

"The Less Traveled Road: Hannah Arendt - Simone Weil - Edith Stein in Dark Times"

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It was not the best of times - the years between 1939 and 1945. The narrative begins with the story of three women living in Europe's dark days. It begins with the Great War (1914-1918) and ends on the 8th day of May 1945 - VE Day. What happened in between is their story - the story of Edith Stein (1891-1941), Simone Weil (1909-1943) and Hannah Arendt (1906-1975). Born in the same generation, each in her own way became defined by the tragic conditions of the times.

Besides being contemporaries, they shared many similarities. All three were Jewish; they lost their fathers at an early age due to death and absence. They were philosophers. All three were brilliant students and caught the attention of their professors, (Arendt to Heidegger, Weil to Emile Chartier [Alain] and Stein to Husserl). They were feminists, teachers, writers, and drawn to religion in their youth. Two of the three (Arendt and Stein) were German and one (Weil) although French lived some time in Germany. Even though their paths never actually crossed, they shared a connection to New York City. They were exiled from their own countries and died far from home. Despite all these concurrencies the disjointed world they lived in eventually led them to different roads.

Hannah Arendt was born an only child into a liberal Jewish home in Hanover. The family identified more with being German rather than being Jewish. They were non-practicing Jews but did allow her to attend services with her grandparents. Her family library was filled with books and by the age of fourteen Hannah decided that her field of study was to be philosophy. It was at the University of Marburg that she met Martin Heidegger who became both her professor and her lover even though he was married and eighteen years her senior. At one time Heidegger failed to recognize her at a railroad station. Though traumatic, this did not seem to affect her feelings for him which never seemed to darken. Heidegger eventually recommended her to Karl Jaspers as a mentor for her doctoral thesis because he did not want to compromise his position. She was granted her degree from the University of Heidelberg with a thesis on *St. Augustine - Love and St. Augustine*. Her youthful relationship with Heidegger continued to overshadow her life, especially since his association with the National Socialist Party became problematic.

By 1933 Hannah knew she had to leave Germany and with her mother settled in France. They lived in France for nine years. When it became obvious that France was to become Nazi occupied territory, she and her mother left for the United States but not before she had spent some time in a French internment camp. They settled in New York and Hannah became a visiting scholar in various universities including Notre Dame, the University of California, Princeton, Northwestern and University of Chicago. One of her most popular teaching positions was at the New School of Social Research in New York City.

The many philosophical books she wrote, were always but not exclusively, written in the light of Heidegger's phenomenological philosophy. In 1961 Dr. Arendt reported on the

Eichmann trial in Jerusalem. It was then that she developed the idea of the banality of evil - a theory that caused her much pain and the loss of many of her Jewish followers and friends. Her claim was that Eichmann was not a fanatic nor a sociopath but just an average not too intelligent human being who simply saw his actions not as evil in themselves but just necessary to enhance his career.

In the post war years she developed a sincere friendship with Karl Jaspers and his wife as well as the American writer, Mary McCarthy. Hannah Arendt died of a heart attack in 1975 in New York City. She is buried with her second husband, Heinrich Blücher at Bard College in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York - an agnostic to the end.

Simone Weil was born the second child and only girl to a nominally Jewish but agnostic family in Paris in 1909. She was preceded in life by her brilliant mathematician brother, Andre. Her father was a physician and was often absent from home serving as a doctor during World War I. Simone was a healthy child until an attack of appendicitis at an early age left her in frail health for the rest of her life. The family was fairly affluent and could afford to send Simone to prestigious schools. It was at Lycée Henri-IV in Paris that she came under the influence of Alain or Emile Chartier, the philosopher, journalist and pacifist professor.

Under the tutelage of Alain she developed an interest in philosophy. At the École Normale Supérieure, Simone studied philosophy, earning her degree with a thesis on Descartes - *Science and Perfection in Descartes*. Afterwards, she taught philosophy at a secondary school for girls in [Le Puy](#). Simone always identified with the working classes and had some radical political opinions that brought her some notoriety among her peers. Even in her younger years she wrote political tracts, marched in demonstrations and advocated workers rights. Because of her sympathy with the working classes she took a leave of absence from her teaching position and worked in the Renault factory. This was her incursion into the "real world."

In the 1930s she went to the Spanish front during the Spanish Civil War. She called herself an anarchist and wanted very much to be a part of underground secret missions. She was never given this opportunity because she was deemed not fit for that particular type of work. She did, however, draft numerous essays and tract concerning the war.

While in Spain, Simone accidentally suffered a sever burn. Her parents went to Spain and brought her to Assisi to recuperate. There she had a religious experience in the Basilica of Santa Maria degli Angeli - a church associated with St. Francis. Although, as her friends attested, she was always attracted to Christian ideas, this was the first time she actually prayed. At one time she even spent one Holy Week at Solesmes with its Benedictine monastery and attended Mass. It was the chanting of the monks in prayer that remained with her for the remainder of her life.

