

# ‘My long search for the true faith’

## *The Conversion of Edith Stein*

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## Foreword

In March 2011 I gave a series of lectures on Edith Stein at the Mount Carmel Retreat Centre near Varroville, N.S.W. It was my intention to revise the text of the lectures and circulate it afterwards to people who had attended the seminar. Before I got round to doing this, however, I was invited to write a short article on the conversion of Edith Stein for the Oxford journal *Mount Carmel*. In the course of preparing this article I discovered important material in German which was new to me and which had not been translated into English: in particular, a scholarly discussion by Fr Ulrich Dobhan OCD, one of the editors of the complete works of Edith Stein (*Edith Stein Gesamtausgabe*) published by Herder. In my Varroville lectures I had raised doubts about the reliability of the influential memoir by Sister Teresia Renata Posselt on which most biographies of Edith Stein have hitherto been based.<sup>1</sup> Fr Dobhan's article<sup>2</sup> provided further evidence that those doubts were fully justified, and led me to reconsider and revise the interpretation of Edith's conversion which I had presented in Varroville. The following essay offers this thoroughly revised account, somewhat belatedly, to my friends from the Varroville seminar and others who may be interested in Edith Stein.

This essay deals with events in Edith's life only up to the time of her conversion to Catholicism. I say nothing here about the subsequent course of her life.

The account of phenomenology in this essay is much briefer than my lecture in Varroville on Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. In the lecture I tried to explain why Husserl's philosophy had such a powerful and lasting influence on Edith Stein. But it was evident that some, perhaps most of the audience found the lecture too abstruse to be helpful.

The article of the same title in *Mount Carmel* (July-September 2012, vol. 60/3) is an abridged version of the present one.

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Nelson, N.Z.  
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<sup>1</sup> Teresia Renata Posselt OCD, *Edith Stein: the Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*, revised edition (ICS 2005). Referred to below as 'Posselt'.

<sup>2</sup> Fr Ulrich Dobhan OCD, 'Vom "radikalen Unglauben" zum "wahren Glauben"', in *Edith Stein Jahrbuch 2009* (Würzburg).

### Edith's Jewish upbringing

Edith Stein was born into a large Jewish family on 12 October 1891, in the city of Breslau, capital of the Schlesiens, a province of the former kingdom of Prussia. Edith's father died when she was an infant, and she was brought up by her mother Auguste, who ran a timber business. Edith's birthday happened to be on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, the most solemn day in the Jewish spiritual year, a day of fasting and atonement for one's sins, practising charity to others and praying for communal redemption. Edith's mother had a deep religious faith and believed that Edith's birth on the Day of Atonement was some kind of portent.

Auguste Stein was a believing Jew, but not an Orthodox Jew, as was claimed in the biography of Edith Stein by Sr Teresia Renata Posselt. Auguste's regular place of worship in Breslau was the New Synagogue, the original home of Reform Judaism<sup>3</sup> – not the White Stork synagogue, where the congregation and rituals were Orthodox.<sup>4</sup>



**Neue Synagoge, Breslau (destroyed by fire on Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938)**

Frau Stein attended synagogue on sabbath days, and on High Holy Days she often took her children with her. But the Stein children were not well educated in Jewish religious traditions and practices. Edith attended a religious instruction course at school, but (according to Katherina Rubens, a childhood friend) it was so poorly taught that she quickly became

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<sup>3</sup> See Abraham Ascher, *A Community Under Siege: the Jews of Breslau under Nazism* (Stanford Studies in Jewish History and Culture, Stanford 2007), 29-33.

<sup>4</sup> Orthodox Jews follow a strict traditional interpretation of Biblical and Talmudic law. Reform Jews maintain that Judaism has evolved over the centuries and is still evolving, and that Jewish traditions should be interpreted flexibly and allow participation in local civic life and culture. The founder of the Reform movement was Abraham Geiger, a rabbi in nineteenth-century Breslau.

indifferent to religious matters. Some Jewish traditions were observed in the family home: eating kosher food, and baking Challah bread and lighting candles for Shabbat. But the household was not one of strict religious observance. Edith's niece, Susanne Batzdorff, writes scathingly about Teresia Posselt's misleading portrayal of the household as punctiliously Orthodox.

In her eagerness to picture my grandmother's home life as devoutly Jewish, Sister Teresia... states that 'grace was said in Hebrew, and every appropriate ceremonial prescription of the Talmud was precisely carried out'. ... My mother (Erna Stein), upon reading this, consistently and vehemently denied that Hebrew prayers were spoken at mealtime; in fact she would remark that her mother was 'much too busy' to find time for prayers, before or after meals. As for the laws of the Talmud, Grandmother would have had no knowledge of these... I cannot speculate as to what prompted (Posselt) to engage in such flights of fancy. Knowing Edith's meticulous respect for truth, I cannot believe that such tales originated with her.<sup>5</sup>

Susanne Batzdorff is one of the editors of a revised and corrected edition of Posselt's memoir, published by ICS in 2005. This contains extensive notes and supplementary information, and is a useful tool of reference, especially perhaps for students of Edith Stein who are disconcerted to find that many of the edifying 'one-liners' attributed to her are not derived from Edith's own writings but from Posselt's demonstrably fallible memoir.

Sr Teresia Renata had been Edith's novice mistress and Prioress in the Cologne Carmel; but as her friend Sr Maria Amata Neyer admits, 'her memory played her many a trick and sometimes totally abandoned her.'<sup>6</sup> Sr Maria Amata says Posselt never intended her memoir to be seen as a biography in the true sense, she only wished to braid a 'wreath of memories' of her beloved subject; yet 'the success of her little book surpassed all expectations.' It went through nine editions between 1948 and 1963, and though the author added new material in successive editions, she was unwilling to remove or correct any errors – even gross errors – that were pointed out to her by Erna Stein and others. Despite this, Posselt's vivid anecdotes about Edith Stein charmed and captivated an entire generation of Catholics. If Posselt had not published her memoir, or had been a less enthusiastic and inventive writer, the name of Edith Stein might by now have been almost completely forgotten – except as a footnote in the history of phenomenology. Nevertheless, in trying to understand something so complex and convoluted as the process of Edith's conversion to the Catholic faith, it is best to rely mainly on Edith's own authentic writings.

### **Life in a Jewish Family**

In 1933 Edith began writing an account of her early life, a story which she never completed. The manuscript covers only her childhood and adolescence and student years in Breslau, Göttingen and Freiburg. The manuscript comes to an abrupt end after describing the joyful summer's day in 1916 when Edith learnt of her success in her doctoral examination. There is almost nothing in the book about her conversion to Catholicism five years later, or her spiritual development after her conversion, or her entry into Carmel. For whatever

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<sup>5</sup> *Aunt Edith: the Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint* (Templegate 1998 and 2003), 95-96.

<sup>6</sup> Maria Amata Neyer OCD, Foreword to the revised Posselt, vii.

reason, Edith never got round to completing her autobiography or revising what she had written.

She began writing the book in 1933, after the Nazis had come to power in Germany. A priest suggested to her that telling the German public what it was like to live as a member of a decent, hard-working Jewish family – Jewish in ancestry, but authentically German in culture and civic and national loyalties - might help to counter the venomous anti-Jewish propaganda circulated by the Nazis.

*Life in a Jewish Family* is the most approachable of all Edith's writings, and provides far and away the best account of her early life and education. It tells an entertaining story about a middle-class German-Jewish family living in Breslau during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Edith is an acute observer of other human beings, good at communicating insight into their personalities and their innermost feelings. She gives lively verbal portraits of many individuals - her remarkable mother and other members of the extended Stein family, and the many friends of her childhood and early adulthood, together with anecdotes about the distinguished philosophers and professors whom Edith met in the course of her academic studies, and an assortment of other characters. In describing the attitudes and presumptions and ambitions of all these diverse individuals, Edith indirectly – perhaps inadvertently - reveals much about her own developing personality and character during this early period of her life.

### **Edith abandons prayer**

Like many other young people, Edith lost her faith in God when she was about 15. This is not to say she became an intellectually convinced atheist or sceptic. Edith never identified herself as an atheist. All she says in her autobiography (148) is that she gave up praying, deliberately and consciously, while she was staying in Hamburg in a completely secular environment, the home of her married sister Else Gordon. In much the same way, many young Catholics growing up in worldly surroundings lose interest in the faith and give up practising it, without actively rejecting it or declaring their conversion to atheism. Susanne Batzdorff makes a sensible comment on Edith's adolescent abandonment of prayer:

A thoughtful young woman who is searching for the truth, as Edith was fated to do all her life, is bound to struggle with doubts and uncertainties, especially during her teenage years. In the process of growing up, Edith was destined to experience a number of shifts in her thinking. That a fifteen-year-old does not pray is probably much more common than that she should observe this fact in herself and comment upon it. [*Aunt Edith*, p. 67]

### **Edith's view of Judaism**

In 1911, when Edith was 19, she began studying psychology at Breslau University. Edith was friendly with two young women from liberal Jewish families, Rose Guttmann and Lilli Platau, and a young man who was courting Edith's sister Erna, Hans Biberstein. Edith's circle of friends regarded themselves as assimilated Jews - Germans who happened to be of Jewish ancestry. Edith's mother kept a kosher household, but the Guttmann, Platau and Biberstein families did not. Like many German Jews, they took a condescending attitude towards *Ostjuden* – Eastern Jews – who spoke Yiddish or heavily accented German, and were usually poorer, less well educated and more pious than German Jews. Edith describes how

she and her friends used to tease Paul Berg, a traditional, strictly Orthodox Jew from the Polish-speaking province of Posen, who knew far more about Judaism than anyone in Edith's group.

