

# ST. EDITH STEIN

By DORIS E. BURTON

## “Edith Stein, a Jewess and a Catholic”

THE convent was situated in the little Dutch village of Echt. There reigned a profound peace. But one day as the seventeen Carmelite Sisters knelt at prayer in the chapel, that peace had been rudely shattered. Two sharp knocks on the outer door. Summoned to the parlour the Mother Prioress whispered hastily to her nuns:

‘Pray for us. I fear that it is the Gestapo.’

It was. Through the grille, that small barred opening which was the means of communication with the outside world, she received this order from the German secret police.

‘Sister Stein is to come with us. She is to be ready to leave here in five minutes.’

‘But she cannot. She is an enclosed nun!’ exclaimed the Prioress in distress.

‘You know what will happen to you and your convent if you refuse to let her go,’ replied the man in threatening tones, adding: ‘She must bring with her a blanket, a mug, a spoon and three days’ rations. You understand!’

## ARREST — JEWESS, CATHOLIC

And so Edith Stein — Sister Benedicta in religion — had been carried off by the German Gestapo. What had she done? Nothing. She had been arrested because she was both a Jewess and a Catholic. Hers had been no easy path for she had not been brought up as a Christian. Her widowed mother, a deeply religious woman, who carried on her husband’s thriving timber business at Breslau, in Germany, had reared her seven children in the Jewish faith. Edith loved her home with its pictures on the walls portraying scenes from the Old Testament, and as for the timber-yard, it was the grandest place for such excitements as hide-and-seek. The sisters were a happy family devoted to each other and to their warmhearted mother who did not hesitate to impress on all of them a horror of sin. Her word was law. But although she was somewhat strict, having like the rest of the family a particularly soft spot for the youngest, born on October 12th 1891, she was inclined to spoil her. Consequently as a small child Edith enjoyed being the centre of attraction and being very self-willed would storm or weep if she could not get her own way. There was this business of school for instance. Sometimes her big brother, Paul, would recite poetry to his intelligent little four-year-old sister. When her sisters amused themselves with poetry competitions, at her attempts to butt in they would say: ‘But you can’t, Edith. You can’t read.’

Therefore she demanded to be sent to school. Her mother arranged for her to go to a kindergarten. But when the day for her first attendance arrived, she hung back protesting: ‘Don’t want a kindergarten. Want a proper school. It’s raining. I can’t go — it will spoil my shoes.’

## PROMISING STUDENT

Paul had picked her up and deposited her at the kindergarten but it was not a success. Not only was she more advanced than the other children but she was miserable. So her mother took her away. On her sixth birthday she set off to school filled with a childish ambition to do well at lessons. She succeeded. As time passed, her wilfulness and self-centredness replaced by a happy comradeship with her school-fellows, this attractive, clever girl with her fresh complexion and dark hair and eyes entered into all the school activities. Nevertheless, her real interest lay in her studies. For a few months she left school to visit a married sister but on her return she set herself to work for the entrance examination to the Breslau University, which she eventually passed. At the school-leaving ceremony, the Headmaster liked to sum up each student going on to the university with an apt phrase. Of Edith Stein, recognizing her intellectual brilliance, he said: ‘Strike the stone (*stein*) and wisdom gushes out!’

## A RATIONALIST

Proud as she was of her youngest daughter, Frau Stein had given but a reluctant consent to a university career. She was alarmed. And not without reason. For although to please her Edith would occasionally accompany her to the Jewish synagogue on the Sabbath, as a student of rationalist philosophy Edith had lost her belief not only in Judaism but in God. Later she summed up the effects of her studies in these words: 'To study philosophy is to walk perpetually on the edge of the abyss.'

To this young girl, knowledge seemed the be-all of existence. When at the end of four terms' study of psychology and philosophy it was arranged for her to have a term at the famous Gottingen University to work under the renowned philosopher, Husserl, she was utterly thrilled. Her friends given to verse-making declared laughingly: 'Most girls dream of kisses (*busserl*), Edith dreams of Husserl!'

