

# My Father André Weil

*Sylvie Weil*



Figure 1: André Weil, quite the dandy! 1930.

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Almost twenty years have passed since my father's death on August 6th, 1998, yet he still sometimes calls me: "Sylvie, get me out of here, I'm bored." (The French word he uses is not so polite.)

I am sure that, following Jewish tradition, André was assigned a study companion for all eternity. I had once asked him who this companion would be. "Euler," he answered, and smiled. So when he calls me to tell me he is bored, I ask: "What about Euler? Is he bored, too?"

Nothing horrified my father more than being bored or wasting time. Every moment needed to be usefully or pleasantly employed. I still have my father's letters to me when I was a teenager. He recommended extraordinary programs: evenings given to reading Euripides and Sophocles, Thursdays at the Louvre or the Comédie Française, Sunday afternoons at the Salle Pleyel to hear Beethoven.... The idealism of these letters makes me smile, but reactivates the terrible guilt I felt because, at fifteen, I just wanted to have a good time.

Meals with André could be a bit stressful: We were to have "interesting" topics of conversation. Reciting verses by Racine, or better still, Virgil, would be well received. However it was hard to avoid criticism: "My poor girl, don't



Figure 2: Theatrical André holding a Séance, with Serge Lang in white shirt listening on the floor. Chicago 1950s.

they teach you to accent Latin verses properly?” might well be André’s response. But his program wasn’t necessarily austere. He loved films by Satyajit Ray and Kurosawa. He loved swimming, ice skating.... He could also be quite theatrical (see Figure 2). When my sister and I were children, he read us the comedies of Molière and was great at playing the young ingénue, putting on a falsetto voice which sent us into raptures.

Most of the time, I felt it was a privilege to grow up with a father who was not only one of the foremost mathematicians but enjoyed a worldwide reputation for being arrogant, ironical, intimidating. So intimidating that post-docs would send me into his office with my homework to test out the great man’s mood. If they heard him yelling at me, they would vanish!

It is precisely André’s reputation of arrogance that makes one childhood memory so delicious: the terrifying, arrogant mathematician André Weil, a raincoat thrown over his pajamas, out in the rain, running around the dimly lit courtyard of a shabby motel somewhere in the American West, knocking at doors, desperately begging for a quarter. In our awful room with the two squeaky beds, my mother, my sister, and I had been watching a movie on the coin-operated television when we ran out of coins. André failed in his quest and we never got to know what happened to the beautiful young heroine who was going deaf.

In 2008, as the centennial of Simone Weil drew near, it became obvious that a large number of books about her would be published. I had long played the dubious role of “saint’s niece,” a kind of “relic,” one might say, since perfect strangers felt free to approach me, touch me, even kiss me, as they marveled: “Oh, how you look like her!” Now it was time to write the book that no one else could write.

Simone is, of course, much better known than André. More people are capable, or think they are capable of reading philosophical, political, or mystical writings, than mathematics! And yes, in the eyes of many, she was a saint!

But it seemed unfair not to write about André. It was a question of balance, especially since I had always seen



**Figure 3: A couple of bizarre twins, André and Simone, 1922.**

André and Simone as a bizarre pair of twins (Figure 3). *In addition to being a saint, my aunt was a double of my father, whom she resembled like a twin. A terrifying double for me, since I looked so much like her. I resembled the double of my father.*<sup>1</sup>

Of course this resemblance influenced our relation. André felt that Simone had been overly sheltered from everyday life by their doting mother, so he encouraged my own independence! In one instance, when I was twelve years old, I had to travel across France to join relatives for a holiday. This involved changing trains three times. André wrote the three station masters asking them to meet me and help me. In each station I made sure the station master didn’t find me and changed trains on my own. Upon my return home, I told my father. He was very pleased. “I did my duty as a father,” he said, “you did your duty as a daughter.”

What I wanted to do in my book was not to write a biography, but to recapture, reconstruct a “Weil space.” I will again, if I may, quote from a chapter from my book. The title of this chapter is “The beauty of Euclid.”

*I read in one of Simone’s notebooks:*

“The axiomatic system of modern mathematicians. What are they seeking? They do mathematics without understanding its use.

(Ask André: Does he feel pleasure when he succeeds, or aesthetic joy?)”

*I read this... and suddenly, without knowing why, I feel good. The parentheses harbor a small family reunion. And the family is mine....*

I imagined lunch in the family kitchen, my grandmother’s special sauerkraut, a nice bottle of Riesling, and the conversation between Simone and André. Did André tell his sister, as he sometimes told me, that mathematics was not a science, but an art? Did he tell her that the pleasure of experiencing thoughts following one another miraculously, and flowing from one another, is superior to sexual pleasure because it can last for several hours, even several days, as he would write later on?

A picture (Figure 4) taken during the 1938 Bourbaki meeting shows my father, in high spirits, ostentatiously ringing a bell. Simone is there, very serious, bent over her notebook! This photo was taken long before I was born, but that was the cast of characters that surrounded my childhood. The Bourbaki group<sup>2</sup> were passionate, idealistic and, to a certain extent, selfless, signing their articles Nicolas Bourbaki, Université de Nancago (Nancy-Chicago).

<sup>1</sup> *Sylvie Weil, At Home with André and Simone Weil, Trans. Benjamin Ivry*

<sup>2</sup> *See the review of Bourbaki, A Secret Society of Mathematicians in the October 2007 Notices [www.ams.org/notices/200709/tx070901150p.pdf](http://www.ams.org/notices/200709/tx070901150p.pdf).*



**Figure 4: André rings a bell at a meeting of the composite author Bourbaki, 1938. To his right, Simone is studiously bent over her notebook. To his left are Jean Dieudonné, Charles Ehresmann, and Jean Delsarte. In the foreground with his back to us is probably Henri Cartan.**

But the selfless and idealistic passion of the Bourbaki group was wont to loud expression! There was one infamous congress in a small hotel in the Alps, when these gentlemen screamed at each other so violently that the hotel keeper called the gendarmes, fearing someone would be murdered.

