathematician as totally and finally as she was a saint. There was never any question, for either one, of whether or not. It was a fate. But that still leaves me full of questions. Being a mathematician cannot account for all one's life. For instance, André Weil learned Sanskrit and read the *Bhagavad Gita* when very young; when war broke out in 1939, he was in Finland and declined to return, repudiating his military duties. And then he tells us that Simone had a philosophic mind, while

his brain had no trace of that. Surely the philosophic mind is to be compared with the mathematical. Sanctity is quite a different matter. And yet everything this biography tells us indicates that all these people's relations with Simone were affectionate, high-spirited, humorous, guiltless. Perhaps the ordinary ones performed in that style out of consideration for the saint, as much as vice versa. But they were not, after all, ordinary. Set beside Gandhi's family, or Tolstoy's family, Simone's comes out of the comparison very well.

As for the book itself, it is written by a close friend and bears the imprint of Simone's friendship. It is written with a remarkable naïveté of style and form and organization; it is all-inclusive, and it is egoless. Simone Petrement is a Ph.D. and a Doctor of Letters trained in that French tradition we think of as so much more arrogant than our own. And yet this is pure transparence. Can this be the France of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes? It has the strengths and weakness of that naïveté. But surely every reader will feel these weaknesses a moving tribute to the force of the subject.

## Political Violence Under the Swastika: 581 Early Nazis by Peter H. Merkl

(Princeton University Press; 716 pp.; \$10.95)

Warren L. Mason

After all that has been written on the Nazi movement and its adherents one would not expect to encounter an important new work based on "fresh" data, but that is exactly what Peter Merkl has created. The work is based on a new analysis of 581 autobiographies entered in an essay contest organized in 1934 by the Columbia University sociologist Theodore Able. These life histories represent the immediate recollections of the movement's minor officials and rank and file on the eve of the consolidation of the Third Reich. Dr. Merkl has returned to this data source with the insight and analytical sophistication of the contemporary social sciences. The result is one of the most useful and refined works to emerge on the internal

structure of the Nazi movement. The author is well aware of the problems presented by the data with which he is working and only poses questions on which this limited set of autobiographies can shed some light. The answers unfold in a painstaking, quantitatively based analysis that goes beyond the personal truth of any individual respondent to probe the tendencies of the entire sample.

Merkl begins his analysis with three sections in which he examines the conventional social, cultural, and historical influences upon the early Nazi movement. A careful evaluation of his autobiographies and a statistical probing of the data derived from them provide little support for such broad-brush ex-

planations for the emergence of the movement as "lower middle class revolt." The disintegrating Weimar society does not appear in the light of this study as a single social upheaval, but rather as a network of social fractures into which the lives of diverse individuals fell. What appears to be simply a decade of Nazi political violence, for example, emerges from the analysis as a series of discrete phases involving distinct social groupings with different sets of apparent motivation and attitude.

The author's skillful treatment of the Weimar youth revolt also produces fresh insights. Interweaving case studies and statistical analysis, he illuminates the role played by German youth organizations of all types in pro-