## GOTTINGEN STUDIES

Once settled at Gottingen she felt her cup of happiness was full. Not only was there the joy of studying under the great man but at friendly informal discussions in his room to which she was invited she met many eminent scholars. She had other enjoyments. Often she and two or three friends would spend a day up in the hills, taking their food with them. And oh, how good the black bread, cold meat, sausage, fruit and chocolate would taste eaten in the open under the blue sky or, if the day were hot, in the cool of the forest!

Frau Stein had not liked her daughter leaving her home for Gottingen. 'It's only for a term,' Edith had said to console her. Yet even as she spoke she had had a feeling that this new venture might lead to great things. And so it proved.

Most of the scholars at Gottingen called themselves rationalists. 'We are guided by reason. Of course we don't believe in religion, supernatural revelation and all that kind of thing, Edith had explained to her sister, Rosa.

## SEARCH FOR TRUTH

What then was her surprise to find living at Göttingen a brilliant scholar, Max Scheler — who had recently returned to the Church — delivering lectures on Catholic philosophy. Her prejudices against religion began to give way. At the same time, having won her mother's reluctant consent, she arranged to stay on at Göttingen University for another two years to study for her doctorate of Philosophy. Here, despite the prevailing rationalist atmosphere, with Max Scheler giving lectures on religion and another Jewish philosopher, Adolf Reinach — having become a Christian — teaching philosophy as leading to Christianity, Edith began to absorb these new ideas in her search for truth. It was said of her that she had only one love, knowledge. At the university she was an outstanding member of the Philosophical Society and, during vacation, at Breslau, she enjoyed the admiration of many intellectual men and women who regarded her as an authority on many subjects. Nevertheless she was no blue-stocking, proud and aloof. She proved a kindly, loyal and sympathetic friend and during the First World War — having laid aside her studies for a time — a devoted and unselfish hospital nurse. And then came the next step in the spiritual adventure of this young Jewess whom Jesus Christ had destined for His own. When Adolf Reinach's death occurred, it was with dread of a heart-rending scene that Edith visited the widow. To her surprise she found Frau Reinach, who was a Protestant, bearing her grievous loss with serenity as a taking up of her Christian cross.

## DISCOVERY OF CHRIST

'For the first time I saw before me the Church born of Christ's redemptive suffering victorious over the sting of death. My unbelief was shattered. Judaism paled before the light of Christ — Christ in the mystery of the Cross.' Such was Edith's comment later.

She even considered becoming a Protestant herself, but having accepted the post of assistant to Husserl, she left for Freiburg. Here immersed in study she gained her doctorate. Despite her intellectual brilliance Dr. Edith Stein remained a simple soul, warm-hearted and cheerful, loved as well as admired by many, not forgetting her beloved mother, that mother

who still ruled her sons and daughters, even those who, having married, now had children of their own. Nothing was done without consulting her. Nothing? Edith was to take the most important step in her life without telling her, a step which she knew would come as a bitter blow to one so fervent in her Jewish faith.

### **“THIS IS THE TRUTH”**

It had come about in the following manner. She was on a visit to a married couple who ran a fruit farm. During the day she helped with the fruit picking, the evening being devoted to religious and philosophical discussion. As she had written an essay which expressed her belief in God, they assured her that she was converted to Christianity. But she remained unconvinced and she was right. She lacked the gift of faith. One evening on her way up to bed she selected a book at random from the bookshelf, the autobiography of St. Teresa of Avila. Once in bed, Edith began reading that wonderful description of the life of that saintly nun who reformed the Carmelite Order in the sixteenth century. The night was passing but she read on to the end. Then she said aloud: ‘This is the Truth.’

### **THE GIFT OF FAITH**

The gift of faith, the greatest of God’s gifts, had been bestowed upon her. Enraptured, she knew the joy of loving her Lord and Creator.

The same morning she bought a catechism and a missal. Then, having studied them, for the first time she entered Catholic church to hear Mass. At the end the priest must have been somewhat startled to find a strange woman asking to be baptized.

‘How long have you been having instruction?’ he asked.

‘Test my knowledge, Father,’ she replied.