I must mention that André's very first passion seems to have been not for mathematics, but for croquet. This yielded or possibly led to a passion for geometry. Selma, my grandmother, humorously but proudly announces this shift in a letter to a friend. André is all of seven years old.

I'm afraid André's ardent nature didn't let much get in his way, especially not conventional etiquette. Once, during a concert in Princeton, there was a commotion; a person sitting in front of André was taken away on a stretcher. The concert resumed, but people whispered. My father angrily demanded they be quiet. A lady hissed at him: "That man was dead, you know!" — "So what!" André replied, "There are worse things than dying while listening to Mozart!" And that was precisely his own wish: to die listening to Mozart. Sadly, I was not able to arrange it.

The year following the cheerful 1938 Bourbaki Congress, WWII began. The story of my father's arrest, in November 1939 in Helsinki, is well known. Rolf Nevanlinna's version of the story tells how he, Nevanlinna, saved André from being shot as a Russian spy. After being transferred to various prisons in Sweden, Denmark, and England, he was imprisoned in France for not having answered the call to the army.

As I was writing my book, I found in a box of documents a small sheet of paper. I immediately called it "A family portrait." Four short sentences, four handwritings, all so familiar to me as to be, in fact, real people. A fifth person appears on the letter in the form of a large, crude dark blue zigzag, the prison supervisor, no doubt. In February 1940, André is in the Rouen prison. The family has come to see him and the guard on duty refuses them entry. No

visit. I imagine my grandmother Selma having one of her very persuasive attacks of nerves. The guard is persuaded, he will accept a letter. The four go to the café, there is always a café across the street from a jail. They each write a sentence. First come three blue sentences: Selma, Simone, and Eveline, my mother. Probably my mother's pen. My grandfather refuses to write in blue ink, maybe he borrows a pen from the café. His sentence is written in black ink.

*I could construct a whole Weil family scene.*

A group photo would have lied, because everybody would have tried to look pleasant, perhaps to smile, feelings camouflaged. No camouflage in

these four sentences! Each, while necessarily brief, is absolutely true to character, revealing the emotional relationship each person has with André. Selma and Eveline compete in expressions of affection, Simone hopes her brother is writing poems and dreaming up beautiful theorems. Bernard, less effusive than the women, hopes they will have the pleasure of seeing André again soon. From this slip of paper, I could construct a whole Weil family scene. As if I had been there.

How did it end? After some months, André was judged, went to the army (see Figure 5), then was evacuated to England.

In 1994, my father was awarded the Kyoto Prize. I accompanied him to Japan. Japan was a mythical place



**Figure 5: Military man! (in French Army) 1940.**

for me, an imaginary land described by André when my sister and I were young girls. In 1955, after a stay in Japan, he had returned obsessed with Japan. He taught

us to bow, eat with chopsticks, use tiny bath towels. When the phone rang we would rush to pick it up and answer *Mush'mashi!* "In Japan," André explained, "you never display your feelings. It is impolite. You must always smile." We practiced being polite, hiding little giggles behind our hands. We were Japanese.

Now I was in Kyoto with my father. The first two evenings, we left the luxury hotel which he despised, to go have dinner in a modest restaurant recommended by one of the hotel maids. As we walked slowly down a dark little street, André explaining and commenting on some of the things we were seeing, I felt I had returned to the imaginary Japan of my childhood.

André was happy to meet Akira Kurosawa. "I have a great advantage over you," he said to the famous director, "I can love and admire your work, whereas you cannot love or admire my work." Some people saw this as a backhanded compliment. They were wrong. André was perfectly sincere.

The last morning in Tokyo, as we were waiting for taxis to take us to the Imperial Palace, the silence was oppressive and André became bored. He turned towards Kurosawa: "Does the Emperor like your films?" There was a brief silence, then, with a small bow, came the answer: "His majesty is a great Emperor."

In Kyoto, there were endless ceremonies. These demanded "performances." But now André was old. He didn't want to perform or bow. He no longer wanted to be Japanese. I was in charge of him. At times I felt I was a Bunraku puppeteer and he was my puppet! Sometimes I wished I could get a beautiful Japanese mask, or even a terrifying red and gold demon mask for my old father who didn't want to smile or be polite.

In the end, he didn't need a mask. I look at the official photo of the three recipients of the Kyoto Prize (Figure 6). Kurosawa's slightly amused distant little smile, the tall, portly American scientist's wide happy smile. And André, the old dwarf jammed between the two giants, having the last laugh. He has pulled his hand away from the pile of hands, a good strong hand. He is free!



Figure 6: The three Kyoto Prize laureates 1994: Paul Christian Lauterbur, André Weil, Akira Kurosawa.

EDITOR'S NOTE. See the review of Sylvie Weil's book, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, in the May 2011 *Notices*,<sup>3</sup> André Weil memorial articles in the April, June–July, and September 1999 *Notices*, and a piece in the March 2005 *Notices*.<sup>4</sup>

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvie Weil is the daughter of mathematician André Weil and the niece of philosopher Simone Weil. Her book, *At Home with André and Simone Weil*, an intimate portrait of one of the twentieth century's most intriguing intellectual families, has been translated from the original French into many languages.



Sylvie Weil

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