We could not complain that (he) offended us by his views for he scarcely ever referred to them. Nor had he even the slightest trace of that unpleasant intonation common to the uneducated Eastern Jews which irritated the German 'assimilated Jews' even more than it did the 'Aryans'. Rather, he spoke a very pure and cultivated German... (But) he was exaggerately polite and obsequious... His presence always provoked me to shock him by particularly unrestrained expressions; and Hans Biberstein baited him continually with biting sarcasm. (*LJF* 127)

This passage shows that Edith and her friends regarded themselves as fully 'assimilated' Jewish Germans. They were conscious of their Jewish ethnicity and nominally Jewish in religious affiliation, but felt little or no allegiance to the traditions and values of Judaism. Their intellectual and social culture, their assumptions and interests, their tastes in literature, art and music, their social attitudes, were entirely German and almost entirely secular. Edith began to develop an informed understanding and appreciation of her Jewish heritage only after her conversion to Catholicism.

### **Edith discovers the philosophy of Husserl**

Edith studied psychology at Breslau University for four semesters. By then she had become discontented with psychology's lack of a scientific basis and turned her attention to another subject, philosophy. Early in 1913, she became interested in the writings of **Edmund Husserl**, a professor at the University of Göttingen and the founder of a new philosophical movement known as phenomenology.



**Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)**

A friend lent Edith the second volume of Husserl's *Logical Investigations*. The book enchanted her and made her want to go to Göttingen to study philosophy with Husserl and become a phenomenologist. Before she had even met Husserl, she was convinced that he was the outstanding philosopher of the age (*Life* 219). She wrote:

All my study of psychology had persuaded me that this science was in its infancy; it still lacked clear basic concepts; furthermore, there was no one who could establish such an essential foundation. On the other hand, what I had learned about phenomenology so far fascinated me tremendously, because it consisted precisely of such a labour of clarification and because, here, one forged one's own mental tools for the task at hand. (*LJF* 222)

Philosophy was always an essential part of Edith's unique vocation; it remained so even after she became a Carmelite. It isn't possible to understand Edith's personality without taking account of her abiding, lifelong interest in philosophy and her dedication to scholarly research and analysis. But her most original philosophical writings belong to the period before her conversion to Catholicism, and have little or no direct connection with her religious faith and the spiritual doctrine she developed during her years in Carmel. Moreover, her philosophical writings are technical and difficult to understand. For these reasons, I shall not explain Edith's own philosophical theories in detail. Instead, I'll try to explain why she first became interested in philosophy, especially Husserl's version of philosophy, and chose to devote her life to it.

For Edith, the attractive features of Husserl's phenomenology were:

- (1) Husserl's repudiation of the scientific pretensions of psychology, and of 'psychologism' - the error of conflating the formal sciences of logic and pure mathematics with the empirical methods of psychology.
- (2) Realism in ontology and epistemology. Realism in this sense is the doctrine that material bodies and other substantial wholes exist externally to and independently of our perception of them. Things exist objectively, whether or not anyone is conscious of their existence, and are what they are whether or not anyone experiences them and knows them as they are. The realm of facts is a realm of objective truth, independent of anyone's subjective impressions and opinions. And it is possible for us, though not easy, to come to know things as they are.
- (3) Husserl claimed that phenomenology was an entirely new method of investigation, comprising a system of rigorous analytical techniques that an intelligent, industrious and painstaking student could learn through training and practice and then exercise autonomously and creatively, without supervision.

Edith relished the prospect of meeting and engaging in collaborative research with other keen and able phenomenologists. She knew that in Göttingen she would learn an enormous amount about philosophy not only from Husserl, but also from the circle of colleagues and students who surrounded him and discussed philosophy constantly with one another. A friend in Breslau had told her, 'In Göttingen, that's all you do: philosophize, day and night, at meals, in the street, everywhere. All you talk about is "phenomena".' (*LJF* 218) In her autobiography, written long after her student years in Göttingen, Edith looked back nostalgically on that brief, wonderful, exhilarating period of her life.

Dear Göttingen! I do believe that only someone who studied there between 1905 and 1914, the short flowering time of the Göttingen School of Phenomenology, can appreciate all that the name evokes in us. (*LJF*, 239)

The picture below shows a group of Göttingen phenomenologists in 1912.



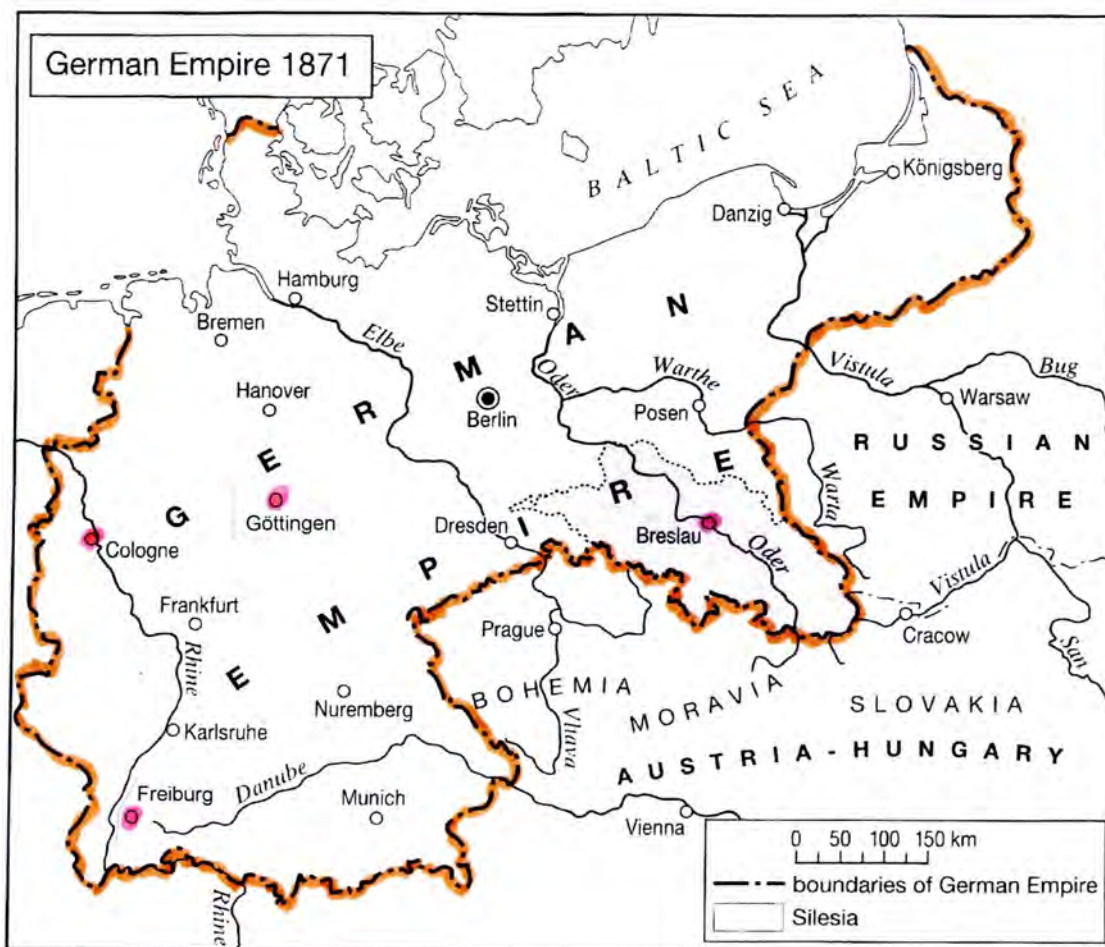
***Left to right:*** Johannes Hering, Friedrich Neumann, Adolf Reinach, Hans Lipps, Hans-Theodor Conrad, Max Scheler, Alexandre Koyré, Siegfried Hamburger, Hedwig Martius, Rudolf Clemens, Gustav Hübener, Alfred Von Sybel.

Philosophers who arrived in Göttingen later and became active in the phenomenological movement include Fritz Kaufmann, Roman Ingarden and of course Edith Stein.



**Edith Stein in 1913**





The four cities where Edith spent most of her life: Breslau, Göttingen, Freiburg, Cologne

### New friends in Göttingen

One of the first people Edith met in Göttingen was **Adolf Reinach** (1883-1917), who was to become her philosophical instructor and one of her most trusted friends. Like Edith, Reinach came from a Jewish background but had never been a practising Jew. He was a *Privatdozent* at the university, and he ran advanced classes for senior students in which he set out to explain Husserl's phenomenological method. Reinach was a charming, warm-hearted, generous person, and a superlative teacher - a far more lucid exponent of Husserl's difficult philosophical ideas than Husserl himself. Husserl was a poor lecturer; his lecturing style was rambling, obscure and dull. Husserl knew this, and he relied on Adolf Reinach to instruct students in the basic ideas of phenomenology. Edith said:

The hours spent in (Reinach's) beautiful study were the happiest of all my time in Göttingen. We (the students) were probably unanimous in the opinion that, when it came to method, we learned more here than anywhere else. (*Life in a Jewish Family*, 274)

Reinach's wife Anne and his younger sister Pauline also became Edith's friends at this time. **Anne Reinach** had been one of the first three female students at the University of Tübingen. She had a doctorate in the field of atomic physics. **Pauline Reinach** was just beginning her university studies. These intelligent, amiable women were to play a key rôle in two momentous episodes in Edith's spiritual development, after the death of Adolf Reinach.