By 1942 she reluctantly left France with her parents for the United States. She consented to this move both for their safety and because she felt that it would be easier for her to get

to England from the United States. From England she had hoped to be sent back to France as a covert agent, and work for the French Resistance. This never came about.

While in the United States Simone lived for a time in Harlem and attended church services in Corpus Christi Church near the Columbia University campus. The same church where Thomas Merton was received into the Catholic Church in 1938. She eventually was able to go to England but was assigned to a desk job which gave her time to write her most famous book, *The Need for Roots*. It was published posthumously with a Preface by T.S. Eliot.

By 1943 her always frail health began to deteriorate and she was diagnosed with tuberculosis. She refused special treatment and ate only the small amount of food comparable to what the residents of German-occupied France received for food. After a lifetime of battling illness and frailty, Weil died in August 1943 at the age of 34. Although sympathetic to the more mystical part of Catholicism, she never accepted Baptism.

Edith Stein was born on Yom Kippur the youngest of eleven children of a devout Orthodox Jewish family in Breslau. Her father died when she was very young; this and the circumstances of her birth quite naturally combined to make her the favorite of her mother. Although widowed, her mother made it possible for Edith to study at the university at Breslau. When Edith left to begin her university life, she left her orthodox religion at home. She called herself an atheist and eventually began to attend the University of Göttingen where she met Edmund Husserl. Professor Husserl, known as the Father of Phenomenology, accepted Edith as his assistant and she followed him to Freiburg. In this capacity she was trying to organize Husserl's hand written notes to prepare them for publication - a formidable task.

In 1915 she took a leave from her academic studies and began a course to study nursing. Europe was in the middle of the Great War and Edith wanted to make a war effort. She qualified as a nurse and was sent to an infectious disease hospital to care for soldiers. Much of the suffering she witnessed had a profound affect on her and was the beginning of her conversion experience.

Although brilliant and a doctor of philosophy (with a dissertation on *The Problem of Empathy*, most likely influenced by her nursing experience) Edith was never able to become a full time professor for two reasons 1) because she was a woman and 2) because she was Jewish.

After reading a biography of St. Teresa of Avila and from seeing the examples of her friends especially Max Scheler, Conrad Martius and Adolf Reinach, in 1922 she decided to be baptized into the Catholic Church. She spent the next twelve years writing and teaching in a girls' school but always wishing to enter religious life.

Finally she was accepted into the Discalced Carmelite order at the monastery of St. Maria vom Frieden taking the religious name of Sister Benedicta of the Cross. This decision distressed her mother, and Edith felt great sorrow to have caused her mother any pain.

When she became a Carmelite, Edith accepted the quotidian tasks required of one in religious life - tasks that she was not used to performing. She took this learning with great humility and joy and did the work that was expected of her. Her intention was to leave her academic and intellectual life behind, but the Order requested that she continue her philosophical writings. She wrote among other things her metaphysical book *Endliches und ewiges Sein (Finite and Eternal Being)* where she attempted to reconcile her lifelong search for truth. It was published posthumously. Some of her other writings include: *Life in a Jewish Family: Her Unfinished Autobiographical Account, Essays on Women, The Hidden Life, The Science of the Cross and Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities.*

Sadly, Edith took her final vows in the Carmelite Order on the day that her mother died. After their mother's death, her sister, Rosa, also accepted Catholicism and lived with Edith in the same convent. As persecutions increased it became apparent that Edith and Rosa would have to leave, not only for their own safety but also for the safety of the other religious in the convent. They knew their presence was a danger to the Sisters. Edith and Rosa went to the Carmelite convent in Echt in Holland.

After the Dutch bishops issued their anti-Nazi letter, the oppression became more violent. Within a twenty-four hour period, the Jewish converts to the Catholic Church were rounded up. Many were in religious life and Edith and Rosa were among them. When the soldiers came to the convent Edith called Rosa and said: "Come Rosa we go for our people." They both were sent to Aushwitz where they perished and were buried in a common grave with the other victims.

Edith Stein was beatified on May 1, 1987 in Cologne, Germany by Pope John Paul II and canonized on October 11, 1996 in Vatican City. St. Benedicta of the Cross has been named one of the six patron saints of Europe. She died a martyr for the faith she was born into and for the faith she accepted.

St. Edith never was able to visit the United States but her cousin, Richard Courant, did fulfill that dream. He was offered and accepted a professorship at New York University. At NYU he founded an institute for graduate studies in applied mathematics. The Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences is one of the most respected research centers in applied mathematics in the world. Professor Courant continued the legacy of a brilliant family.

The three women of Europe's "dark days" began their mission on a similar path shrouded by two world wars. But by the end they had parted ways. Hannah Arendt died an agnostic; Simone Weil longed for, but never accepted Baptism. Edith Stein alone became a Catholic - a Carmelite - a martyr.

The words of the poet, Robert Frost, could well describe St. Edith's story - the road to holiness. "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference."

"The Road Not Taken."

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