Louise Weiss: Lifelong champion of European values and women's rights (1893–1983)

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The journalist and politician Louise Weiss was an influential voice in French and international affairs from the 1920s until her death in 1983. Her experiences working in field hospitals during the First World War profoundly affected her. She dedicated her life to the pursuit of peace, first through her work on several newspapers and then in her dedication to the cause of female suffrage; her belief being that giving women the vote would help prevent the looming threat of a Second World War. During that war, she helped save thousands of Jewish children from the Nazis and joined the French Resistance. Post-war, she promoted the idea of Europe as a counterpoint to the superpowers during the Cold War.

She was elected to the European Parliament in 1979 at the age of 86, and made the inaugural speech at its opening session. After her death, the European Parliament named its main building in Strasbourg after her in recognition of her lifelong support of European values.

Louise Weiss was born in Arras (Pas-de-Calais, France) on January 25, 1893, the eldest of six children in an upper middle class family of mixed Protestant-Jewish background. Her father, Paul-Louis Weiss, was a mining engineer and her mother Jeanne, a descendant of the prominent and influential Javal family which hailed from Alsace.

Jeanne supported her daughter's desire to achieve in education and Louise excelled in her studies. In 1914 she successfully completed the *agrégation* – the exam taken by those wanting to join the civil service. She obtained degrees in literature from both the Universities of Paris and Oxford before the First World War began to dominate her thoughts.

Eager to contribute to the war effort, Weiss returned to France to set up a small military hospital in Brittany for wounded French soldiers and establish a home for refugees. As the conflict ended, Louise went to Switzerland to nurse former French prisoners of war and wrote an exposé of their treatment in German prison camps in the newspaper *Le Radical* under the pseudonym Louis Lefranc.

Weiss saw journalism as a means to 'make war on war' and as women were excluded from politics in France at the time, she used her writing as a way of voicing her opinions and promoting the causes dear to her, such as peace and equality. She co-founded, with fellow journalist and publisher Hyacinthe Philouze, the weekly journal *L'Europe Nouvelle*, in January 1918. It soon became an important and respected journal on international affairs. She also became a correspondent for the Parisian daily, *Le Petit Parisien*, in 1919.

While she continued to be a strong advocate for peace, her pacifistic tendencies began to waver as Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s. The policy of appeasement pursued by the League of Nations concerned Weiss, who began to support the use of force to guarantee peace and as a result, she relinquished her role with *L'Europe Nouvelle* in 1934. Her focus turned to women's rights and especially women's suffrage, which she believed could help turn the tide against war. She created a new organization, *La Femme Nouvelle,* which was dedicated to securing the vote for women.

As war with Germany became inevitable, Weiss – as one of the few journalists to devote significant attention to the Nazi persecution of political dissidents and Jews – used her influence to persuade French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet to create a government-sponsored refugee committee in December 1938 to help Jews fleeing the Nazis. She also helped to secure French visas for one thousand Jewish refugee children from Germany and Austria after the 'Kristallnacht' pogrom, and secured permission for several hundred refugees stranded on board the transatlantic liners Saint-Louis and Flandre to settle temporarily in France after they had been refused entry into the United States.

When France fell under Nazi occupation in 1940, life for Weiss and her family became increasingly difficult and dangerous. When her brother narrowly avoided arrest in 1943 on suspicion of aiding the resistance, Louise went into hiding and joined the resistance's cause, editing the underground newspaper, *La Nouvelle République*.

After the war, Weiss undertook a period of extensive travel around the globe, which lasted for almost a decade, during which she wrote many articles for prominent French magazines and newspapers on the leading role that the West, and Europe in particular, could take in promoting democratic values around the world. It was this belief that led to her championing Europe as a counterpoint to the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

In 1971, she established the Fondation Louise Weiss to award an annual prize to the person or institution who contributed most to the advancement of the "science of peace". Among the winners of this award are Vaclav Havel, Helmut Schmidt and Simone Veil.

With her focus now on Europe, Weiss successfully ran for election to the European Parliament in 1979, and gave the inaugural speech at the Parliament's first session at the age of 86. In her speech she called on all Europeans to unite on the basis of common culture and not merely shared economic interests.

Louise Weiss remained a member of the European Parliament and its oldest member until she died in 1983 at the age of 90. After her death, the European Parliament named its main building in Strasbourg after her in recognition of her lifelong support of European values.

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Louise Weiss talks to fellow MEP Pierre Pflimlin in Strasbourg 1981.