

## **Edith Stein Talk -- Susan Thau**

### **Musings on the Life of Edith Stein from a Jewish Perspective**

If I had a time machine that would allow me to maneuver back in time so I could meet Edith Stein at some tranquil moment of her life, the first thing I would bring up in our conversation is the matter of her conversion to Catholicism.

Every American Jew of my era – those born in the 1950s and afterwards – has been in some way involved with the issue of conversion. When a young person switches sides, there are a lot of repercussions within the family.

When I was a child I believed that to switch religions was a traitorous act. As I grew older and gained some emotional maturity, I changed my belief. One's religious beliefs depend on mind and heart. If someone feels in her heart that Jesus is the Savior, well, that's her emotional reality and she has to honor her own truth. Converting to another religion is the only way to keep faith with one's own heart.

To quote Edith Stein, *“Do not accept anything as love which lacks truth.”*

Edith Stein, in converting to Catholicism, was living according to her own truth. She did not convert on a whim or to rebel against her mother. Family and school were at the core of her existence, and she was extremely family-oriented during her entire life. She was not the kind of daughter who would be able to disregard her mother's reaction to her switch of loyalty.

In the summer of 1921, when Edith understood that she wanted to convert to Catholicism, she hesitated to do it precipitately. She knew full well that her decision would devastate her mother. She was baptized in January 1922 and afterwards went to her mother's house to break the news to her. It caused a profound rift in their relationship. Unfortunately, when she later became a sister in the Carmelite convent, this experience was doomed to be repeated. I feel compassion for both of them, and wish that their relationship could have been mended and not ended as traumatically as it was.

Edith's conversion to Catholicism occurred in an organic, unplanned-for way. It was only when her friend Adolph Reinach was killed in the war and she marveled at his widow Anne's equanimity after his death (in 1918), and then when in 1921 she chanced upon a copy of the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila at the Reinachs' house, that she understood she had found her path to God.

In Germany during the years 1915 to 1930, many Jews did convert to some form of Christianity. Many of the young phenomenologists who gathered around Husserl at the University of Göttingen were born into Jewish families and then converted to Lutheranism. Husserl himself had been born into a Jewish family. When a person begins to seriously study philosophy, he/she also naturally begins to think about creation and the Creator. Questions about why we exist and what happens after we die aren't so easily pushed away. It makes sense to me that

Jews would discover Christianity in the study of philosophy, and particularly phenomenology. On a more cynical note, I also tend to assume that converting to Christianity or Catholicism would make it easier for an academic to enter the equivalent of a tenure-track position at this time in Germany, as long as one was male.

I admire and respect St. Edith Stein because she tried her best to battle gender discrimination. She discovered the philosophical school of Phenomenology and went to the University of Gottingen to study this with its founder Edmund Husserl. She excelled in her studies there, and wrote her dissertation on the idea of empathy.

After she was awarded her doctorate in philosophy *summa cum laude* in 1916, she became Husserl's assistant and helped him edit his work into publishable form. However, although he allowed her to function as his secretary and transcribe his notes (a menial task), when she attempted to do some substantial editing of his texts, helping to clarify his thoughts, he rejected her help.

Edith was an excellent philosophy student, probably better than the other male students in the School at Göttingen. Husserl believed she was the best student he had ever had. She asked Husserl to let her apply for Habilitation in the University of Freiburg – the status for which post-doctoral students apply who are excellent enough to warrant their application for a teaching and research position. Edith would have had to write a new research dissertation, one which would have been even better than her doctoral thesis.

Husserl would not support her application. It didn't matter that he believed she was the best student he had ever had. Females did not become professors. These are Husserl's words: "*Should academic careers be opened up to ladies, then I can recommend her wholeheartedly and as my first choice for admission to a professorship.*"

After she resigned her position as Husserl's assistant, she lectured, taught, and wrote on her own. She gave beginning philosophy classes at her mother's house. She taught well and had a great reputation, although she was not a university professor.

During these years, she accepted Christianity in 1917-18 when her friend Anne Reinach lost her husband in WW I, and then she was baptized into Catholicism in 1922. Because of this, she was invited to speak at many Catholic institutions across Europe and Germany. Her writing and translations became popular all over Europe. In general, she wrote about the significance of the role of women in modern society and she achieved a high degree of notoriety. The Jesuit priest and philosopher Eric Przywara requested that she translate a work by St. Thomas Aquinas, and she realized she was finding a way to serve God by being a scholar. In 1932, she became a lecturer at the Institute for Scientific Pedagogy in Munster, Germany, a school affiliated with the Catholic Church. She had found a home in Catholic higher education, teaching with the Dominican Sisters at

Speyer, Germany and also at the teacher training college of St. Magdalen's Convent. In addition, she lived with the sisters according to their way of life, accepting only a very basic salary. In this way she became accustomed to living as the nuns lived, and she seems to have been very happy.

