

Tribute to Truth: Destination Unknown, Traveling East.

To honour Edith Stein (Sr Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) and her search for truth, this article will look closely at primary sources, particularly her later letters and the early accounts recorded following her arrest by the SS on 2nd August 1942. From these writings it will consider Edith's practical response to the growing threat from the Occupation Forces; and seek to uncover her true awareness of the consequences of her arrest. by Bernadette Micallef OCDS

The Jewish Film Festival in Melbourne in 2018 included a movie “A Rose in Winter – Edith Stein.”¹ The story-line was framed within the context of a journalist for the New York Times doing research in 1962, twenty years after Edith's death and the year the process for her beatification was opened. At one point the journalist asked the Bishop of Freiburg, who had known her, “Why didn't she escape when she still could?” His answer was, “She couldn't abandon her own people. That would have been like abandoning Jesus on the night of his passion.”

The Bishop's answer in the movie, expressing her unwillingness to attempt to escape and her solidarity with the Jewish people, are familiar sentiments reflected in much that has been written about Edith Stein. The same sentiments are echoed in the legendary phrase thought to have been uttered to her sister Rosa at the time of their arrest, “Come, we are going for our people.”² This phrase can seem to imply, firstly, that she willingly consented to being arrested; and, secondly, that *she knew at the time of her arrest* that she was going to her death.³

To honour Edith Stein, and her search for truth, this article will highlight her attitude to escape in the months before her arrest, and seek to uncover her awareness of her impending death during the three days she spent at Westerbork transit camp.⁴ It will rely exclusively on primary sources written *before* the consequences of her arrest were known.⁵

Growing threat depicted in her letters

On 31st December 1938, following *Kristallnacht*,⁶ Edith fled from the Carmel of Cologne in Germany to the Carmel of Echt in the Netherlands. Rosa joined her there six months later (L 331) and, according to Edith, “continues to be a faithful portress, and since June [1940] she has belonged to our Third Order.” (L 315)⁷

On 31st December 1941, she wrote to a friend, Dr Hilde Borsinger, a jurist in Switzerland. Both Cologne and Echt Carmels had recently voted on and accepted that her transfer to Echt become permanent. She wrote,

Now, just in the days when this was being voted on, the Occupation Forces issued a decree that declared all non-Aryan Germans in the Netherlands as stateless and ordered them to report for emigration by December 15. ... my sister Rosa and I, complied because failing to do so would have incurred a severe penalty. But I immediately drafted a petition for us to be permitted to remain in the Carmel of Echt and to be taken off the list of emigrants; the petition is now being typed. But in case that fails we have to look for alternative possibilities. (L 331)

¹ Written and directed by Joshua Sinclair

² This phrase was included in the official biography distributed to all who attended the canonization eucharist. See *Holiness Befits Your House: Canonization of Edith Stein – A Documentation*, edited by John Sullivan, OCD (ICS, 2000), p. 18.

³ One example of accepting this implication: Waltraud Herbstrith, *Edith Stein: A biography*, (Ignatius Press, 1971), 180. “Edith Stein understood that the last stage of her journey had begun.”

⁴ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/westerbork>

⁵ See Posselt, p. 231. It was not until late April 1947, more than four years after their arrest, that the death of Edith and Rosa was accepted as certain and “Sr Benedicta was reported to the Father General in Rome as dead. From Rome the sad message was sent to all Carmelite houses...”

⁶ <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/kristallnacht>

⁷ L = Edith Stein, *Self-Portrait in Letters 1916-1942*, The Collected Works of Edith Stein Volume V, (ICS, 1993). The number refers to the Letter number, not the page number.