He did. Nevertheless, although he was astonished at her knowledge of Catholic doctrine, it was not until New Year’s Day that, having kept a nightly vigil in the church, Edith Stein, the Jewess, receiving the name of Teresa, became child of Holy Mother Church. Knowing what a shock it would be to her mother, so rooted in her belief with their worship of the One True God of the Old Testament the Jews were His chosen race, Edith had waited until her return home before breaking the news. Kneeling before the ageing woman and taking her hand in hers, she said: ‘Mother, I have something to tell you. I am a Catholic.’

### **A SHOCK TO HER FAMILY**

Edith had never before seen her strong-minded, capable mother in tears. At the sight she too wept, realizing that despite their mutual love there now lay a great gulf between them. The rest of the family were likewise shocked at the news. One of them said afterwards:

‘We believed that Catholicism consisted in grovelling on one’s knees and kissing the priest’s toes. It was beyond us how Edith with her superior outlook could so demean herself by joining such a superstitious sect’.

To please her mother, Edith one day accompanied her to the synagogue. Frau Stein was greatly surprised to see her reading the Jewish psalms from her Catholic breviary. When the Rabbi read out the text, ‘Hear, O Israel, thy God is one,’ she whispered to her daughter: ‘“There, you hear what he says—Thy God is One’.

### **A FURTHER STEP**

It was a painful situation for them both but Edith, far from yielding to her mother’s appeals to give up this new religion, longed like St. Teresa of Avila to surrender everything to God by entering a religious Order. Her spiritual adviser, however, felt that the time was not yet ripe. But as she no longer cared for the life of the Freiburg University she found a position for her as teacher in the Dominican convent school at Speyer. All ambition gone save that of serving God, this renowned scholar now strove to be as little noticed as possible. The senior girls who appreciated the brilliance of her intellect were amazed at the humility of this kind, gentle teacher, always so ready to help or advise them. One young

teacher said of her: ‘When you were with her, you felt yourself to be in an atmosphere which was noble, pure and sublime.’

Drawn from the first towards the religious life Edith shared in the devotions of the Dominican nuns, spending much time in prayer, especially before a statue of Our Lady of Sorrows as if aware that she, too, was to be called to great suffering. However, at the end of four years, knowing that she was now fully acquainted with the Catholic philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, her spiritual adviser urged her to use her knowledge to the glory of God as a Catholic scholar in the world.

‘St. Thomas is no longer satisfied with my spare time. He claims me entirely!’ she told a friend.

So once more the learned Dr. Stein resumed her work as a lecturer and philosopher but this time with the highest motive.

### **A TOOL OF GOD**

‘One should see oneself as a mere tool; the powers with which we work as something *we* do not use but which *God* uses in us,’ she said.

Working at a translation of St. Thomas Aquinas she lived for a while at home, but with her mother and likewise a cousin, Erica, both proud of the Judaic faith, it was no longer for Edith the happy haven it had been. At Speyer she had known the joy of winning Jewish friends and students to Catholicism but the only one in the family who felt drawn towards Christianity was her sister Rosa, and even she felt that it would be too great a blow to her mother if she, like Edith, became a Catholic.

It is possible that many of Dr. Stein’s acquaintances found her changed. Often, now, in spirit of humility she would conceal her intellectual gifts and in the spirit of holy poverty she dressed very simply. Sometimes people would criticize her for stressing the supernatural in her lectures.

‘If I did not do so I should never lecture again,’ she replied ‘What I try to put across is simply this, how to live as a hand maid of the Lord.’

Having been offered various tutorial posts she finally settled down at a Catholic College in Muenster. Here her life consisted entirely of work — much of it important public work such as speaking at conferences and so forth — and prayer. As at Speyer, she did everything possible to help and befriend the students.

### **PERSECUTION**

Meanwhile all was not well with Germany. Catholics and Jews had watched with the greatest alarm the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and his National Socialism, a policy which laid down that everything was to be sacrificed to the State. As Hitler regarded the Catholic Church with its teachings of charity, justice and the rights of the individual as his enemy he immediately started a persecution against Catholics and an even more terrible one against the Jews. For, with the idea that Germany would regain her former greatness as a pure blooded race of supermen, he decided that the German Jews as an alien race must be driven from the country or exterminated. Thousands were seized and thrust into concentration camps, primitive dwellings surrounded by barbed wire where vast numbers could be herded together in captivity, brutally treated or killed.

