

Rosa—Forgotten Sister?

In CARMELITE STUDIES X (the volume honoring Fr. Kieran Kavanaugh, O.C.D.), an article addressed two items related to the final sufferings of Saint Edith/Teresa Benedicta Stein. One treated the postwar phenomenon of three concentration camp Carmels ; the other the case of Rosa Stein, her older sister. It was a direct apologia to begin work toward Rosa's beatification.

This article serves to show why Rosa Adelheid Stein deserves beatification by stressing her virtues, all the while showing why she was interesting in herself

The multiple phases of her spiritual being embrace her youth, as Edith in *Life in a Jewish Family* describes it; then her identity as a convert; her subsequent desire to imitate her sister once she became a Catholic; her share in the tragedy of the arrest of St. Edith at the hands of the SS ; a little known message from her while they were on their way to the Birkenau section of the Auschwitz death camp, in the wake of their arrest; then, finally, an ongoing "In Memoriam" wish from me.

1. The Young Rosa

In her autobiographical narrative Edith Stein casts her observant phenomenological eye on what she sees of her earlier life (from the late 1800s to 1916), and her powers of observation tell with honesty what she sees. Of course there are other points of view about and from her family, such as Susanne Batzdorff's *Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint*, the book that offers insights from the vantage point of a contemporary of hers. To situate Rosa, she was born eight years ahead of Edith, well before the last two children of the family came into this world, viz., Erna in 1889 and Edith in 1891.

One thing comes particularly to mind, though, from what the Saint writes. It is the nickname the family gave to Rosa. The passage where Edith introduces it shows Rosa, after the death of their father, assuming a lot of the grind of the housework when Mother Stein had to begin running the family lumber business (his untimely death from sunstroke came before his youngest, Edith, had even reached her 2nd birthday):

Rosa's nickname was "the Lion." It was inspired by her loud roar of rage whenever she was provoked. Of all the children she was the most difficult to raise. Although in no way lacking talent, she was always a poor student. The most undisciplined boys in the house or in the neighborhood were her best friends. With them she tore through the streets, rang doctors' doorbells, and joined in other pranks boys usually play. (. . .) [as she] showed no particular inclination for a career, it was decided that she should have a very thorough training in housekeeping, so she could later take charge of the maternal household. She was sent to be trained by the aunts in Lublinitz [Rosa's birthplace in 1883], there to learn every phase of the work in their well-run household. The year she spent with them was a very happy one for her, and she always recalled it with gratitude. (*Jewish Family*, 50)

This story has a somewhat mirthful side to it: the family knew how they could "send up" old Rosa and get her to roar away. Still, there is a positive side to it all. Its interest lies in the strength of character of Rosa that prompted her to speak up, perhaps excessively, but with reason, when she felt her opinion ought to be heard. Joined to her willingness to shoulder the less spectacular position in the clan of house-mother, this can be credited as an expression of the cardinal virtue of fortitude. Not to be deterred by too many distinctions, pro-and-con, in the weighing of an argument, she let her mind be known, to set the record straight, and there is no real harm in that.

Without making excuses for her sister, St. Edith reaffirms her central talent while also citing her ability to adopt another activity suited to channel her personal interests in a positive fashion:

So, finally she resigned herself to the lot of housekeeper and from that time on merely sought some congenial sideline. She served for a good number of years in a volunteer position with the municipal government taking care of orphans. A number of the children whom the city had placed in foster homes were assigned to her. From time to time she had to visit them to determine whether they were getting the proper attention. (*Jewish Family*, 52)

She could take a different tack when prudence, another cardinal virtue, was called for. She exercised it so as not to inflict harm lest her actions adversely affect others, especially her dear mother.

2. Christian Rosa

The attitude of Rosa toward embracing Catholicism late in 1936 was guided in large measure by the prudence she saw in her sister, Edith, upon Edith's leaving aside her unbelief and entering the Church. Edith took the step of receiving Baptism on New Year's Day 1922 and would have felt called immediately to enter religious life, but most interpreters of her life imagine that she felt that one shock for her mother was enough. Edith would not want to ask Mother Stein not only to tolerate her daughter's Catholicism, but also the step of becoming a religious in some order requiring residence far away from her and foregoing her usual home-visits. Her empathic concern for mother was expressed in a letter she sent just a few months after entering Cologne Carmel in expectation of receiving the habit that would signify beginning her novitiate year:

The Feast of the Purification was my Confirmation Day, so it still has particular significance for me. I will be happy if you remember me specially that day. But I ask urgently for prayers in the coming weeks, for I know I will have to earn the holy habit with some severe trials. They have already started in that my mother has begun with renewed vigor to oppose the forthcoming decision. It is so hard to witness the pain and the pangs of conscience of such a mother and to be unable to help with any human means. (January 26, 1934)

Something similar occurred with Rosa, and Edith sums it up very well in another letter sent on October 3, 1936 less than a month after Frau Stein's death from stomach cancer:

My sister Rosa (the only one besides me who never married) has been longing for Baptism for years but, *out of concern for my mother*, she renounced it so far. But, she will soon be taking the preliminary steps, although without the knowledge of our brothers and sisters for the time being, to *spare them additional pain*.

