

# Edith Stein: The Willing Holocaust

Edith Stein was born into a believing Jewish family in Breslau (now Wroclaw, Poland) on 12 October 1891. She was the youngest and seventh child of Siegfried and Augusta Stein. Her father died

suddenly when she was barely 21 months old. After Siegfried's death, Edith's mother took over the family business. As a result, Edith and her sister Erna were raised largely by their older sisters.

Nevertheless, Augusta kept the family together by her love and warmth, and offered them an example of deep faith in God.

In her autobiography Edith admits that although she exuded joy and good cheer as a child, she could also be obstinate and mischievous. Her family, although believing Jews, were not orthodox. Home prayer was conducted not in Hebrew, but in German. As far as the family firm was concerned, Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath) was a normal working day. Edith stopped praying as a teenager, having concluded that God did not exist. She considered herself an atheist until the age of 21. In 1911, she was one of the first of a small number of young women to begin studies at the University of Breslau. For two years she read philosophy, psychology, history, and German language and literature. In 1913 she went to Göttingen to study under Edmund Husserl, the world-renowned philosopher, founder of the school of phenomenology, where Jewish students comprised the overwhelming majority.

Phenomenology was a new philosophical movement that led many people to embrace Christianity. Kantian Idealism, the reigning philosophical movement of the day, had reduced human experience, and even divine nature, to purely subjective notions. Husserl, on the other hand, stressed the possibility of perceiving objective reality, including supernatural reality. In this way Edith understood that she too was able to know the existence of an unseen God. She was particularly fascinated by the lectures of two Jewish professors: Adolph Reinach, who was baptized into the Catholic Church shortly before his death in the trenches of World War I, and Max Scheler, also a

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Edith Stein (1891-1942)

Catholic convert, whose lectures on the nature of humility and sanctity drew her into the orbit of his intellectual genius. Edith's years at Göttingen, the leading center of humanistic studies in Europe of the time, resulted in the walls of atheistic prejudice crumbling around her, and her spirit gradually opening up to an acceptance of the mystery of an unseen God.

In 1915, with World War One raging, Edith interrupted her studies to serve for five months as a Red Cross nurse at a field hospital in Moravia. There, with great solicitude, she cared for the wounded soldiers and sufferers of infectious diseases. In August of 1916, having successfully

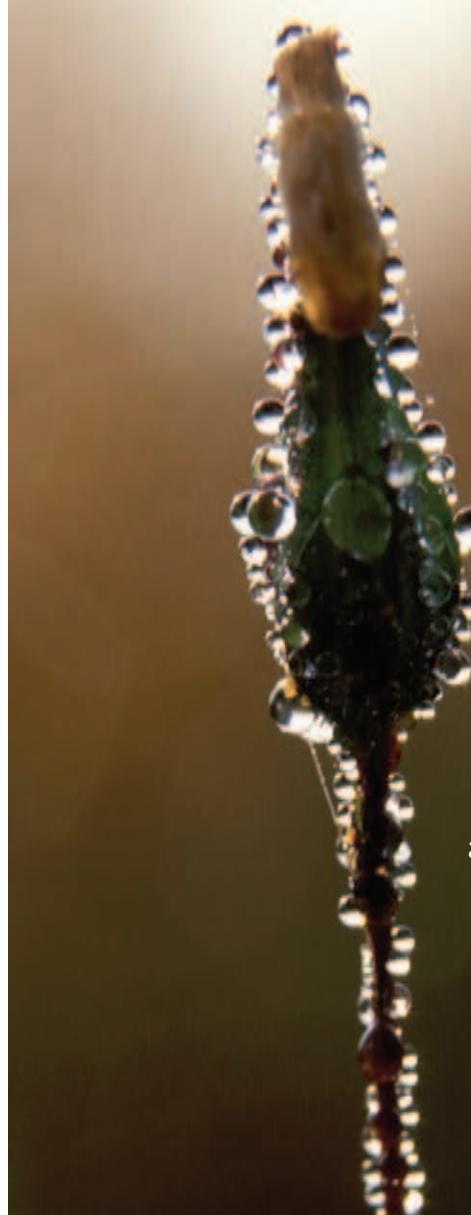
defended her thesis in philosophy at the University of Freiburg, she received her doctoral degree summa cum laude. Recognizing Edith's extraordinary abilities, Edmund Husserl invited her to work with him as his assistant. During this period, Edith felt herself drawn ever closer to Christianity. This was due in part to the influence of Anna Reinach, the widow of Adolph, who had been killed in 1917. Anna asked Edith to help her set her husband's papers in order. Edith expected to find the young widow in a state of deep depression. To her surprise, she found that despite the grief caused by the loss of her beloved husband, Anna was in good spirits and not at all in need of consolation. Edith attributed this incredible spiritual strength to Anna's faith in Christ. Years later she was to write that it was then that she first came into contact with *the cross and the power of God, which it gives to those who bear it. For the first time I had a glimpse into the life of the Church and its victory over the goad of death. It was then that my unbelief broke, and Christ revealed Himself in the mystery of the Cross. One by one, the towers of rationalistic prejudice, in which I had grown up, fell away without my realizing it, until suddenly the world of faith appeared before me. People whom I saw every day, whom I admired, lived by this faith. Thus, at the very least this faith merited reflective consideration. At the time, I was too busy with other matters to confront the problems of faith in any systematic way. It was enough for me to absorb uncritically the impulses flowing from my surroundings, which — almost imperceptibly — were transforming me internally* (The Thoughts of Edith Stein, Verbinum, 1995, p. 27).