She went on to explain the plans to move her and Rosa temporarily to one of their Swiss convents, and asked her friend how to go about obtaining an entry permit and visa to Switzerland, then commented hopefully, “I do know that Switzerland is strictly closed to immigrants, but I could imagine that under these particular circumstances an exception would be made.” (L 331)

She wrote, “If we are unable to get out in this way, we will be deported by the authorities in any case.” She then described the plight of her sister Frieda in Germany who was “deported to a so-called ‘Jewish residential community’ in Silesia. There she lives, together with eleven other ladies ... in a large attic room and works an eight-hour shift daily, sewing or peeling potatoes. She has accepted this very bravely and, naturally, were that necessary, we would adjust to a similar lot.” (L 331)

Edith had written in a previous letter about the fate of Frieda and there added, “My eldest brother [Paul] and his wife live with the expectation of a similar compulsory action.” (L 328)

Five weeks later she wrote of, “expecting an invitation” to the SS in Amsterdam, and again comments hopefully, “But we will put up with that, also, if we will be left in peace afterward.” (L 333) Her optimism showed through and also her faith when in April she wrote, “Humanly speaking, my sister Rosa and I are in a somewhat precarious situation. But as far as we know there will be no change before the end of the war. We are leaving everything confidently to Providence, and calmly go about our duties.” (L 335)

On Wednesday 29th July, four days before her arrest, Edith wrote to a past colleague with the good news, “Switzerland wishes to open its doors to my sister Rosa and myself, ... Le Pâquier [Carmel] ... will receive me, and a Convent of the Third Order Carmelites ... my sister. The two houses have certified, to the aliens’ office of the police, that they will provide for us for our lifetimes. The big question remains: will we be given permission here [by the Nazi occupation forces] to leave [the country].” (L 339)

She added, revealing both her ambivalence and her faith, “In any case, it will probably take a long time. I would not be sad if it did not come. After all, it is no slight matter to leave a beloved monastic family the second time. But I will accept whatever God arranges. Will you please tell them in Speyer and Kordel about this and ask for prayers?” (L 339)

On Sunday 2nd August 1942, Edith and Rosa were arrested as a direct consequence of “the courageous protest of the clergy in the Netherlands that precipitated the arrest of hundreds of Jewish-born Catholics...”⁸ Edith’s last three letters were written from the Westerbork transit camp on 4th, 5th and 6th August. Rosa also added a letter on 4th August. Before looking at these letters we turn to consider the night of their arrest.

Early eye-witness accounts

The writings of the Cologne Prioress Sister Teresia Renata Posselt were first published in German in 1948.⁹ This is the earliest source of collected eye-witness accounts available and includes a chapter entitled “Plans of Escape.” It conveys the unfolding political drama as depicted in Edith’s letters, but also includes an extensive account of the evening the SS knocked on the door of the Echt Carmel.

The account tells of Mother Antonia, the Prioress of the Echt Carmel, speaking to the SS men, protesting the demands being made. She is recorded as saying, “We have taken steps to have the two sisters received into Swiss monasteries and are only waiting for the permission from the Germans. On the Swiss side everything is already arranged. ...” The account then records that, “She left the speakroom and went upstairs to Sr Benedicta’s cell ... Sr Benedicta said quickly, ‘Please write straight away to the Swiss Consul at the Hague for the travel permits.’ ... She was still so convinced that the transfer to the Le Pâquier Carmel was a possibility.”¹⁰

The editors of the 2005 revised edition of Posselt added a footnote that reads, “She actually wrote out the address of the consul in Amsterdam.” Written in haste on “a leaf torn out of a small calendar booklet” the text of the letter was brief. It read, “Enable us as soon as possible to cross the border. Our monastery will take care of travel expenses.”¹¹ Mother Antonia’s account continues, “After the two of them [Edith and Rosa]

⁸ Teresia Renata Posselt, *Edith Stein: The Life of a Philosopher and Carmelite*. Edited by Susanne M. Batzdorff. Josephine Koeppel and John Sullivan (ICS, 2005), p. 345.

⁹ Posselt, p. xv.

¹⁰ Posselt, p. 208.

¹¹ Posselt, footnote 33, p. 275 and G5 p. 339.

had gone outside the enclosure, I could still hear Sr Benedicta explaining to the spokesman her plans for leaving the country.”