Rosa wanted to show respect for her elderly mother who was in her 70's by the time Edith was teaching in a Dominican girls' school soon after entering the Church. What guided her was affection and care for the matriarch who had sacrificed so much of her life to make the lumber business flourish and thereby guarantee prosperity for her seven children. As events after her baptism showed, Rosa was quite capable of taking steps to adopt new settings for her life, she just did not want to have Mother Stein pay the price of losing her religiously by becoming a Catholic while she was still alive. In fact, Mrs. Stein died on the feast of The Exaltation of the Holy Cross on September 14th in 1936. By Christmas Eve of that year, Rosa was baptized in Cologne.

She was exemplary in her kindness toward Frau Stein, even at the cost of prolonging the period of not sharing in her sister Edith's peace of mind within the bosom of the Church.

More could be said of her behavior in the years following her baptism while she still lived in the family house in Breslau—that lasted until early 1939 following Kristallnacht's ravages in mid-November 1938—but there is more to learn from the experiences she had once she had joined Sr. Teresa Benedicta in exile in the Netherlands late in 1939.

3. Secular Order, Lay Carmelite

Rosa was able to leave Germany after facing the Nazi hassles of emigration for Jews and she went first of all to Belgium. After some ill-treatment by locals there, she moved quickly to Echt in the Limburg Province of southern Holland where her younger sister had arrived late on New Year's Eve 1938. Both of them would be new-comers, then, in the world connected to the Carmelite Monastery in that small village. It was a daughter-house of Cologne Carmel and considered to be a safe refuge for Edith Stein when, appalled by the pogrom-like actions of Kristallnacht, she requested a transfer.

Rosa, however, had intentions of starting religious life in Belgium, so she now asked about the possibility of joining the Carmel where her sister was a nun. Rosa, had not “clocked,” as it were, as many years as a Catholic as her sister had when she had previously asked to be admitted to Cologne Carmel.

Eleven years as a lay-teacher and lecturer at two Catholic institutions were considered good preparation for entrance into a contemplative, and cloistered, monastery. Rosa's time as a lay person in good standing, certainly—by the time she made her request—was approximately three years only. In most cases at that period of Church history, the petitioner would have been asked to wait a bit longer. But the Carmelite nuns showed themselves welcoming anyway. They suggested she join the lay Third[Secular] Order group in Echt, and also serve the monastery as an extern person—hat individual who acted as link for the cloistered nuns with the outside world. Edith comments in a letter:

Now something about Rosa. We had hoped that since she has at least been given a residence permit [in Holland] she could soon become an extern Sister. But our superiors (our dear Rev. Mother and the Father Provincial) think the time is not suitable for making such a change. They suggested Rosa become a Third Order member for the time being and that she wear the habit. It is a very painful disappointment for Rosa. She does not like the busy activity connected with being a portress, would much rather live inside the cloister, and hoped for at least a year inside in the novitiate since that is prescribed for extern Sisters. As consolation Mother Prioress promised her that I would be allowed to come to her every Saturday in order to introduce her to the spiritual life. Will your reverence please help me to ask for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that I may successfully transmit the true Carmelite spirit to her? After all, that is of prime importance. (April 26, 1940)

Thus, Rosa was showing admirable signs of commitment. Not the thorough and full engagement that could come from entering the postulancy and starting formation in the contemplative life of a vowed daughter of St. Teresa, but a real commitment to promote the well-being of the community she hoped one day to join. Much could be listed showing the effectiveness of her work in this capacity. It was real and precious to the nuns. A more recent description that fills out Edith's summary, comes from a providential encounter that sheds light on it—and Americans on the canonization pilgrimage co-sponsored by the Edith Stein Guild and the I.C.S. back in 1998 in Rome, had the chance to welcome it. A Dutch gentleman gave his first-hand indication to them in Rome's Coliseum.