Anna Reinach's example of deep faith pointed Edith in the direction of Christianity. But at the time it was difficult for her to make the final decision. She had to mature toward it, and this would require another five years. After a year of demanding work with Husserl, Edith resigned as his assistant in 1918. With the publication of a number of her own books, and a series of brilliant appearances at philosophical symposiums, Stein won recognition as one of the leading lights of Europe's philosophical and cultural elite. It was Max Scheler, a Catholic convert from Judaism, who had first disposed Edith to the Catholic faith through his superb lectures at Göttingen, but the immediate cause of her decision to enter the Catholic Church

was entirely fortuitous: it came from an all-night reading of the autobiography of St. Teresa of the Child Jesus.

This took place on a summer's evening in 1921, in the home of her old university friends, Hedwig and Theodore Konrad-Martius. Left alone in the house, Edith picked out a book from the couple's library. Years later, this is how she would describe that moment: *I reached for a book at random. It was The Life of St. Teresa of Avila Written by Herself. I began reading it. It held me spellbound! I read it through at one sitting. On closing it, I said to myself: 'This is the truth'.* That morning Edith went to the bookstore and bought herself a Catholic catechism and missal. Her long, sincere search for the truth ended with her decision to enter the Catholic Church. St. Teresa's mystical experiences of God completed Edith's long period of seeking, which she characterized as a peculiar kind of prayer leading to faith, or "resting in God" as she called it. Later, she would write: *God is Truth. Those who seek the truth, seek God, even if they do not know it... Some may be non-believers through no fault of their own (in the sense that they are totally ignorant of God), and therefore the images of Holy Scripture make no sense to them. We know that original sin brings about a darkening of the spirit. If this darkening is further darkened by the surrounding milieu, what blame and responsibility it must bear! Still the unbeliever always bears a share of responsibility. It is increasingly rare for a person never to come into any contact with God... God leads each of us in his own way. Some reach the goal sooner and more easily, others later and with greater difficulty. Everything we do is a trifle compared to what we receive. Still, that little trifle we must do ourselves: above all, by praying constantly for knowledge of the right path; and, once knowing it, by taking it freely, under the inspiration of grace. Those who take this path, and bear it patiently, cannot say their efforts are useless. Only we must not impose deadlines on God* (Thoughts, pp. 46-47).

On 1 January 1922 Edith was baptized at St. Martin's Church in Bergzabern. By then she had decided to devote herself entirely to God in the religious life. However, so as not to cause her mother too much pain, she decided to wait another few years. Having professed private vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, she accepted a position as a teacher of German



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Edith Stein

photo Maria Pajzderska

in a secondary school run by the Dominican Sisters. She refused to accept a salary. During this time, Edith spent many hours in prayer and contemplation, wrote several important philosophical works, translated works of St. Thomas Aquinas and the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century convert, Cardinal John Henry Newman. Between 1928 and 1933 she was constantly in demand as a guest lecturer at various European universities. With Hitler's accession to power in 1933, Edith understood that a time of great persecution had come for Jews and Catholics alike. In the spring of 1933, she wrote personally to Pope Pius XI calling for an encyclical condemning Nazi atheism. In October of the same year, she entered the Convent of Discalced Carmelites in Cologne, where she took the name Sister Teresia Benedicta of the Cross. Taking the commandment of loving one's enemies literally, she prayed ardently for both persecutors and

persecuted, offering herself as an expiation on behalf of the Jewish people, the German nation, and world peace.

On entering the convent, Edith radiated joy as never before. How could a great intellectual, who loved dancing, mountaineering, rowing, tennis, concerts, plays, and philosophical discussions, be deprived of these things, and still be happy in a cloistered convent? She herself attributed this happiness to the fact that she was now walking with her "hand in the Lord's". Never in all her life, she observed, had she known such happiness as during those two years of her novitiate. Her joy flowed from deep contemplation and submissiveness, from a close bond of love with Christ. It was from prayer that Edith Stein drew her great powers of concentration and creativity. Her 500-page-long philosophical work *Endliches und Ewiges Sein* (Finite and Eternal Being)

was written over a period of nine months, in her free time between convent duties.