It was Holy Week, 1933. Greatly concerned at the fate of her people, Edith knelt in the Carmelite chapel at Cologne at the foot of the crucifix.

‘I told Our Lord that I knew that it was His Cross that was being laid on the Jewish race. Most of them did not understand but those who did should accept it willingly in the name of all. . . . I told Him that that was what I wished to do . . . felt convinced that I had been heard though I did not know what the bearing of that Cross might entail.’

### **THE FIRST SACRIFICE**

Almost at once the first sacrifice was asked. Those of Jewish race were being turned out of schools, colleges and

professions. Edith was informed that she could no longer lecture at the University. She took it calmly. For twelve years she had longed to enter a religious Order. If the fact that she was a Jewess was not an obstacle, she felt that now was the time to fulfill her desire; to follow in the footsteps of St. Teresa of Avila by entering the Carmelite Order where the worship of God is combined with a penitential life in union with the crucified Redeemer.

‘Your work as a scholar is of value to the world. You would not be able to continue it in Carmel,’ the sub-prioress of the convent told her.

‘It is not human activity that can help most in these times of trouble but the Passion of Christ. I long to take my part,’ she replied fervently.

### ON TRIAL

The prioress agreed that she could come on a month’s trial, but first she paid a farewell visit to her home. Her mother being now eighty-four she did not dare break the news to her too suddenly, though Rosa, who was in the secret, was delighted. However, at last the day came when her mother, realizing Edith’s difficulties as a Jewish lecturer, asked:

‘But what exactly will you be doing during your stay with these sisters at Cologne?’

When she realized that her daughter was hoping to enter the convent as an enclosed nun and that this was her farewell to her home and to the world, it came as a shattering blow. Every argument was put forward to change her decision. It was indeed an agonizing time.

‘I used to wonder during those weeks which of us would break, my mother or I,’ Edith tells us.

Erica, her cousin, also joined the fray. ‘How can you cut yourself off from your own race when they are so oppressed,’ she would cry.

Edith held firm. For the last time she accompanied her mother to the synagogue.

‘You admit it is possible for a Jew to be holy?’ pleaded her mother.

‘Why yes, if he can see no further,’ came the quiet reply.

‘I don’t say ‘anything against Jesus Christ. But why did He claim to be God?’

Edith was silent. Useless to try to explain yet again to her broken-hearted old mother that God’s law for the Jews and the sacrifices of the *Old* Testament had but led up to the incarnation of the God-made-man, Jesus Christ, of the *New* Testament, and to the Church He had founded, with Himself as the Victim of the divine sacrifice of the Mass.

### CONVENT AT COLOGNE

Finally, the last goodbyes said, she found herself one day speeding to her destination, the convent at Cologne. ‘What I had hardly dared to hope for was now to be fulfilled, There could be no overwhelming joy for me just then. All that I had recently experienced had been too painful for that. But I was filled with a deep peace, knowing that I had surrendered myself to the divine will. The enclosure door of the convent opened. I stepped across the threshold into the House of the Lord,’ she tells us.

### A NONENTITY

And so began Edith Stein’s life as a Carmelite nun, a self-sacrificial life of poverty, penance and prayer; a secret battle against self-love, in a word the life of the Cross. One of the necessary virtues to acquire was humility. Edith had plenty of opportunities for this. From being the centre of attraction as a renowned scholar she was now a nonentity. Most of the nuns had never even heard of her.

‘Is she good at needlework?’ one asked anxiously.

No, the newcomer proved to be a poor needlewoman, clumsy and unskilled, too, at the household duties required of her.

Then, too, she was twenty years older than the other postulant and the two novices which did not make things easier for her. Nevertheless she radiated joy. In recreation she had a laugh and a joke for everyone, and how she loved the

ceremonies in the chapel, the feasts of the Church! Since her conversion she had always realized the power of prayer, saying: 'It is the Church herself who prays in every prayer. Unlimitless loving surrender to God and God's response, full and lasting union, this is the highest degree of prayer. The souls who have reached it are truly the heart of the Church.'