Our pilgrimage group to the canonization of St. Edith in October 1998 met up with

a similar group of pilgrims from the town of Echt inside the Coliseum. The pilgrims from the United States excitedly pointed out to me a Dutch citizen they'd just learned had been an altar boy during World War II serving liturgies in the nuns' monastery. Of course he knew both the Stein sisters, but in different ways. This became apparent under the barrage of questions from the inquisitive Americans eagerly asking if he had any recollections of the new saint, Sr. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. "No," he replied, "not many memories of her because she lived within the enclosure and always wore a long, black veil. But, Miss Rosa, we all knew and liked Miss Rosa." In the course of performing her duties of running errands around the town, and accommodating requests from the people who came to the monastery door, Rosa had made many friends and won over a lot of hearts. Her goodness and kindness lived on in the elderly man who was speaking to us in the city of St. Edith's canonization. She was truly charitable to the villagers who lived so far from her home town, who spoke another language, but whom she assisted well as she assisted the Carmelite nuns.

4. Taken with Hundreds of other Catholic Jews from the Netherlands

The overall story of the Catholic Jews who were rounded up in Holland as a reprisal for the courageous act of defense of all the Jews in that country by the Catholic bishops through a Pastoral Letter read out on Sunday, July 26, 1942 has been recorded in many ways. The Edith Stein Guild sponsored for distribution the translation of a booklet of documents about the death of Edith Stein assembled by Msgr. Jakob Schlafke that includes many precious details. For our purposes we want to consider just the act of arrest carried out on the Stein sisters at the Carmelite Monastery the Sunday following the reading of the pastoral letter from the church pulpits.

It was afternoon. The SS officers arrived in a van large enough to take several persons to the designated assembly point. They spoke at first with Sr. Teresa Benedicta, then with the Mother Prioress, after they were admitted at the outside door (by Rosa herself? we don't know, but probably so). The orders delivered by the Nazi officers were that both Edith and Rosa were to leave swiftly and accompany them to headquarters.

In the intervening minutes both ladies tried to take some simple objects with them, and Sr. Teresa Benedicta, since she went to the visitor's room from the chapel

where she had assembled with the nuns for the evening's hour of meditation, took with her the current volume of the Breviary of the Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours). Once out on the sidewalk they noticed some of the townspeople gathered by the commotion of an SS van arriving. From the earliest sources we do not know what greetings might have been exchanged, nor do the earliest sources indicate any words between Sr. Edith and Rosa. This may come as a surprise to many, but careful research into the chain of events of that day allows one to say that a certain hortatory sentence, supposedly uttered by St. Edith to Rosa, never was delivered. In its own way, this article in *Carmelite Digest* gives public notice in a periodical that she did not offer any calming words to Rosa that sounded like "Come, Rosa, we go for our people." The saint might very well have harbored thoughts like that as she believed sincerely in the Church's teaching on the value of vicarious suffering, or offering one's pain for the intentions of others. But, one does not see those words in the early biography of Sr. Maria Renata Posselt, the former Novice Mistress and Prioress of Edith in Cologne. Regardless of whether Sr. Posselt could have heard or not directly from the onlookers in their village in Holland, her book is the one that was the first major biography to come out in print and there is no reference at all to any such sentence. Consultation of the newly retranslated English-language edition of that important book on pages 335-36, Gleanings 15-16, will supply further useful explanations.

Edith would have simply gotten into the van at the time Rosa got into it so as to comply with the inescapable orders of the menacing SS men. Some adolescent girls from the village were arrested then, and went along to Maastricht police station. They were sisters too, in a haunting parallel to those we know: Annemarie and Elfriede Goldschmidt, 20 and 19 years old respectively.

That day opened the door to the first week of August 1942. In it Rosa provided the confirmation herself that her younger sister most probably had not uttered those legendary words of comfort to her. We have a touching document to prove that, one which is frequently overlooked.

5. Word from Westerbork Camp

The prisoners got permission to send out small notes, even though in captivity. Several arrived back in Echt. The paper of the first of the three notes shows that

Edith gave Rosa the chance to write greetings of her own to the community they had left behind in Echt. This is what Rosa penned:

Sincere greetings to all. We are very sorry not to have seen Mother Otilia any more. In this brief time we have experienced a great deal: one lives together with the others and everywhere people help each other. We have slept very little, but have had a lot of good air and much traveling. Many greetings to Sophie[Meuwissen], Maria [Delsing] too, and to everyone. They were *upset*; we not at all./ In Corde Jesu we all find ourselves in gratitude./ Rosa

The word “upset” in that last sentence deserves to be underscored. Not Rosa and Edith were upset, but Sophie and Maria. The name of Maria Delsing was connected with the spread of the legendary words previously mentioned, , as if she had been the one who heard “Come, we go for our people.” But, if she was the one who was upset, as well she might have been, to see the two defenseless women hustled off like criminals into a police van, how could she have heard straight and crisply all that was being stated in the commotion? If Rosa and Edith were not upset at all, as Rosa claims, why would Edith have had to try to calm Rosa down? Plain accuracy of reporting stands more on the side of Rosa: did she not have a few days to let the trauma of the arrest sink in, and then later on be in a position to express in writing her honest sentiments? She would not introduce misleading statements into her saintly sister’s note either. (!)