After the Kristallnacht of November 9, 1938, when tens of thousands of Jews throughout Germany were arrested and interned in concentration camps, Sister Benedicta knew she would have to leave Germany. To have stayed would have given the Nazis further cause to close her convent. Driven by their hatred of the Catholic Church, the Nazi atheists had already dissolved several convents. Nuns suddenly found themselves out on the street. On New Year's Eve of 1938, Sister Benedicta and her born sister Rosa (who had converted to Catholicism in 1936) were quietly moved to a Carmelite convent in Echt, Holland.

In the early months of 1939, Hitler launched a massive propaganda campaign against Poland and the Jews. In a letter to her Mother Superior, dated Palm Sunday

occupying powers to wear the yellow Star of David. She was required to report regularly to Gestapo headquarters. Sister Benedicta never greeted the Gestapo officers with the customary "Heil Hitler". On one occasion she felt an inner compulsion to dramatize the battle being waged between God and Satan by greeting her Gestapo officer with "May the Lord Jesus Christ be praised". Dumbfounded, the officer lowered his head. During her stay in Echt, Sister Benedicta wrote *Knowledge of the Cross* — the last work of her life. It was a brilliant study of the theology of St. John of the Cross.

On 26 June 1942, the bishops of Holland published a pastoral letter protesting against the deportation of the Jews and the expelling of Jewish children from Catholic schools. The

gas chambers, gassed, and her body burned in the crematorium. The site of her martyrdom bears a metal plaque on which appears the following citation from her writings: "Love shall be our eternity".

Thus, on 9 August 1942, ended the earthly life of Edith Stein, former atheist turned Carmelite nun, one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's leading intellectual lights, philosopher, scholar and saint. She has since become both a powerful inspiration to all seekers after truth and a symbol of reconciliation between Catholics and Jews. Beatified in Cologne on 1 May 1987, she was canonized by Pope John Paul II in Rome on October 11, 1998. To those of us journeying through life at the threshold of the third millennium Edith Stein points the way. Her account of her conversion and all her writings carry exceptional urgency today.

Let us listen to what she has to say: *We do not have to spend our lives proving the validity of religious experience. However, we are required to declare ourselves "for" or "against" God. This is what we have to decide, and without any guarantee in return. That is the great risk of faith. The path leads us from believing to seeing — not the reverse. Those who are too proud to squeeze through the narrow gate are left outside. However, those who get through to the other side, come, even in their lifetime, to see things with ever increasing clarity. They come to experience the truth of the maxim: Credo et intellegam — I believe and I shall understand. To my mind, there is little to be gained on the road of experiences, which the imagination can falsify and make up. Christ did not leave us here as orphans. He sent us His Spirit to lead us to the full truth (Jn.16.13). He founded His Church, guided by His Spirit, and He left us his Deputy on earth, the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. In His Church He has also assembled all the faithful, each of whom He desires to be responsible for the other. Thus, we are not alone. At times when we lose confidence in our own judgment, and even in our own prayers, a community comes to our aid — a community based on obedience to the Church and a belief in the intercessory prayer of others (Thoughts, pp. 99-100).*

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of that year, Sister Benedicta expressed her readiness to accept death by the will of God in a spirit of expiation for world peace, the Church, the Jews, and the German people. She was offering up her life as a means by which to break the power of Hitler — the Antichrist.

On 1 September 1939, Hitler launched his invasion of Poland, thus setting off the cataclysm of World War Two. Two weeks later, Sister Benedicta wrote a moving essay, "Hail the Cross, Our One Hope", in which she expressed her sorrow at not being able to render physical help to the wounded, the dying, and the orphaned children. However, she stressed, there was a spiritual form of healing and consolation — through prayer and compassionate love. Women, who could forget themselves by contemplating Christ's Passion, could change the face of the world through a stream of mystical prayer.

In 1940, the Germans occupied the Netherlands. On 15 September 1941, Sister Benedicta was forced by the

Nazi authorities ordered the bishops to withdraw their protest. Not only did the Catholic bishops not withdraw their letter, but they also instructed that the occupying powers' threatening telegram be read aloud from every pulpit. In retaliation, on Sunday, 2 August 1942, the Nazis rounded up all Christian Jews throughout the Netherlands. Among those arrested were Sister Benedicta and Rosa Stein. At the holding camp in Holland, prior to being transported to Auschwitz, Sister Benedicta spent time comforting and consoling her fellow inmates. Fully aware that death awaited her, she nevertheless spread good cheer. On 7 August 1942, the train of cattle-cars with Edith and her sister Rosa on board left for Auschwitz. The journey took three days. Sister Benedicta wore her Carmelite habit to the very end. All indications point to the fact that upon arriving at Auschwitz, she was immediately directed to the