**Adolf and Anne Reinach**

Among her fellow-students, Edith was particularly impressed by **Hans Lipps** (1889-1941). He was just two years older than she. Lipps was a student of medicine and biological science as well as a talented philosopher. Edith says:

Hans Lipps made a deeper impression on me than any (of the other students). Twenty-three years old at the time, he looked much younger. Very tall, slim, but powerfully built, he had a handsome, expressive face, lively as a child's. His gaze was serious; still his large, round eyes were as inquisitive as a child's. Usually he would state his opinion in brief but very definite terms. When asked to give more detailed clarification, he would assert that there was no more to be said as the matter was self-explanatory. That had to satisfy us. (*LJF*, 254)

Edith exchanged letters on philosophical topics with Hans Lipps throughout the first world war, when he was serving as an assistant physician in the army. None of the correspondence has survived. She liked to send him little presents: a Japanese woodcut, essays on the theory of relativity, pralines or other sweets. He told her: 'You have an uncanny knack for finding just what I need.' (*LJF* 370) Lipps was later to become a respected professor of philosophy at Frankfurt-am-Main. He was killed in action in Russia in 1941.

**Fritz Kaufmann** (1891-1958) came from a wealthy Jewish family in Leipzig. When Edith first met Kaufmann she teased him mercilessly (*LJF* 257) because she was amused by his elegant attire, so unusual in a philosopher, and his affected manner of speaking. Her taunts had a chastening effect on Kaufmann: 'his tone became unpretentious and sincere'; and Edith and he were soon good friends. Edith wrote to Kaufmann often during the war years, and received long letters from him in return. Kaufmann's experiences during the war strengthened his Jewish faith, and after Edith's conversion he did not write to her for nearly five years. Then in 1925 Edith wrote to him and he replied, and they continued corresponding until her death. Kaufmann paid Edith a farewell visit at the Cologne Carmel before he migrated to the United States in 1938.

**Hedwig Martius** (shown in the 1912 photograph wearing a large hat) married Hans-Theodor Conrad early in 1913 and changed her surname to Conrad-Martius. Hedwig and her husband had left Göttingen before Edith arrived. Edith corresponded with Hedwig about various matters relating to phenomenology, but did not meet her till the summer of 1920 when Edith went to stay at the Conrad-Martius farm near Bad Bergzabern. This was the first of many such visits. The two women became intimate friends and corresponded frequently. Hedwig Conrad-Martius lived until 1966 and gained a considerable reputation as an exponent of phenomenology.

**Roman Ingarden**, a Polish philosopher from Krakow, was one of Edith's most trusted friends and colleagues during the years in Freiburg, 1916-18, when she was working as assistant to Edmund Husserl.



**Roman Ingarden (1893-1970)**

Edith wrote a great many letters to Roman Ingarden between 1917 and 1939, at first mainly about her work with Husserl,<sup>7</sup> later about many other topics, both philosophical and personal. Ingarden was to become one of the teachers of Karol Wojtyła in Kraków.<sup>8</sup>

### **The impact of Max Scheler**

Edith discovered, to her surprise, that Edmund Husserl and other members of the Göttingen philosophical community held religious beliefs, or at least were sympathetic to religion. Husserl himself had been born Jewish, but he and his wife Malvine had converted to Evangelical Christianity, i.e., Lutheranism, before their marriage in 1887. Max Scheler, a philosopher from Munich who was visiting Göttingen, had an Orthodox Jewish mother and a Lutheran father, but had converted to Catholicism in his youth. Scheler was a brilliant orator on ethical and religious themes. His striking appearance, charismatic personality and dramatic lecturing style made a powerful impression on the young Edith Stein. She writes:

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<sup>7</sup> See article by Roman Ingarden, 'Edith Stein on her activity as an assistant of Edmund Husserl', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XXIII, no.2, December 1962, 155-175.

<sup>8</sup> The future Pope wrote his *Habilitationsschrift* on the ethical theory of Max Scheler.

One's first impression of Scheler was fascination. I have never encountered the phenomenon of genius so clearly in any other person. His large blue eyes seemed to radiate the light of a more exalted world. His features were handsome and noble; yet life had left some devastating traces in his face. Betty Heymann said he reminded her of the picture of Dorian Gray [in the play by Oscar Wilde]: that mysterious portrait on which the dissolute life of the original painted its distorting lines, while the person preserved the handsome features of his youth. (*LJF*, 259).



**Max Scheler (1874-1928)**

Edith was enthralled by Scheler's eloquence in expounding and defending Catholic spiritual ideals. Listening to his lectures on the phenomenology of religion, she became disposed to take religious ideas and attitudes seriously for the first time since her adolescence, when she had lost her faith and given up prayer. She writes in her autobiography:

This was my first encounter with this hitherto totally unknown world. It did not lead me as yet to the Faith. But it did open for me a range of 'phenomena' which I could then no longer bypass blindly. With good reason we were repeatedly enjoined [by Reinach and Husserl] to observe all things without prejudice, to discard all possible 'blinkers'. The barriers of rationalistic prejudices with which I had unwittingly grown up fell away, and the world of faith unfolded before me. People with whom I associated daily, people whom I esteemed and admired, lived in it. At the least, they deserved my giving it some serious reflection. For the time being, I did not embark on a systematic investigation of the questions of faith; I was far too busy with other matters. I was content to accept without resistance the stimuli coming from my surroundings, and so, almost without noticing it, became gradually transformed. (*LJF*, 260-1)

This is an illuminating passage, which – if one reads it attentively - shows how misleading it is to describe Edith during her years of philosophical apprenticeship as an 'atheistic philosopher'. Edith Stein was never an atheistic philosopher. Her adolescent loss of faith was the result of 'rationalistic prejudices' which had no intellectual foundation, but were acquired – as Edith says - '*unwittingly*' from her secular surroundings. Edith never attempted to justify those prejudices with formal philosophical arguments. The prejudices simply 'fell away' when she joined the philosophical community in Göttingen and heard - for the first time - real philosophers discussing religious beliefs seriously and respectfully. From then on, Edith tells us, she 'became gradually transformed'. In other words, it was when she began doing philosophy that the process of her conversion began.

## Husserl's 'transcendental turn'

After the initial excitement of meeting Husserl and being accepted as one of his students, Edith discovered, to her disappointment, that Husserl's epistemology had begun developing in ways that diverged from his position in *Logical Investigations*. In 1913, the very year in which Edith began her studies with Husserl, he published a new book, *Ideen (Ideas)*, which seemed to Edith and many of Husserl's other students to turn away from the epistemological realism of the *Investigations*, which they had found so refreshing and stimulating, towards a kind of Kantian idealism, which they found completely wrong-headed. Edith says:

The *Logical Investigations* had caused a sensation primarily because it appeared to be a radical departure from critical idealism which had a Kantian and neo-Kantian stamp. It was considered to be a 'new scholasticism' because it turned attention away from the 'subject' and towards 'things' themselves. Perception again appeared as reception, deriving its laws from objects; not, as critical idealism has it, from determination which imposes its laws on the objects. All the young phenomenologists were confirmed realists. However, the *Ideen* included some expressions which sounded very much as though their Master wished to return to idealism. Nor could his oral interpretation dispel our misgivings. It was the beginning of that development which led Husserl, more and more, to see in what he called 'transcendental Idealism' ... the actual nucleus of his philosophy, and to devote all his energies to establishing it. This was a path on which, to his sorrow as well as their own, his earlier Göttingen students could not follow him. (*LJF*, 250)

## The Problem of Empathy

Eventually Husserl gave approval for Edith to begin working on a doctoral thesis on the topic of 'empathy' and its relation to phenomenology. The term 'empathy' (or rather its German equivalent, *Einfühlung*) had been introduced into philosophy by Theodor Lipps, a professor in Munich (no relation to Hans Lipps, Edith's fellow-student). In his writings on psychology and aesthetics, Theodor Lipps used the notion of empathy in a variety of ways: to explain how we are able to understand the mental states of other people, and to enjoy works of art, and even what makes us succumb to optical illusions. Husserl appropriated Lipps's terminology and adapted it for his own purposes. For Husserl, empathy is an intuitive awareness of the thoughts, perceptions, emotions and desires and thoughts of another person, as when I discern what another person is thinking or remembering, or see sadness or joy in his face and demeanour.

In ordinary English, empathy is often taken to be more or less equivalent to sympathy or compassion or pity or fellow-feeling. Husserl's use of the term is different. For Husserl, empathy doesn't necessarily involve commiserating with the fears and pains and sorrows of other people. Empathy is not an emotion, nor is it a manifestation of altruistic sensibility or moral virtue of any sort. Empathy is fundamentally a cognitive exercise, a dispassionate and detached insight into the mind of another person. It is an intuitive apprehension of the other person's present state of consciousness - the perception, or judgment, or remembering, or imagining, or emotion which he is currently experiencing. I can know what another person is secretly thinking without approving of or agreeing with his thoughts (which I may find disgusting or repellent), and I can know what another person is feeling without approving of or sympathizing with or sharing his feelings.