This is important due to the great amount of ink spilled over the apocryphal statement ascribed to St. Edith. Too many Jewish writers express both disappointment and consternation at the thought she felt she was going somehow to have an advantage over the other Jews who were being herded against their wills into the Nazi death machinery. They interpret those words to signify that Edith Stein was too much in control of the situation; was somehow or other superior to the other six million killed for no reason other than their parentage; and that she was not being shipped off because she was Jewish. We know from the history of the events set in motion in Holland by the bishops’ pastoral letter in defense of the Jews that—come what may, and regardless of her eventual unjust demise—Edith Stein and her sister Rosa with their companions that day died as Catholic Jews or Jewish Catholics, therefore they died for more than one reason. Even the Jewish author Etty Hillesum chose to acknowledge the double-significance of that fateful band of persecuted individuals when she saw them arrive at the transit camp

Westerbork with terms like, and I quote from her own eye-witness account: “There was a remarkable day when the Jewish Catholics or Catholic Jews—whichever you want to call them—arrived, nuns and priests wearing the yellow star on their habits. I remember two young novices, twins, with identical beautiful dark ghetto faces and serene, childish eyes peering out from under their skull caps.” (*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941-1943*, p. 617)

In the final analysis, when the question of Catholic converts being caught up in the Holocaust is raised, the most fitting attitude to adopt is that of the Latin “*et. . . et*” and not “*aut. . . aut*” or “both. . . and” instead of “either. . . or.” You don’t have implacably to say it was always and exclusively because they were Jewish that they died at the time they did during that horrible period. The “final solution” was directed against our Jewish brothers and sisters as a group and for no other reason—to deny that is folly. But in the ill-fated attempt to carry it out, some at least died in part because of their allegiance to the Catholic Church along with their Jewish origins.

6. Lest we Forget

The anthology of the *Essential Writings of Edith Stein* by Orbis Books (now in its 6th printing) starts out with this dedication: “To Rosa Stein and those who suffered with her — Lest we Forget.”

That word “forget” occurs in so many places and contexts connected to the Holocaust. The action of not forgetting has become a sacred duty for us all, so that the world never sees another such unjust charade take place in any land on the earth.

Christians nourish their spiritual lives on not forgetting, in obedience to their Lord’s injunction to “Do this *in memory* of me.” We are to remember, not forget what it takes to have a share in the glory of our Risen Savior. So, what about a share for Rosa Stein in the glory recently accorded her sister, the one she died with, the one she traveled with, the one she was arrested with, the one she lived with for the last four years of their lives at a contemplative monastery?

Surely, there is a difference between an explanation and an answer, in this case at least. If one were to ask why Rosa was not already included, as happened in medieval times, as a “companion” of the proclaimed saint, I can’t give an

explanation. The Vatican's Congregation for the Causes of Saints chose the route it did and did not bring along Rosa or those other good people living in Holland who were rounded up in August of 1942 and in that same sad summer gave witness to their Christian faith, receptive as they were to their bishops' brave gesture of the pastoral letter in defense of Holland's Jews. Those companions of St. Edith Stein did not apostatize. Far from it, Lisemaria Meirowsky, a physician and Dominican Third Order member, summed up her acceptance and adhesion to the bishops' fight for justice by writing a long letter to her confessor. It is included in the renewed volume of Mother Teresa Renata Posselt's *Edith Stein: Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite* and a pertinent excerpted passage from it would be this:

Transfiguratio, 6 August 42

You know already where we are, and that we are expecting to be sent to Poland. Tomorrow morning is the time fixed. There are two Trappistine nuns with me here, as well as two Trappist monks and a lay-brother from the same abbey; all of us were driven to the camp at Amersfoort on Sunday morning, before being brought to Westerbork Hooghalen on the Feast of our Holy Father, St. Dominic. I know, dear Father, that you're heart and soul in this with me, with us all. Your spiritual child, Sister Judith, is also here, and so is the Carmelite from Echt whom I met that time in Amsterdam.[Edith Stein] Now I want to send you my last greetings and to tell you that I have complete confidence in God and have surrendered myself entirely to His Will. Even more—I regard it as a grace and privilege to be driven along this road under these conditions, a witness to the words of our *good fathers and shepherds in Christ*

