

“Edith Stein: Family History and the Edith Stein Society of Wroclaw, Poland”

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Welcome to this event commemorating 125 years since the birth of Edith Stein in Breslau, Germany, on October 12, 1891, which during that year was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. Edith was the youngest of 11 children in the Stein family which was made up of four sons and seven daughters. However, by the time of Edith’s birth four of her siblings had already passed away. Her mother was Auguste Courant and her father was Siegfried Stein.

Sometimes there is limited information on certain parents and/or family members of revered individuals such as saints, blessed, venerables, and others in Roman Catholic church history. There are different reasons for this. The time frame of the individual’s life dates back several centuries or to the ancient world. Accurate historical data is not available. Records may have been lost, accidentally destroyed, or not well preserved. Also, in some cases, there might not be sufficient interest in looking into the family background of some of these individuals. However, parents, grandparents, other family members, or close friends can influence someone’s life in diverse ways.

Edith Stein’s father, Siegfried, died at the age of 49 when she was two years old. He was born in Wojska, Silesia, Poland in November, 1844. The surname Stein in German means rock or stone. His father was Simon Stein born in 1812, and his mother was Johanna Stein, formerly Cohn. Samuel J. Stein, Siegfried’s paternal grandfather, was born around 1776. The geographical location of the births of his parents and grandfather is currently unknown. Silesia was originally a Polish province. It became a possession of the Bohemian (Czech Republic today) crown in the 1300’s, then passed to the Austrian Habsburgs in 1526, and was eventually taken by Prussia in 1742 (territory in Western Germany and Eastern Poland during this time). At the end of World War II, in 1945, Silesia was one of the regions of German territory that was granted to Poland by the Soviet Union in compensation for land in eastern Poland that was annexed by Russia. One of the chief cities of the region is Wroclaw, formally Breslau, Edith’s birthplace.

Edith’s maternal ancestry can be traced back to Andre Courrenc from the 1500’s whose birthdate and location is unknown. The surname Courant has undergone slight changes in spelling through the generations. In old French it

means running and also refers to a type of dance from the later Renaissance period and also the Baroque period. A series of male descendants were born from Andre: Pierre, Jean, two more males each named Andre and then around 1725 Guillaume Courant was born. His birth location is unknown as well as the names of his two wives. Guillaume had a son with each wife and both were named Jacob. The younger Jacob had a son named Salomon, born in 1815, and he is known to have been a soap and candle maker. He married Adelheid Burchard, the daughter of Joseph Burchard from Posen and his wife Ernestine Prager. These maternal great-grandparents had eleven children. Joseph Burchard, in his later years, set up a factory for the manufacture of surgical cotton. He was a religious man who had a prayer-room in his own home and would gather all his sons-in-law there for prayer on the High Holy Days. His daughter Adelheid and her husband Salomon had 15 children. Auguste, Edith's mother, was the fourth of the fifteen Courant children. Siegmund, a younger brother of Auguste's, married Martha Freund and they had a son Richard. Richard's first wife was Nelly Neumann, a mathematician, and a friend of Edith Stein. (I will return to Richard Courant later in the presentation.)

Auguste Courant met Siegfried Stein when she was nine years old and he was between the age of 14 or 15. He began sending her letters from this time and he and his sisters kept correspondence from later years where references appeared with the intended intention of a future engagement. Auguste eventually married Siegfried when she was 21 years old and he was the proprietor of a family run timber business. As previously mentioned, the Steins had 11 children, four of whom died in childhood. Edith's mother attributed these deaths to epidemics of scarlet fever. At this time the family was living in Lublinitz in a small house with a large garden and, Edith has said that her mother was always happiest when she was sowing and reaping vegetables and fruits in her garden and could give generously to those in need. Auguste Stein was a religious woman and she tried to faithfully follow the old Jewish custom that, instead of keeping for oneself the first of each kind of produce you give them away. The business in Lublinitz did not prove to be successful so her parents decided to move the family to Breslau. Providing for them was problematical. The new business was burdened with debts and took a prolonged period of time to become established. Edith has indicated that her mother endured all these difficulties without complaint.

A few months before Edith's third birthday her father had gone on a business trip. It was a hot July day and while inspecting a forest he collapsed from heat stroke and died. After the funeral Frau Stein did not want to accept support or advice from relatives. She was adamant and decided she would cope for herself and her seven children. She was a very resilient woman and Edith praises her

mother highly for what she was able to overcome and accomplish in her lifetime. She took over the family business and through a step by step process was able to repay all of her husband's debts. She had to manage the education of her children, and she tried to keep the family involved with the congregation of the White Stork Synagogue. It was built in 1929 when the city was known as Breslau and part of the Kingdom of Prussia (The architect was Ferdinand Langhans one of the foremost 19th century architects of Silesia.) and was named after the inn that originally stood in its place. The synagogue was seriously damaged and fell into decay after World War II. The Jewish community was able to recover it from the Polish government in 1996 and begin the restoration process. The White Stork Synagogue was re-opened in May 2010, and now serves as a worship space, cultural center, and branch of the Jewish information Center and it has two exhibition spaces. One holds a permanent exhibition about the history of Jews in Wroclaw (and Lower Silesia). This would have been the synagogue that Edith attended as a child with her mother and her siblings. However, by the time she was a teenager she had a loss of faith in God and declared herself an atheist.