Edith Stein was interested in the experience of empathy because it seemed essential to the phenomenological method, yet Husserl had used the term frequently in his work without explaining it or analysing what it meant. Edith writes:

In his course on nature and spirit (lectures which Husserl gave in 1913-14), (he) had said that an objective outer world could only be experienced intersubjectively, i.e., through a plurality of perceiving individuals who relate in a mutual exchange of information. Accordingly, an experience of other individuals is a prerequisite. To this experience, an application of the work of Theodor Lipps, Husserl gave the name *Einfühlung* [empathy]. What it consists of, however, he nowhere explained in detail. Here was a lacuna to be filled; therefore, I wished to examine what empathy might be. (*LJF*, 269)

The task of analysing empathy and explaining its relation to phenomenology turned out to be immensely difficult. As Edith laboured night and day to solve the problems she had set herself, she discovered by personal experience how difficult it is to do philosophy properly – not just to read books by philosophers and discuss their ideas, as students and teachers do most of the time, but really to think creatively about philosophical problems, to articulate them more clearly; to analyse the issues systematically and accurately and try to work out convincing solutions. Anyone who has ever tried to do philosophy seriously will appreciate Edith's description of her bewildered state of mind during this period:

For the first time, I encountered here what was to be, repeatedly, my experience in every subsequent work: books were of no use to me at all until I had clarified the matter in question by my own effort. This excruciating struggle to attain clarity was waged unceasingly inside me, depriving me of rest day and night. At that time I lost the art of sleeping, and it took many years before restful nights were granted to me again. Little by little I worked myself into a state of veritable despair. For the first time in my life I was confronted by something I could not conquer by sheer will-power... All this brought me to a point where life itself seemed unbearable... Reasoning was of no avail. I could no longer cross the street without wishing I could be run over by some vehicle. (*LJF*, 277-78)

Nothing I had hitherto accomplished had ever exacted such a heavy toll in mental effort. I believe that without personally having done such creative philosophical work a person cannot possibly imagine what it demanded of me. (282)

Later, after her religious conversion, Edith came to believe that fidelity to the vocation of philosophical enquiry can be an authentic way of attaining holiness. But at this stage of her life she would have agreed with Wittgenstein's gloomy aphorism, 'Philosophy is *hell!*'

Edith was saved from her misery by Adolf Reinach, who possessed all the virtues of a first-class supervisor. When she showed him her drafts, he read them attentively, reassured her about their quality, advised her how to proceed and encouraged her to persevere. Edith says:

After these... visits with Reinach, I was like one reborn... I felt as though I had been rescued from distress by a good angel. As if by one magic word, he seemed to have transformed the monstrous offspring of my poor brain into a clear and well-organized whole. I was completely confident that his verdict was reliable. (*LJF*, 284)

## **The outbreak of war**

When war broke out in the summer of 1914 university lectures were suspended, and most of the young male phenomenologists in Göttingen - including Adolf Reinach, Hans Lipps and Fritz Kaufmann - left the city and enlisted in the army. According to Edith: 'An entire regiment of volunteers from Göttingen was engaged in the thick of the battle in

Flanders.’ (*LJF* 300) Edith and her friends were convinced that Germany’s cause was just, and were confident of the outcome of the war. Edith was a Prussian conservative and an ardent German patriot, just as Thérèse of Lisieux had been an ardent French patriot. She felt that all her intellectual and physical energy must now be devoted to ‘this great happening’ (*LJF* 297).

Edith remained in Göttingen during the winter of 1914-15, studying for her oral examinations. She derived much comfort at this time from her friendship with Pauline Reinach and Erika Gothe (a fellow-student of phenomenology), both of whom had brothers at the front. Edith read Homer with Pauline Reinach and discussed philosophy with Erika Gothe. Edith wrote warmly of these two friends:

Despite the oppressive anxiety caused by the war, this winter may well have been the happiest time of all my Göttingen years. The friendship with Pauline and Erika had more depth and beauty than my former student friendships. For the first time, I was not the one to lead or to be sought after; but rather I saw in the others something better and higher than myself. (*LJF* 308)

Edith passed her oral and written examinations with highest honours. But she was reluctant to continue philosophizing while so many of her friends were risking their lives on the battlefield. She longed to play an active part in the war effort. When she was offered a job as a nurse in an Austrian military hospital, she accepted immediately. She abandoned her studies and went to work in Mährisch-Weisskirchen, a town in Moravia, which was then a province of Austria and is now part of the Czech Republic.

Edith had led a rather sheltered life and the environment in the military hospital unsettled and disturbed her. The worst experience came at the beginning, when she was forced to observe the carousing of some of the medical staff.



**Recreation at Weisskirchen (Edith at front left)**

But one of the senior doctors gave her encouragement and protection, and she settled down to do the work she had come to do. The patients were lice-ridden soldiers suffering from dysentery, cholera, typhoid and other contagious diseases. Many had gangrenous wounds and were dying. Sometimes they cursed her as she tried to wash them or give them medication.

Edith's experiences in the military hospital must have helped to develop and strengthen her character.

Eventually she took a period of leave, during which the authorities closed the hospital and Edith was released from her nursing duties. At the end of 1915 she returned to Göttingen and resumed work on her dissertation. Edmund Husserl left Göttingen in 1916 and took up a new position as Professor at the University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau. By this time Edith had completed her dissertation, and as soon as it was typed she posted it to Husserl in Freiburg. Several months later, she was awarded her doctorate with the highest grade of honours, *summa cum laude*.

### **Empathy and religious faith**

Edith's doctoral dissertation seeks to explain how it is possible to have insight into another person's beliefs and values, which one may not share, by means of empathy. Such insight may be available only in the manner of an 'empty presentation' if the other person's 'experiential structure' is alien to one's own. No doubt it is easier to discern the thoughts, emotions and attitudes of someone whose personality, character, cultural background and beliefs are similar to one's own. Yet, for example, it is possible for a non-believer to gain an objective understanding of the motivation and outlook of a religious person:

I can be sceptical myself and still understand that another sacrifices all his earthly goods to his faith... I intuit empathically the type of *homo religiosus* by nature foreign to me, and I understand it even though what newly confronts me here will always remain unfulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

We should not assume from Edith's use of the first-person singular in propounding this example that she identifies her own state of mind with that of the hypothetical sceptic portrayed in the example. In presenting examples for analysis, the phenomenologist moves between first-person, third-person and completely impersonal modes of description, but her object is always to describe general types of 'experiential structure', not her own nor that of any other particular individual.

In fact, by this time the question of the authenticity of religious belief had become for Edith an open question. In the last paragraph of her dissertation she asks what we are to make of someone's claim to have experienced an effect of God's grace, or the influence of a guardian spirit. Are all such experiences delusory, or might some be genuine? Edith postpones answering the question, pending 'further investigation' (118).

### **Attracted to Catholicism**

In Edith's autobiography there are anecdotes which indicate that though she knew little of Catholic theology, she felt attracted by devotional aspects of the Catholic faith from the time she heard Max Scheler's lectures. It appears that Protestantism never held much appeal for her, though she dutifully studied the works of Protestant as well as Catholic authors, and many of her friends were Lutheran. In her autobiography she writes:

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<sup>9</sup> *One the Problem of Empathy* (ICS 1989), 115.



In Göttingen I learned to respect questions of faith and persons who had faith. With some of my women friends, I even went to one of the Protestant churches at times. The sermons there, habitually mixing politics with religion, naturally could not lead me to a knowledge of pure faith; and often they turned me off. I had not yet found a way back to God. (*LJF* 316)

Once, after attending a Protestant service with a friend, Edith remarked: ‘In Protestantism, heaven is closed; in Catholicism it is open.’<sup>10</sup>

In 1916, on her way to Freiburg for her doctoral examination, Edith met Hans Lipps in Dresden, where he had returned on leave from the front. They exchanged news about other former members of the Göttingen circle, now dispersed. Edith writes:

In the course of this exchange (Lipps) asked me: ‘Do you also belong to this “club” in Munich that goes to Mass every day?’ I could not help laughing at his amusing way of expressing it, although... I keenly minded his lack of respect. He meant Dietrich von Hildebrand and Siegfried Hamburger who had become converts and were now proving to be very zealous. No, I was not one of them. Very nearly I added, ‘Unfortunately’. ‘Actually, Fräulein Stein, what’s it all about? I don’t understand any of it.’ I understood a little but was unable to say much about it. (*LJF* 399)

Soon afterwards, Edith met Pauline Reinach in Frankfurt. Together they visited the cathedral, where something happened which made the ‘deepest impression’ on Edith:

While we looked around in respectful silence, a woman carrying a market basket came in and knelt down in one of the pews to pray briefly. This was something entirely new to me. To the synagogues or to the Protestant churches which I had visited, one went only for services. But here was someone interrupting her everyday shopping errands to come into the church, although no other person was in it, as though she were here for an intimate conversation. I could never forget that. (*LJF* 401)

## Walks in the Schwarzwald

Edith’s favourite form of recreation was walking in the countryside, especially among mountains. She found it a relaxing diversion from the long periods of intense intellectual activity that filled her working life. During her childhood and adolescence in Breslau she had enjoyed many excursions with family and friends in the wild and rugged scenery of the Riesengebirge. In Göttingen she went walking in the Harz mountains. Freiburg-im-Breisgau lay at the foot of the lofty wooded hills of the Schwarzwald (Black Forest). During the last weeks of July 1916, while she was in Freiburg awaiting her *viva voce* examination, Edith took several long walks in the mountains with Erika Gothe, who was a Protestant. Erika had come to keep company with her during the anxious period before the examination. Erika wrote:

Edith took great pleasure in the splendours of nature. She was absolutely enraptured by the masses of wild-flowers and multi-coloured butterflies on the Belchen. On the Blauen she was delighted because even at night from her bed she could look over the Rhine valley all the way to the lights of Basel in the distance and the shimmering stars overhead. (Posselt 59)

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<sup>10</sup> Hedwig Conrad-Martius, Letter of 1948 to Fr John Oesterreicher, in *Never Forget*, ed. W. Herbstrith (ICS 1998), 265.