So now in Carmel, writing to one of her nun friends, she says: 'Please help me to be worthy of living at the heart of the Church's holiness and to offer myself for those whose lot lies in the world.'

### **RECEPTION**

A year later, in April 1934, the chapel was adorned with flowers for her clothing ceremony, many of her friends, including eminent scholars, being present. They watched her, dressed as a bride in white silk with bridal veil and myrtle wreath, a lighted candle in her hand, approach the open convent door where the nuns awaited her. After she had knelt to kiss the crucifix they saw her enter. They saw the door close behind her. The bride of Christ had said farewell to the joys of this world for ever. Then, clad in her brown habit, the penitential hair cloth and the Carmelite veil, they saw her outstretched before the altar in the form of a cross, signifying the mystical death she must die.

### **A DEEPER LIFE OF PRAYER**

And so began for the novice a deeper life of prayer and penance, a hard life. To her sorrow although she was allowed to write a weekly letter home to which Rosa replied, no word had come from her beloved mother. But when she took her first vows the following year, her name in religion being now Sister Benedicta of the Cross, to her joy she received a few lines of good wishes from her mother.

The persecution of the Jews throughout the country had in no wise abated. A visitor who had been struck by her radiant appearance said to her: 'At least you are safe here hidden away in Carmel.'

'No, I don't think so. I feel sure they will search me out,' she replied calmly.

In Whitsun, 1936, the death of her mother after a long illness, at the age of eighty-seven, occurred at a time when the nuns were renewing their vows.

'As I stood in the chapel I knew my mother was beside me. I felt her presence quite clearly,' Sister Benedicta said afterwards.

Later, knowing that although not a Christian her mother with her deep love of God had lived according to her light, she wrote to a friend saying: 'I am convinced that my mother is now my faithful helper aiding me on my journey.'

### **HER SISTER IS RECEIVED**

Rosa, who had looked after her mother for so long, was now able to prepare for her reception into the Church. Towards the end of the year, having injured her foot, Sister Benedicta was taken to hospital for X-ray. On Christmas Eve, her foot in plaster of Paris, by special permission she was granted the joy of attending her sister's baptism in a nearby church.

In the spring of 1938, Sister Benedicta took her final vows, exchanging her white veil for a black one as a symbol of her total surrender to God. Thus veiled and wearing her ring of espousal she stood before the bishop.

'Come, bride of Christ. Receive the crown which your Lord has prepared for you from all eternity,' he said, placing a wreath of white roses on her head.

### **A QUESTION OF VOTING**

Although so far the convent had remained unmolested, matters at last reached a climax. During an election the people had been bidden to vote 'yes' for Hitler, non-Aryans, that is those of Jewish origin, not being entitled to vote. To avoid questioning Sister Benedicta recorded her vote which was 'no'. At the next election soon after, the polling officers called at the convent to collect votes. Having counted them they asked: 'Why is Dr. Edith Stein's vote not here?'

'She is a non-Aryan,' came the reluctant reply.

### **PROMPT ACTION**

The officers, making no comment, departed but the prioress acted promptly, for Jews in their thousands were being sent concentration camps. A rumour was rife that they were to be exterminated—gassed.

‘Sister Benedicta needs a change of air,’ wrote the prioress to the Superior of the Carmelite convent at Echt in Holland. And so it had come about that, having been driven there by a lady doctor, Sister Benedicta settled down in her new home at Echt. But in the autumn of 1939, a few months after her arrival, with the outbreak of the Second World War, Hitler’s victorious army swept through Poland, Belgium, France and Holland, so Sister Benedicta realized there was no safe refuge for her at Echt and the nuns who had given her shelter might suffer.

‘Holy Poverty implies being ready to leave our home in this dear convent,’ she wrote. ‘ . . . If we are driven into the streets then Our Lord will send His angels to encircle us, and their invisible wings will enfold us in a peace more secure than that of the highest and most solid of convent walls.’