Yet her heart was really set on becoming a professor, and after more than a decade of prolific writing and teaching, in 1931 she once again attempted to be an academic. She tried to gain a professorship in Breslau and Freiberg, but she was not successful, this time not only due to her gender, but also her religious origins. Germany was becoming increasingly anti-Semitic at this time, and finally in 1933, once Hitler gained power, all Jews in university positions were fired.

This worsening of the political situation in Germany did not deter Edith from persisting in her attempts to gain a professorship. Her persistence is inspiring.

As Edith said: *"Each woman who lives in the light of eternity can fulfill her vocation, no matter if it is in marriage, in a religious order, or in a worldly profession."*

*"The deeper one is drawn into God, the more one must 'go out of oneself'; that is, one must go to the world in order to carry the divine life into it."*

Why did Edith become a Carmelite nun? The Carmelite order seems to me to be the most drastic in its withdrawal from society. As a non-Catholic who doesn't know very much about the various kinds of religious orders, I tend to admire activist nuns, sisters who contribute so much to people and societies in so many different ways. The ways of contemplation and mysticism are obscure to me, in Judaism as well as Catholicism.

At the same time, Edith Stein was baptized a Catholic, she very much wanted to join the Carmelite order. Her spiritual advisors did not encourage her to do this so quickly. As I remember, when they heard that her mother had taken the news very badly, and that Edith was extremely worried about her, they suggested that it was not the right time. They reinforced Edith's reluctance to emotionally overwhelm her mother.

It seems to me that they were wise in this. They prevented her from taking the most drastic step she could have taken, a step which would have worsened the relationship between her and her mother. I believe that we ought to thank the priest who was advising her, because he made it possible for her to be prolific in her writing on philosophy, theology, and life. When in 1934 she finally joined the Carmelites, she did continue with her work. She was taken away by the SS in 1942. That was eight years of productivity for her. She was writing prolifically from 1918 until 1934, and teaching and lecturing widely all around Europe.

*"During the time immediately before and quite some time after my conversion I ... thought that leading a religious life meant giving up all earthly things and having one's mind fixed on divine things only. Gradually, however, I learnt that other things are expected of us in this world... I even believe that the deeper*

*someone is drawn to God, the more he has to 'get beyond himself' in this sense, that is, go into the world and carry divine life into it."*

Edith worked for a little over a decade out in the world, under the auspices of Catholic educational institutions, writing about philosophy, theology, women's issues and women's education. This is her contribution to the world, and we are much the richer for it. In 1933, when the Nazis came to power and all the Jews were forced out of academia, Edith entered the Carmelite convent. It probably seemed like a welcoming refuge to her; it was where she had been longing to be all the time since her conversion, she had converted. She had been denied her place in academia in two ways, first by sexism and then by Nazism, which did not even allow her to contribute from within her own Catholic educational institutions. At that time, her idea might have been that if she added her voice in prayer, she might have some way to help try to drive back the onslaught of evil.

After reading more about Edith Stein to prepare myself for this presentation, I feel it was the most natural step for her to take. She was a mystic, and the power of prayer and contemplation of God was the most important consideration in her world. In no way am I an expert on her life, but now, in thinking about the sweep of her life as a whole, I have a sense that it might have been what she was born to do.

The most nightmarish and also the most triumphant moment of her life took place at the very end, when she was rudely pulled out of the convent in Holland, and she and her sister were thrust into the horror of the concentration camps. At that time, all the spiritual preparation she had made during her life, those thousands of hours of prayer and that gradual flowering of her spiritual life, was put to the test.

For the short time she was alive in those unbearably noxious environments, she ministered to and prayed with the traumatized women whose children otherwise would have been alone in the horror. She comforted them, and comforted their children, too. Those children would have probably lived through their last hours on earth emotionally abandoned in the camp. So many people in the camps probably could not understand the hell on earth into which they had fallen. How does one process the fact that one's life is about to end in a government-sanctioned mass murder? Edith was there at that moment for them, almost as if that was her ultimate purpose. One could almost imagine that God put her in the right place at the right time.

Even though I make this statement, I really have no sense that the Holocaust involves any divine causation or intervention. If the Lord had not allowed Hitler to come into power, Hitler would not have been able to implement his Final Solution and we would not have had the horror of the 1930s and 1940s in Europe.

I am not a truly religious Jew. I am still searching for my own spiritual truth, and widening my path. I don't know whether God played any part in bringing some truly remarkable souls (Jews and Christians alike) into the camps, individuals who

were able to spiritually and emotionally care for their fellows and to bring some humanity into those dark places. But I have read that it happened. Humans are remarkably resourceful and courageous creatures.

I do take special notice of these words of St. Edith Stein, "*Those who remain silent are responsible.*"

There were many examples of courage in how individuals chose to react to the Nazi machinery of evil, and St. Edith Stein is a shining example of this courage. There is a lot to learn from her story. Even for those of us who don't share her religious convictions, St. Edith Stein provides us with a superb example of an admirable attitude towards life. We can make the world a better place by choosing to earnestly and steadfastly seek the truth.