On one occasion the two friends attended Husserl's lecture in the morning and then walked all the way from the outskirts of Freiburg over the Schauinsland (1284m.) to the Feldberg, the highest hilltop in the Schwarzwald (1493m.) – a distance of more than twenty miles (*LJF* 406). They found accommodation overnight with a farmer on the Feldberg. Erika wrote:

It made a deep impression on us when this Catholic master said his prayers with his men in the morning and shook hands with each of them before they went out haymaking.<sup>11</sup>



### **The Reinachs are baptized**

At the end of 1916 Adolf Reinach, who had trained Edith Stein and other members of the Göttingen circle in phenomenology, returned home from the war on leave and astonished Edith by telling her that during his military service he had lost interest in philosophy and become engrossed in religious questions. Reinach had undergone a religious experience on the battlefield which made him feel unable to withhold trust in God. He wrote to his wife: 'The first weeks were terrible, then God's peace came to me, and now all is well.'<sup>12</sup> Adolf and Anne had been baptized by a Lutheran pastor earlier that year. Shortly before their baptism Reinach expressed a doubt as to whether they were doing the right thing. Had he chosen to be baptized as a Lutheran only because he was not yet ready for the Catholic Church? Anne Reinach replied: 'Once we are in communion with Christ, we shall see where he will lead us.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Posselt 58.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in John M. Oesterreicher, *Walls Are Crumbling* (London 1953), 107. Fr Oesterreicher had corresponded with Anne Reinach.

<sup>13</sup> Oesterreicher 117.

## Difficulties with Husserl

After Edith was awarded her doctorate, she left Göttingen and began working in Freiburg as Husserl's personal assistant. She was full of excitement at the prospect.

Husserl was the first in rank of all the living philosophers... I was convinced he was one of those real giants who transcend their own time and who determine history. (*LJF* 410)

But the job didn't work out well for Edith. She persevered in it for only eighteen months. One problem was that Husserl's philosophy was developing in an idealistic, neo-Kantian direction, which Edith disagreed with. A more serious problem was that Husserl expected her to spend all her time working as a menial secretary, transcribing his notes (written in Gabelsberger shorthand) and putting his manuscripts in order. She had hoped and expected to be treated as a philosophical collaborator. She laboured dutifully for months deciphering his notes, clarifying his often rather cloudy and inchoate thoughts and converting them into cogent, coherent philosophical argument. Edith wrote to Roman Ingarden:

I am seeking to establish from (Husserl's) material a unified draft of the entire thought process (of which I have a pretty clear view even though nothing is fixed or even carried to a conclusion). That is to become the basis of the Master's work, so I would like to finish it because I believe he would never be able to find his way through the material and would forever remain hung up on particulars... (And) I have experienced a breakthrough. Now I imagine I know pretty well what 'constitution' is – but with a break from idealism. An absolutely existing physical nature on the one hand, a distinctly structured subjectivity on the other, seem to me to be prerequisites before an intuiting nature can constitute itself. I have not yet had the chance to confess my heresy to the Master. (Letter to Roman Ingarden, 3 February 1917)

Husserl was unwilling to discuss Edith's draft, or even to read it. He preferred to continue working alone in his study, constantly jotting down new ideas and disconnected observations without ever attempting to relate them to his earlier work. Roman Ingarden explains this:

It was simply impossible to persuade Husserl to re-read, study and correct his old manuscripts. He was usually dissatisfied with what he had already accomplished. He always believed that he now knew the truth about things better than before. His old manuscripts bored him, and he usually gave them up after one or two days' reading. Or again, the text interested him and stimulated him to active thinking. Then instead of improving it, Husserl used to put it away and begin writing a new one.<sup>14</sup>

Eventually Edith plucked up the courage to reveal her doubts about transcendental idealism to the Master. Courage was needed, because he almost always reacted impatiently to any expression of ideas that conflicted with his own. On this occasion he listened politely, but dismissed all Edith's objections. Edith reports what happened:

Recently I laid before the Master, most solemnly, my reservations against idealism. It was not at all (as you had feared) a 'painful situation'. I was deposited in a corner of the dear old leather sofa, and then for two hours there was a heated debate – naturally without either side persuading the other. The Master is of the opinion that he is not at all disinclined to change his viewpoint if one demonstrates to him such a necessity. I have however, never yet managed to do that. (Letter to Roman Ingarden, 20 February 1917)

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<sup>14</sup> Roman Ingarden, 'Edith Stein on her activity as an assistant of Edmund Husserl', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XXIII, no.2, December 1962, 158.

Edith had hoped Husserl might agree to let her apply for *Habilitation* in Freiburg. In German universities, *Habilitation* is an academic status available only to post-doctoral scholars whose competence in teaching and research at an advanced level is recognized by the university. An application for this honour has to be supported by a new research dissertation (*Habilitationsschrift*), distinctly superior in quality to a doctoral thesis. Attaining *Habilitation* is a prerequisite for appointment to an official teaching position. When Edith broached the subject with Husserl, he refused point-blank - 'on principle', he said - to allow her to apply for *Habilitation* in Freiburg. Husserl's daughter Elizabeth pleaded Edith's cause, but he was obdurate.<sup>15</sup> Why was Husserl opposed 'on principle'? It could only have been because Edith was female. The professoriate in German universities at this time was exclusively male, and every German professor would have agreed with Husserl that this state of affairs was entirely right and proper.

Eventually, it became clear to Edith that there would be no opportunity to do any serious philosophical work either on her own or in collaboration with Husserl so long as she remained his assistant. In February 1918 she resigned. Nevertheless, she tried to remain on amicable terms with Husserl. She stayed on in Freiburg for a while and continued having discussions with him and with other philosophers, including Martin Heidegger, who had been a Catholic seminarian for many years but had now turned against the church. Throughout this period Edith maintained an extensive correspondence with other former members of the Göttingen circle, including Kaufmann, Lipps and Ingarden.

Despite Edith's rather prickly relationship with Husserl after she resigned her assistantship, she never lost her respect and unbounded admiration for him as a philosopher. She wrote in a letter to Fritz Kaufmann:

(Regarding) the Master... That at times it is not easy to maintain the right attitude is something I have experienced to the full in the two years of my personal relationship (with him). But one must keep reminding oneself that he himself suffers most because he has sacrificed his humanity to his science. (His achievement) is so overpowering and the amount of gratitude we owe him for it is so incalculable that, in view of it, no kind of personal resentment should even arise. For me, he will always remain the Master, whose image cannot be blurred by any human weakness. (Letter of 22 November, 1919)

## Reinach's Death

Adolf Reinach was killed in action in Flanders in November 1917. He had been a brave soldier: he was awarded the Iron Cross. A few months later, his widow sent Edith a transcript of his wartime writings on the philosophy of religion. Edith described them in a letter to Fritz Kaufmann: 'Very beautiful... A few pages of expositions are so beautiful that they might be printed as a fragment. I must see what Frau Reinach thinks about that.' Anne had invited Edith to come to Göttingen at Easter to go through her husband's philosophical papers and arrange them for possible publication. Edith was willing to help in whatever way she could, but she dreaded returning to the familiar apartment where, in happier times, the Reinachs had received her warmly and given her friendship and hospitality. She was worried about Anne Reinach's state of mind. She feared that the bereavement might have crushed

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<sup>15</sup> See Letter of 20 February 1917.

Anne's spirit, destroyed her faith and reduced her to melancholia or despair. Instead, Edith found that Anne was fully reconciled to her husband's death. She was grieving, but her faith and hope in the saving power of the Cross seemed purer and stronger than ever. Edith had ample opportunity to empathize with Anne Reinach at this time because she stayed with her for a whole month, working with her day by day through Adolf's legacy of philosophical papers. Pauline Reinach, Adolf's sister, was living with Anne at this time, and many years later she stated in the Beatification Proceedings that Edith was awestruck by Anne's courage and loving submission to God's will, which seemed to manifest the power of Christian faith.