### **SEIZED BY GESTAPO**

Her sister, Rosa, having lost all her possessions had been given a room outside the enclosure, so preparations were now started by the prioress to transfer both of them to the Carmelite convent in Switzerland. These preparations resulted in a summons to appear before the Gestapo. Then the fatal fact was disclosed. They were Jewish. The German authorities in occupation had started mass deportation of Jewish men, women and children from Holland, many being sent to the Polish concentration camps where they were driven to work in the mines or put to death in the gas chambers. The inhuman treatment brought forth so great an outcry from the Christian denominations that finally an assurance was given that Jewish Christians would not be deported. The Dutch Catholic bishops, however, continued to protest on behalf of the rest of the Jews, a pastoral to this effect being read in all Catholic churches. As a reprisal the Gestapo seized many Catholics and Jews and all Jewish religious. So it was that, on August 2nd, 1942, they descended on the Carmelite convent at Echt and carried off Sister Benedicta and her sister.

### **NEWS FROM HOLLAND**

One can imagine the anguish of the nuns at the convent as they waited for news. Three days later a telegram arrived from Westerbork, an assembly camp near Hooghlen in North Holland. It ran: “Send warm clothing, blankets and medical supplies immediately by messenger...”

### **AN ANGEL AMONG THE PEOPLE**

The nuns immediately collected everything possible and the two men had offered to take the cases by car arrived that same evening at the camp which consisted of thousands of huts in which men, women and children were herded together. The Dutch guards, who hated their jobs, allowed them to speak to Sister Benedicta who was still in her brown habit. She spoke of the terrible journey they had made there, of a guard at one stopping place belabouring her with a truncheon. Nevertheless she appeared calm and even radiant, happy, so she told them, to be of use to so many sufferers. A Jewish business man from Cologne, who was in charge of the prisoners, said afterwards: ‘She was like an angel going among the people, helping and comforting them.’

That same day two other gentlemen arrived with packages for the prisoners. They, too, spoke to Sister Benedicta. She told them that among the vast number of Jews there were several religious including a wonderful Jewish family of brothers and sisters, five of them, all Trappist monks or nuns. She said of herself: “Whatever happens I am prepared for it. Our dear Child Jesus is with us even here.”

### **FURTHER DEPORTATION**

The next morning one of these visitors made enquiries as to the prisoners at the railway station. ‘All the Catholics, both lay and religious, were deported during the night to the East,’ he was told.

A letter from one of the captives, a lady doctor who had been attached to the Trappist convent and who was a friend of Sister Benedicta, contained these words: ‘We are expecting to be sent to Poland. . . . Rejoice with me. I am going forward with the same joy and confidence as the sisters who are with me.’

A nun at Freiburg received the last message from Sister Benedicta. It ran: ‘Greetings from the journey to Poland’ and was signed with her name.

The rest was silence.

### **TO THE GAS CHAMBER**

Some time afterwards a Jewish professor who escaped from one of the camps disclosed that there had been nightly deportations to the gas chambers at Auschwitz. One of the first to go had been Sister Benedicta who, assured of eternal life, went calmly to her fate. Her sister, Rosa, apparently suffered with her.

Ever since the conversion Edith Stein had had a deep love of the Cross, a willingness to follow wherever it might lead. The Mother Prioress had had a letter from her during those few days at Westbork which included these words: ‘One can only have a *Scientia Crucis* [a real understanding of the Cross] if one is truly partaking of that Cross. I was convinced of this from the very first and have said with all my heart: *‘Ave crux, spes unica!* [Hail Cross, our sole hope!]

### **FINAL SACRIFICE**

Just before the outbreak of war, on Passion Sunday, 1939, she had sent a written petition to the prioress:

‘I beg your permission to offer myself to the Heart of Jesus as a sacrificial expiation for the sake of true peace; that the Antichrist’s sway may be broken.

Thus that noble woman and brilliant scholar, Edith Stein, who had sacrificed everything to become first a Christian and then a Carmelite nun, as a Catholic Jewess — a political victim — had made of her final sacrifice a superb offering which, united to the Sacrifice of her Crucified Lord, was assuredly not made in vain.

Nihil Obstat:  
BERNARD O’CONNOR,  
Diocesan Censor,

Imprimatur:  
✠ ARTHUR F. FOX,  
Auxiliary Bishop.  
Melbourne, 22/6/1967.

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