If our sufferings have been increased somewhat then we have received a double portion of grace, and a glorious crown is being prepared for us in heaven. Rejoice with me. I am going forward unshaken, confidently and joyfully—like the Sisters who are with me—to testify to Jesus Christ, and to bear witness to the Truth *in company with our bishops*. We are going as children of Our Holy Mother, the Church; we will unite our suffering with the sufferings of our King, our Savior and our Bridegroom, sacrificing ourselves for the conversion of many, for the Jews, for those who persecute us, so that all may know the peace of Christ and His Kingdom. (Posselt, pp. 219-21)

So, why not ask ourselves, shouldn't Rosa Stein, like the other "companions" of Edith Stein who were shipped on the same train from Westerbork to Auschwitz—Birkenau, receive consideration for the honors of the altars?

It helps to return to the PS note put on the transit camp letter of St. Edith by Rosa. Note the spiritual depths it contains:

Sincere greetings to all. We are very sorry not to have seen Mother Otilia any more. In this brief time we have experienced a great deal: one lives together with the others and everywhere people help each other. We have slept very little, but have had a lot of good air and much traveling. Many greetings to Sophie[Meuwissen], Maria [Delsing] too, and to everyone. They were upset; we not at all./ In Corde Jesu we all find ourselves in *gratitude*./ Rosa

The final word "gratitude" is most evocative. It reveals a positive attitude in someone coping with downright threatening surroundings, hemmed in on all sides by forces unfriendly to her prisoner companions and intently bent on applying the infamous "final solution" to them (actively in force since January of that same year, though surely without their knowing it). Rosa also manages to accentuate the positive in her phrase "everywhere people help each other." Furthermore, in words of supreme kindness, she lets us appreciate more accurately her frame of mind in the face of the violent events that accompanied her arrest at the Echt Carmel. She mentions Maria Delsing, one of the local women who had gathered near the Echt monastery door when the Stein sisters were being led away into the police van.

Rosa's note is helpful in another way. It clarifies and underscores her own inherent significance in the story of the last days of her and her sister's life together. The now-accepted martyrdom of St. Edith Stein asserts she witnessed as a truly Christian vessel of grace to all around her in the concentration camps during her last week on earth. St. Edith spent herself in comforting others, especially the children. Rosa's text indicates she acted similarly. "Everywhere people help each other," was one remark that described the mutual assistance she participated in as the group "experienced a great deal" (euphemistic phrase to describe the maltreatment they received, no doubt). The further remark that "one lives together" probably indicates a lack of privacy in the jumbled conditions of

captivity on police vans and in camp barracks, but it also can be taken to mean she was sharing *actively* the lot of all the others. Her text describes a scene of people reaching out to each other, sustaining one another, giving of one's self to help the others along—things so much in character for her who years before had run the house for her busy mother, then was known for her friendly ways in Echt. Both she and her sainted sister were sources of Christian charity while moving through the concentration camps. Both were illumined by grace to shed perhaps small, but real, beacons of light in the darkness around them. Both overcame the temptation to self-centeredness in the face of mortal danger, as they opened their hearts (“*in corde Jesu*”) to the other Jewish victims around them, sharing their burdens. Rosa's behavior was a mirror image of her sister's, however different they were as individuals. Ought they to remain distant in death for lack of equal recognition of how they witnessed to the presence of the suffering Christ in Nazi Germany's diabolical camp system? Can Rosa not qualify, in other words, for canonization? The answer is not ours to give, but we can do something to help it take form. I once turned the remembrance of Rosa Stein, Jewish born, Catholic lay-woman, and obvious holy person, into a challenge to the Edith Stein Guild. Could they not dedicate some efforts in the direction of having the Vatican examine her cause as a martyr of the faith (and consequently a person not in need of a miracle to be beatified)?

I go on nourishing the hope that some who read this might want to contact Father Ildefonso Moriones, the Discalced Carmelite in charge of causes for canonizations (his title is “Postulator General”), to initiate a process to take up actively Rosa Stein's cause. Our order is the proper matrix or vehicle for such a cause, due to the fact that Rosa was a secular order member (as was, for instance, Bl. Josefa Naval Girbés before her). Carmel cannot answer for the other companions who accompanied them after the August 2nd round-up—some were Trappists and members of more modern congregations—but we can, and ought to, feel a certain pride in Rosa's worth as a contemporary Christian witness along with her sister. Not to do so is to lose an opportunity to show how widely the holiness of God in his servants shone forth at an hour of great darkness in the affairs of humankind. She will not be forgotten, after all.