In 1910, her mother moved the family from the site of Edith's birthplace (ul. Dubois 29), now demolished, to the home (ul. Nowowiejska 38) which today houses the Edith Stein Society. Edith was a gifted child who enjoyed learning. She attended the Victoria School in Breslau where she became the top student in her grade. An excellent student Edith studied philosophy, history and German at the University of Breslau (today's Wroclaw University) from 1911 to 1913 before transferring to the University of Gottingen under the mentorship of Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology. Interrupted by World War I, she became a Red Cross volunteer and worked in an Austrian field hospital before rejoining Husserl in Freiburg where she earned a doctorate in philosophy in 1917, one of the first women in Germany to receive a PhD. Edith had a strong interest in women's issues and became a member of the Prussian Society for Women's Suffrage. She later wrote "When I was at school and during my first year at university, I was a radical suffragette. Then I lost interest in the whole issue. Now I am looking for pragmatic solutions". (1) However, although her radical stand on feminism was tempered she continued to lecture and write on the topic. She taught for ten years at a secondary school for young women run by the Sisters of St. Dominic in Speyer, Germany. She began traveling to several German speaking countries to lecture on women's and educational topics and in 1932 she took a position as lecturer at the German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Munster. She wrote the book *Essays on Woman* which consists of eight essays on the theme of woman and her vocation. Many of the essays are based on Edith's long hours of

experience teaching in the classroom and on the lecture circuit in the pursuit of fulfilling roles for women in all walks of life.

Edith's life journey led her to embrace Roman Catholicism and then to become a Carmelite nun. You will hear more about this journey from other presenters. The Church of St. Michael the Archangel was Edith's preferred house of worship during her visits to Breslau/Wroclaw from the time she was baptized in 1922 until her last visit to her home city in 1933 before leaving to enter the Carmelite monastery. This was an extremely difficult time for Edith's mother and other family members who could not comprehend the choices that she had made but with apprehension tried to respect them. Many tears were shed between Edith and her mother concerning these decisions. Auguste Courant Stein did not see her daughter again after she entered the monastery and passed away three years later at the age of 87. There is a chapel in the Church of St. Michael dedicated specifically to St. Edith. In the center of this chapel is a marble altar with the date of her death engraved in it, an urn containing earth and ashes from Auschwitz-Birkenau, as well as other relics, including a fragment of her habit. Edith would walk from her mother's house to the church and back and today anyone visiting the area can follow the same path.

Edith's parents are buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery in Wroclaw which was established in 1856 and holds over 1200 gravestones from Breslau's pre-war Jewish community. The cemetery was closed in 1942 and fell into neglect. Preservation began in the 1970s and it was opened as the Museum of Jewish Cemetery Art in 1991 as a tribute to the beautiful craftsmanship of its sepulchral art. However, it is known to be a rather mysterious and haunting sanctuary of monuments. (One of the noteworthy figures buried here is Clara Immerwahl, the first female PhD student at the University of Breslau, and wife of Fritz Haber, who committed suicide to protest her husband's work developing chemical warfare.)

Richard Courant, whom I mentioned earlier, was a first cousin of Edith on the maternal side. Like his cousin he studied at the University of Breslau and the University of Gottingen where he received a doctorate in Mathematics in 1910. Courant left Germany in 1933. After spending one year at Cambridge, in 1936 he accepted a professorship at New York University (in New York City) where he eventually founded an institute for graduate studies in applied mathematics. It is known as The Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, located on Mercer Street, and is one of the most respected research centers in applied mathematics worldwide. Today we are here at New York University for an event to honor St.

Edith Stein's life and the anniversary of her birth and located a few blocks away is an institute dedicated to her cousin's name and his work.

The home which houses the Edith Stein Society was built in 1890. Auguste Stein bought the large neo-classical villa and the surrounding gardens in 1910. It was occupied by the Stein family until 1939 when it was repossessed under the Nazi 'arianisation laws' and given to a master bricklayer named Oscar Jankel. It has been completely renovated, and since 1990 has housed the Edith Stein Society. The society is an organization devoted to its main goals of propagating Edith Stein's legacy, the promotion of Judeo-Christian understanding, Polish-German reconciliation, and the development of civic society. The society has cultural and educational programs that aim to promote multicultural dialogue, including exhibitions, lectures, readings, youth seminars and more.

Edith Stein: a brilliant, complex, and controversial woman. I believe that each of us is here today because of an attraction to Edith Stein and some aspect of her life or wanting to know more about this extraordinary woman. You may not agree with or understand her philosophy or all of the choices that she made during her lifetime. My hope is that her life and writings will become more well known in different ways for everyone, whether it's her earlier life or later life.

I would like to end with one of St. Edith's thoughts from *Woman - Principles of Women's Education*:

Humanity is to be understood as one great individual...Each person is a member of this whole...But, at the same time, each has his own character as a member which he must develop if the whole is to attain development. (2)

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