I realized that the servant of God was stunned when she saw how my sister-in-law accepted the death of her husband with great strength and submission. She saw then that Christianity was great and divine. At that time my sister-in-law was still Protestant.<sup>16</sup>

In 1941 or 1942, shortly before her own death, Edith spoke about this episode to Fr Johannes Hirschmann, a German Jesuit working in Holland. Hirschmann wrote in a letter of 13 May 1950 to Sr Teresia Posselt:

The decisive reason for (Edith's) conversion to Christianity was, she told me, the way in which her friend Frau Reinach, in the power of the mystery of the Cross, made the sacrifice that was imposed on her by the death of her husband at the front in the First World War. In this sacrifice (Edith) experienced a proof of the truth of the Christian religion and became open to it. At that time she was staying in Reinach's house after his death, to look through his unpublished writings.<sup>17</sup>

When Teresia Posselt received Fr Hirschmann's letter her biography of Edith Stein had already run through four editions. In the fifth edition she inserted a new passage paraphrasing Hirschmann's account of Edith's visit to Anne Reinach. Posselt did not acknowledge her source, however; and she could not resist the temptation to gild the lily. Hirschmann's original narrative uses indirect speech and plain, factual language. Posselt turned it into a putative direct quotation of Edith's own words, couched in effusive, theatrical terms, with invented additions:

This was my first encounter with the Cross and the divine strength it inspires in those who bear it. For the first time I saw before my very eyes the Church born of Christ's redemptive suffering, victorious over the sting of death. It was the moment in which my unbelief was shattered, Judaism paled, and Christ radiated before me: Christ in the mystery of the Cross.<sup>18</sup>

Ever since this embellished and inflated pseudo-quotation first appeared in the fifth edition of Posselt's memoir, it (rather than Fr Hirschmann's original report) has been quoted repeatedly in books and articles on Edith Stein.<sup>19</sup> Myth-making is one of the occupational hazards of hagiography. Yet providence accommodates everything and turns it to account. Many readers have been inspired and edified by Posselt's fabricated version of Edith's address to Hirschmann.

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<sup>16</sup> Canonizationis Servae Dei Teresiae Benedictae a Cruce Positio super Causae Introductione (Rome 1983), 438. Anne Reinach converted to Catholicism in 1923, and in 1937 became an Oblate of the Benedictine Abbey of Beuron, which Edith Stein had called 'the antechamber to Heaven'.

<sup>17</sup> Letter to Sr Teresia Posselt, in *Edith-Stein-Archiv*, Köln; quoted by Fr Ulrich Dobhan OCD, 'Vom "radikalen Unglauben" zum "wahren Glauben"', in *Edith Stein Jahrbuch 2009* (Würzburg), 69.

<sup>18</sup> Posselt 59-60.

<sup>19</sup> See further Dhoban, *op. cit.*

### ‘A thoroughly positive Christianity’

Several months after her revelatory experience in the home of Anne Reinach, Edith wrote to Roman Ingarden:

You will never congratulate me in *your* sense. But in another sense, you may do it today. I don't know if you've already gathered from previous statements that I have forced myself more and more to a thoroughly positive Christianity. That freed me from the life that had prostrated me and at the same time gave me strength to take up life anew and with appreciation. I can therefore speak in a profound sense of a 'rebirth'.<sup>20</sup>

But Edith's new-found faith was nebulous and unfocussed. She did not yet feel ready to commit herself to any particular Christian denomination. She felt strongly attracted by the devotional aspects of Catholicism, but alienated by its doctrinal complexities. Years after her conversion, she wrote to Ingarden reminiscing about her divided state of mind in 1917-18.

Of course I cannot think back to Freiburg with joy. Do you remember you told me then that I was 'so Catholic'? I did not understand it then. Now I understand it and know how right you were. I actually felt Catholic. But I could not justify what I felt, because Catholic dogma with its practical consequences was foreign to me, and so head and mind combined to do violence to the heart. You know what came out of that.<sup>21</sup>



Summit of Herzogenhorn (1415m.), Schwarzwald

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<sup>20</sup> Letter to Roman Ingarden, 10 October 1918, ESGA 4.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Roman Ingarden, 29 November 1925, ESGA 4.

## Academic ambitions thwarted

After Husserl refused to allow Edith to apply for *Habilitation* in Freiburg, she still cherished hopes of getting an academic position somewhere else. She knew her qualifications merited it, and she firmly believed that women should be allowed and encouraged to enter the professions and political life. In October 1919 she applied for *Habilitation* at Göttingen. Her *Habilitationsschrift* was a newly-written piece of research on ‘Sentient Causality’.<sup>22</sup> Husserl wrote an ambivalent testimonial supporting her application. He praised Edith’s philosophical ability, but qualified his recommendation with a fatally hypothetical concluding sentence:

If the career of university teaching were supposed to be open for ladies, I would recommend her whole-heartedly as my first choice for admission to *Habilitation*.

Edith’s application was rejected without even being formally considered. One of the Göttingen philosophy faculty, Georg Misch, wrote confidentially to Husserl about the ‘difficulties’ associated with Edith’s application:

For all the esteem I have for Fräulein Stein after your recommendation and after reading her remarkable dissertation, I cannot offer her many prospects. It would be otherwise if an outstanding *male* student of yours were to come here...<sup>23</sup>

Edith did not give up hope. She wrote two more monographs for use as *Habilitation* theses: *Individual and Community* and *An Investigation Concerning the State*. Husserl thought them good enough to be published in his Phenomenological Yearbook. Edith made discreet enquiries about *Habilitation* in Kiel and also in Hamburg, where she had friends among the professors. But her academic ambitions were doomed to remain unfulfilled. She never really had much of a chance. She was competing against talented and ambitious male applicants, and she was Jewish. Eventually Edith returned to Breslau and began running part-time courses in philosophy for beginners. She wrote to Fritz Kaufmann: ‘I am not thinking of trying again for *Habilitation*.’<sup>24</sup>

## Philosophy and religious experience

In her monograph ‘Sentient Causality’<sup>25</sup> Edith refers several times to the writings of Adolf Reinach. She doesn’t mention Reinach’s mystical experience on the battlefield, but she discusses similar kinds of experience and the stances of acceptance or rejection which the subject may adopt towards them. Edith says one cannot choose whether to have or to lack a particular cognitive attitude, such as religious belief. Having such an attitude is something which *befalls* a person ‘on the basis of information uptake’; it is not something one can create voluntarily or bestow upon oneself. ‘I can yearn for religious faith and fret about it with all

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<sup>22</sup> The first essay in volume 7 of the ICS edition of Edith’s Complete Works, *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*. The second essay, *Individual and Community*, is another intended *Habilitationsschrift*.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Bob Sandmeyer, *Husserl’s Constitutive Phenomenology* (Routledge 2009), 197.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of 31 May 1920.

<sup>25</sup> Translated in *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* (ICS 2000).

my might, and yet that doesn't make it happen for me.' (48) But if events and circumstances do combine in such a way as to make a certain belief seem plausible and credible, the subject can choose whether to accept the belief and declare allegiance to it, or render it ineffectual by refusing to acknowledge its existence.

Suppose I accept it: that means that if it emerges in me I give myself over to it, joyously, without reluctance. Suppose I deny it: that doesn't mean I eliminate it. That is not under my control... But I need not acknowledge this belief. I can comport myself as though it were not present; I can make it inoperative. (49)

Edith illustrates this point with examples, one of which is the case of a convinced atheist who is drawn into an experience of God's existence but refuses to acknowledge it. 'He cannot escape from the belief, but... doesn't allow it to become operative in himself, and he staunchly sticks with his "scientific world-view".' (50)

Note that the example is not presented as a report of Edith's own past or present state of mind. 'Sentient Causality' isn't an intimate letter to a friend, or an autobiographical essay. It is a phenomenological treatise, written in dry, dense and technical prose without a trace of romantic subjectivity. Edith is analysing a mental phenomenon which she knows empathically, without necessarily having experienced it personally. Nevertheless, this particular example is intriguing.

Later in the same treatise Edith describes a kind of religious experience which she calls 'resting in God'.

There is a state of resting in God, a complete relaxation of all mental activity, in which one makes no plans at all, makes no decisions, still less takes action, but leaves everything that lies in the future to the divine will, 'submitting oneself completely to fate'. This state might have befallen me after an experience that exceeded my strength, completely consumed my mental vitality and deprived me of the ability to act. By contrast with the lethargy that comes from lack of vital energy, resting in God is something completely new and unique. The former was dead silence. Now it is replaced by the feeling of being safe, of being relieved from all anxiety and responsibility and obligation to act. And as I surrender myself to this feeling, little by little new life begins to fill me, and to stimulate me – without any exercise of my will – to new activity.<sup>26</sup>

Again Edith is describing what it is like to have a certain experience, without saying or implying that she herself, or someone she knows, has undergone it. The task of phenomenology is to analyse *the* experience of 'resting in God' (or whatever), not my experience or my friend's experience. In phenomenological jargon, Edith is describing the 'essence' of the experience, without attributing it explicitly or implicitly to an identifiable individual.

Nevertheless, though she does not say so, Edith may be drawing upon Adolf Reinach's description, in his letter from the battlefield, of 'the inner experience of being sheltered in God'. Or she may be recalling the trusting acceptance of God's inscrutable will which Anne Reinach displayed when Edith visited her after Adolf's death. Or (it's possible to speculate) Edith herself may have experienced some mysterious touch of divine grace, manifested as a sense of 'resting in God'.

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<sup>26</sup> *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities* 84 (translation slightly modified).



## Spiritual conflicts

If she had, however, the experience was evanescent and quickly forgotten. Through much of 1919 and 1920 Edith suffered some kind of personal crisis involving what she calls ‘spiritual conflicts’ which she ‘endured in complete secrecy and without any human support’ (*Life* 235, 237). She was deeply perplexed about philosophical and religious issues, struggling to understand the truth about God and her own destiny; but this was not the only source of her anxiety. She had been devastated by the failure of her attempt to establish a fruitful philosophical collaboration with Husserl. Her carefully-prepared application for *Habilitation* at Göttingen in October 1919 had been rejected. She was still financially dependent on her mother. She was nearly thirty years old and had not yet found a proper job or a suitable marriage partner.

Though totally dedicated to my work, I still cherished in my own heart the dream of a great love and of a happy marriage. Though I had no inkling of Catholic doctrines on faith and morals, I fully espoused the Catholic ideal of matrimony. It happened, at times, that I found among my associates a young man whom I liked very much and whom I could imagine as a future life partner. (*LJF* 227)

One such young man was - according to Hedwig Conrad-Martius<sup>27</sup> – Edith’s philosophical colleague and friend Hans Lipps. But her love for him was not reciprocated; at least, it was evident that Lipps didn’t want to marry her. Another object of Edith’s affections may have been Roman Ingarden, to whom she wrote over 150 letters, mostly reporting the details of her work with Husserl. In one letter Edith addressed Ingarden as ‘Mein Liebling’ – ‘my dear’.<sup>28</sup> But he returned to Poland early in 1918 and married a school doctor the following year. Edith wrote congratulating him on his marriage, and asked him to burn any personal letters from her that he might have kept.

Finally, Edith was keenly aware that if ever she elected to make a formal profession of Christianity, and especially if she became a Catholic, it would break her mother’s heart. The thought so distressed and demoralized her that she kept postponing any final decision. Years later, she wrote that in the summer of 1919 she had been in a ‘pitiable state’, which had begun even earlier ‘and, through many changes, lasted for years longer, until I found the place where there is rest and peace for all restless hearts.’<sup>29</sup>

## Searching for religious truth

Yet throughout this miserable period Edith kept herself occupied. She spent most of 1919 and 1920 back in Breslau, pursuing her research whenever she could, perusing the manuscripts sent to her by phenomenological associates and writing painstaking critical comments on them, and running philosophy classes for beginners at her mother’s house. She also found time to read the New Testament, together with books on theology, the philosophy of religion and Christian spirituality. She read and tried to practise the *Spiritual Exercises* of

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<sup>27</sup> Letter of 1948 to Fr John Oesterreicher, in *Never Forget*, ed. W. Herbstrith (ICS 1998), 266.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of 24 December, 1917 to Roman Ingarden.

<sup>29</sup> Letter of 13 September, 1925 to Fritz Kaufmann.

St Ignatius Loyola. She hung a copy of Cimabue's portrait of St Francis of Assisi above her desk at her mother's house – one wonders what Frau Stein said about that! The wedding of Edith's beloved sister Erna took place under the picture of St Francis in December 1920, and Edith found great consolation in the saint's presence as a witness to the Jewish wedding ceremony (*LJF* 238).

### Discovery of St Teresa

Furthermore, Edith had by this time discovered the writings of St Teresa. According to a young Jewish woman, Gertrud Koebner (the wife of a lecturer at Breslau University), who began studying phenomenology with Edith after she returned to Breslau in 1918, Edith was reading the works of St Teresa in the second year of their friendship, having become dissatisfied with Kierkegaard's *Training in Christianity*. According to Frau Koebner:

She read the books aloud over a period of time, more as if she were praying them than reading them... She often told me that (St Teresa's) books contained something she had never been able to find in her Jewish religion, though she had seen it truly and faithfully practised in her mother's home. Because of this, she said, she would have to live and act according to whatever she discovered in them, out of obedience to the Eternal Truth.<sup>30</sup>

Frau Koebner does not say which of St Teresa's works Edith was reading so earnestly and gratefully at this time. We may surmise that she had not yet discovered Teresa's *Life*, because in her personal account of how she came to Carmel Edith says she encountered this work 'in the summer of 1921'.<sup>31</sup> However, if Koebner's chronology is right, Edith's acquaintance with and love for the writings of St Teresa preceded her conversion by at least twelve months.

### Return to Göttingen, 1921

In March 1921 Edith returned to Göttingen, where she remained until the end of May. We do not know the purpose of this trip, except that it included a reunion with her friends Anne and Pauline Reinach; but the visit seems to have had special significance for Edith, at least in retrospect. In a cryptic preamble to the seventh chapter of her autobiography, looking back twenty years after the events described therein, she writes:

It was a long way I had travelled since that April day in 1913 when I came to Göttingen for the first time, till March 1921, when I went back there again – confronting the greatest decision of my life.<sup>32</sup>

Edith seems to imply that the long and tortuous process of her conversion to the Catholic faith, which began in Göttingen in 1913, had reached a climactic stage by the time she returned to Göttingen in 1921.

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<sup>30</sup> Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein* (San Francisco 1992), 70.

<sup>31</sup> Posselt 118.

<sup>32</sup> My translation. Cf. the more paraphrastic rendering in the ICS edition, *LJF*, 239.

For Edith, Göttingen was always a special place, a place of enlightenment and inspiration. In this small university town she received three of the greatest spiritual blessings of her life. It was in Göttingen in 1913 that she came under Scheler's influence and began feeling drawn to Christianity. It was in Göttingen in 1918 that she observed Anne Reinach bearing her cross with indomitable faith and fortitude, and felt impelled by her example to make a private profession of Christian belief. And it was at Anne Reinach's house in Göttingen, early in the summer of 1921, that Edith became acquainted with the spiritual autobiography of St Teresa, which inspired her to become a Catholic.

### **Teresia Posselt's account of Edith's conversion**

According to Posselt's memoir, Edith Stein came across the *Life* of St Teresa by chance in the library of the farmhouse near Bergzabern owned by Theodor Conrad and Hedwig Conrad-Martius. Posselt's narrative is well known and frequently quoted:

Edith herself tells us:

I picked at random (*aufs Geratewohl*) and took out a large volume. It bore the title *The Life of St Teresa of Avila, written by herself*. I began to read, was at once captivated, and did not stop till I reached the end. As I closed the book, I said, 'That is the truth'. (Posselt 63)

Posselt's dramatic anecdote implies that Edith knew nothing of St Teresa before she happened to find the book of the saint's *Life* in the Conrad-Martius library, and that reading this book had the effect of converting her – immediately, effortlessly, almost miraculously – to the Catholic faith. Posselt claims to be reporting Edith's own words ('Edith herself tells us...'), but provides no reference for the supposed quotation. The most likely source is a sentence in Edith's account of how she came to the Cologne Carmel, written in 1938:

For twelve years Carmel had been my goal, since the summer of 1921 when the *Life* of our holy mother Teresa came into my hands<sup>33</sup> and put an end to my long search for the true faith. (ESGA I, 350; cf. Posselt 118).

If this is Posselt's only source, her report of Edith's words is a travesty. If she was quoting from another source, no one has been able to identify it.

### **A farewell gift from the Reinachs**

Hedwig Conrad-Martius rejected the legend of Edith's fortuitous discovery of St Teresa's *Life* in the farmhouse library. In a letter of 1960 Dr Conrad-Martius maintained that she had not possessed a copy of Teresa's *Life* at that time.<sup>34</sup> Her statement was generally discounted or ignored, however, until Pauline Reinach's testimony to the Beatification Proceedings was published in 1983. Pauline testified in 1965, by which time she had been a Benedictine nun (Sr Augustina) for 41 years.

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<sup>33</sup> 'in die Hände gefallen war'. The translation in Posselt (2005) renders the German incorrectly as 'had happened to fall into my hands', thus appearing to support Posselt's claim that Edith came across the book by chance.

<sup>34</sup> See Dobhan, 80, note 120.

In the course of the summer of 1921, when the servant of God was about to leave us, my sister-in-law (Anne Reinach) and I invited her to choose a book out of our library. Her choice fell on a biography of St. Teresa of Avila, written by herself. About this detail I am absolutely sure.<sup>35</sup>

This apparently insignificant event in the Reinach home would have occurred on or about the 27<sup>th</sup> May, the day that Edith left Göttingen and travelled by train to Bergzabern, where she remained until the end of August.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps she took out the Reinachs' farewell present and began reading it during the train journey, and continued reading and pondering it at intervals during her extended working holiday on the Conrad farm. Perhaps she had already discovered the book and read it during her stay with the Reinachs, and chose to take it with her as a souvenir of her visit. It is even possible that the epiphanic moment – if there was one – which led to her conversion occurred at the Reinach home, earlier in the summer than is generally supposed. After all, in Göttingen Edith would have had the leisure and opportunity to stay up all night reading, had she been inclined to do so; whereas in the very different circumstances of daily life on the farm at Bergzabern this might have seemed an act of bohemian indulgence. No one knows what really happened. Edith never disclosed to anyone exactly how, when and why she was finally converted to the Catholic faith. But Pauline Reinach's testimony that Edith was presented with a copy of the *Life* of St Teresa in Göttingen is far more plausible than Posselt's unsubstantiated story that Edith found it by chance in the Conrads' library, began reading it at once, stayed up all night to finish it and was converted to Catholicism by daybreak.

### Hard labour and private thoughts

Only Hedwig Conrad-Martius was in a position to give a first-hand report of Edith's three-month stay at the Bergzabern farm in 1921. She was Edith's constant companion and co-worker on the farm throughout that summer. Fortunately, Hedwig communicated some of her memories to Fr John Oesterreicher in 1948. In 1957 she reminisced again about Edith in a lecture to the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation. This lecture was published the following year in a German Catholic journal.<sup>37</sup>

Like Edith Stein, Hedwig and Theodor Conrad had been students of Husserl. They were both distinguished philosophers in their own right, but only Theodor had an academic job, and to make ends meet the couple needed the supplementary income derived from their fruit farm. Germany was impoverished by the post-war Great Inflation. Even formerly wealthy people were feeling the pinch. The Conrad farmhouse had become a meeting place for phenomenologists from Munich, Göttingen and Freiburg, but long-stay visitors were expected to help as required with work on the farm. During the busy summer season there

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<sup>35</sup> *Beatificationis et Canonizationis Servae Dei Edith Stein. Summarium super dubio: An eius Causa introducenda sit* (Rome 1983), Part 3, 437.

<sup>36</sup> Her departure from Göttingen on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1921 is recorded in the police register. Her arrival in Bergzabern on 28<sup>th</sup> May is recorded in the Conrads' guestbook. Cf Dobhan, op. cit., 80 note 118.

<sup>37</sup> 'Edith Stein', *Hochland* 51 (October 1958), 38-46. Reprinted in *Edith Stein: Briefe an Hedwig Conrad-Martius* (München 1960), 61-83; also in Waltraud Herbstrith (ed.), *Edith Stein: Ein Lebensbild in Zeugnissen und Selbstzeugnissen* (Kevelaer 2004), 87-101.

was much hard work to be done, picking, grading and packing fruit. Hedwig and Edith were busy from daylight till dusk, and by nightfall they were exhausted.



**Hedwig Conrad-Martius working in the orchard, 1921**

### **An emotional attachment is broken**

Years later, Hedwig Conrad-Martius described an incident during the summer when she rebuked Edith for keeping a photograph of her beloved Hans Lipps on her desk in the farmhouse.

I said to her that it didn't seem right to surrender totally to God and to want to dedicate oneself to him and yet to keep on the table the picture of a man who didn't want to marry you... She was deeply affected and shortly thereafter, perhaps even immediately, the picture disappeared from her desk... I believe that this profound disappointment of her life contributed not a little to her conversion and baptism, yes, even to the choice of cloistered life... Divine mercy uses such incidents in order to draw near persons who are called.<sup>38</sup>

It isn't clear whether this poignant event occurred before or after Edith told Hedwig of her decision to become a Catholic, but it was certainly before her baptism. In the divine scheme of things, it was necessary, perhaps, for Edith to be forced to break this last, futile emotional attachment, in order to give herself more completely to God.

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<sup>38</sup> Hedwig Conrad-Martius, letter of 1948 to Fr John Oesterreicher, in *Never Forget*, ed. W. Herbstrith (ICS 1998), 266.

### ‘Secretum meum mihi’

Edith was always a reserved and taciturn person,<sup>39</sup> but she seemed particularly inscrutable at this time.<sup>40</sup> Hedwig could not discern what was going on in her mind, though they were the closest of friends. In any case Hedwig was preoccupied with her own spiritual predicament.

(During the summer) we were both in the middle of a religious crisis. We were close beside one another as though on a narrow ridge, each of us expecting the divine summons at any moment. It came, but led us in different denominational directions.<sup>41</sup>

Hedwig felt called to follow the Evangelical (Lutheran) tradition. Edith announced that she had decided to become a Catholic. For a while, this spiritual divergence created a certain tension between them. Hedwig writes:

A certain reciprocal aggression came into our personal intercourse, though only in short conversations and words uttered softly. In *this* context, her aforementioned remark occurred: *Secretum meum mihi*. It was a somewhat brusque gesture of self-defence against me. Sometimes I retaliated in kind. (73)

The tension between the friends did not last long. Their affection for one another was too deep. When Edith was preparing for baptism she asked Hedwig to be her godmother, and Hedwig agreed joyfully, though a dispensation had to be obtained because she was not a Catholic. Hedwig provided her own wedding dress as a baptismal garment for Edith, because the rampant inflation had made it impossible to buy such a thing.

The Latin phrase quoted by Edith, ‘*Secretum meum mihi*’, is the Vulgate rendering of Isaiah 24:16. It means ‘My secret is for myself’, or simply ‘That’s my secret’.<sup>42</sup> I think Edith meant to indicate that the complicated series of apparently fortuitous incidents and experiences and interior currents of thought and emotion and insight which had led to her conversion were too sensitive, too private and too mysterious to be spoken about, even to a dear and trusted friend. Reticence in speaking about one’s own interior life and motivations is characteristic of spiritual people.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, as Hedwig Conrad-Martius said, ‘the inner life of such a person lies in the mystery of God.’<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Even when Edith was a child, her family called her ‘a book sealed with seven seals’ (*LJF*, 259)

<sup>40</sup> Hedwig described her as ‘*eine außergewöhnlich verschlossene, in sich versiegelte Natur*’. See *Edith Stein: Briefe an Hedwig Conrad-Martius*, 61.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>42</sup> Hedwig Conrad-Martius reported Edith’s remark to John Oesterreicher in 1948, and he quoted it in *Walls are Crumbling*, 297. Many subsequent biographers of Edith Stein made use of the quotation before Conrad-Martius published her own essay explaining its context. It is noteworthy that Sr Teresia Posselt did not quote the dictum ‘*Secretum meum mihi*’ in any edition of her memoir, even after the publication of Oesterreicher’s book. Presumably this was because Posselt believed there was nothing secret or mysterious about Edith’s conversion.

<sup>43</sup> John of the Cross takes the twice-repeated ‘*secretum meum mihi*’ of Isaiah 24:16 to express the secrecy of a private supernatural communication (*Spiritual Canticle* 14, 18). Cf. the opening paragraph of Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*.

<sup>44</sup> *Edith Stein: Briefe an Hedwig Conrad-Martius*, 61.

## The circumstances of Edith's conversion

Hedwig Conrad-Martius was aware of Edith's veneration for St Teresa, but doubted whether reading Teresa's *Life* was the cause of her conversion.<sup>45</sup> Apparently Edith had said nothing about this book during her stay with Hedwig in 1921. Yet although reading Teresa's *Life* may not have been the only cause, it was according to Edith herself the proximate and precipitating cause of her acceptance of the gift of faith at this time. Years afterwards, as we have seen, she wrote that her long search for the true faith ended in the summer of 1921 'when the *Life* of our holy mother Teresa came into my hands'. And when Edith entered the Cologne Carmel in 1933 she wrote to Fritz Kaufmann:

I entered the monastery of the Carmelites here last Saturday and thus became a daughter of St Teresa, who earlier inspired me to conversion. (Letter of 17 October 1933)

It would be interesting to know which passages in Teresa's autobiography made the deepest impression on Edith Stein and aroused her sense of personal affinity with the Mother of Carmel. Some of Teresa's paragraphs could almost have been written by Edith herself:

On the one hand, God was calling me. On the other, I was following the world. All the things of God gave me great pleasure, yet I was tied and bound to those of the world... I suffered great trials in prayer, for the spirit was not master in me, but slave. I could not, therefore, shut myself up within myself (the procedure in which my whole method of prayer consisted) without at the same time shutting in a thousand vanities. I spent many years in this way... By that time it was no longer in my power to give up prayer, because he who desired me for his own in order to show me greater favours held me himself in his hand.<sup>46</sup>

We can guess that Edith would have empathized keenly with Teresa's narrative of the 'stormy sea' of troubles that engulfed her for years - as a result of having abandoned the practice of prayer - until her 'second conversion'.<sup>47</sup> Edith the philosopher would surely have admired the precision and lucidity of Teresa's account of the phenomenology of mental prayer.<sup>48</sup> Edith the budding contemplative would have been fascinated by the passage in chapter 40 where Teresa tells how she underwent a transport of the spirit in which she was given to understand 'a truth which is the fulfilment of all truths', namely that God is Truth itself.

But these are only conjectures. Edith left no oral or written comments on the *Life* of St Teresa, except that it was the book that inspired her to become a Catholic. This we do know. Whether Edith read it in a single nocturnal session, or slowly and thoughtfully over a period of days or weeks (as seems more likely), and whether or not she had read the book at the Reinachs' home in Göttingen before she took it with her to Bergzabern, her renewed contact at this propitious time with the luminous, generous mind of St Teresa had the effect of resolving all her religious doubts and difficulties. She may not have exclaimed 'That is the

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<sup>45</sup> In correspondence with Oesterreicher, 298.

<sup>46</sup> E. Allison Peers (translator), *Complete Works of St Teresa*, vol. I (London 1957), 45.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>48</sup> Chapters 10-21, on the 'Four Waters'.

truth!’, as Posselt would have it,<sup>49</sup> but reading Teresa’s *Life* certainly did inspire her decision to become a Catholic - and a Carmelite, like St Teresa herself.

## **Conclusion**

In summary: Edith Stein’s conversion to the Catholic faith was the culmination of a prolonged and painful spiritual process that began in 1913 when she encountered Christians among her philosophical colleagues in Göttingen. The process of gradual conversion continued for eight years, as she struggled with deep philosophical and personal issues and observed with wondering admiration the unselfconscious witness of the Reinachs and other faithful Christians. Edith received the gift of faith which she had desired for so long in the summer of 1921, after an experience of empathic communion with a kindred spirit, the great Teresa of Avila.

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<sup>49</sup> See Fr Dobhan’s reasons for doubt on this point, op. cit. 82-3.