From these letters and early accounts, it seems that a more truthful answer to the question posed in the movie, “Why didn’t she escape when she still could?” would have been, “She did everything she could to escape.” She first escaped Germany and when she was declared stateless in the Netherlands she simultaneously petitioned to be taken off the list of emigrants and actively pursued a transfer to Switzerland. However, all attempts at escape failed. The question now remains: “When did she know she was going to her death?”

Scene on the street

Posselt described the scene on the street on the evening of their arrest, “Of course, the whole street was full of people loudly protesting against this barbarous injustice, for Rosa Stein was very popular and highly respected by the local people. ... At the street corner the police van was waiting to move off, ... the two sisters climbed in and then the van drove off, no one knew where.”¹²

Two things stand out in this account. Firstly, there is no record here, in the earliest documents we have of the events of that night, of any words uttered by Edith to Rosa as they were leaving.¹³ Later commentaries have embellished this scene presenting Rosa as disoriented and distressed and claiming that it was within this context of Rosa’s confusion that Edith allegedly took her by the hand and uttered words of reassurance, “Come, we are going for our people.” However Rosa herself wrote two days later sending greetings to everyone and said, “they were so upset, we not at all.” (L 340)

Secondly, those present on 2nd August understood that Edith and Rosa were being *deported* and, as the account says, “no one knew where” they were being taken. Although *we know* where they were taken and that within the week they had both been killed, Edith’s letters from Westerbork strongly suggest, even in her last letter on 6th August, that *they did not know* that they were soon going to die.

Deportation to the East

At that time ‘deportation’ was *not* understood as being synonymous with death. Frieda had been deported and had not died. The next day, the Dutch daily Catholic newspaper, *De Tijd*, included the official reasons given for the arrests. It read in part, we “are compelled to regard the Catholic Jews as our worst enemies and consequently see to their deportation to the East with all possible speed.”¹⁴

The uncertainty of Edith’s (and Rosa’s) fate is confirmed by the entry in the Chapter book at Echt Carmel “a long time” later. It records that they were, “abducted ... by the German police, and taken to an unknown destination in the East. We are making inquiries in various places to find her, but, alas, with no real hope.”¹⁵

Other sources, recorded in December 1942, also confirm that deportation meant being taken to an unknown destination and unknown destiny.

Etty Hillesum worked for the Jewish Council at Westerbork. She described the camp partly as, “a camp for people in transit, great waves of human beings constantly washed in from ... all the nooks and crannies of the Netherlands – only to be deported a few days later to meet their unknown destiny.”¹⁶ She remembered the “remarkable day when the Jewish Catholics ... arrived, nuns and priests wearing the yellow star on their habits.”¹⁷ Later, in the same report, she described the “scandalous shortage of space” and that “the iron bunks are stacked in triple decks.” She wrote, “On these iron beds people live and die, eat, fall ill, or lie awake through the night, because so many children cry, or because *they cannot help wondering why so little news comes from the thousands who have already set out from this place.*”¹⁸ They wondered as they *did not know* that the next stop was Auschwitz and *did not know* the fate awaiting them there.

¹² Posselt, p. 209.

¹³ See comment, Posselt, G16 p. 336.

¹⁴ Cited in Posselt, p. 209. See note 35 p. 275.

¹⁵ Posselt, p. 222. No date given here.

¹⁶ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, trans Arnold J Pomerans, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 26.

¹⁷ Hillesum, p. 28.

¹⁸ Hillesum, p. 34-35. [my emphasis]

On the way to Auschwitz

Edith wrote three letters from Barracks 36 at Westerbork. (L 340, 341, 342) In the first she wrote, “We were given a very friendly reception here. They intend to do everything possible to enable us to be freed or at least that we may remain here ... it will be necessary for you to send us our personal credentials, our ID cards, and our ration cards. We hope you have found the address of the Consul and have been in touch with him.” [Before this letter was posted, she added that it was “no longer possible” to remain there.]

The next day, Wednesday August 5 she wrote, “Outside [the camp] an attempt [to be freed] can still be made, but with extremely little prospect. According to plans, a transport will leave on Friday.” She then mentioned her manuscript, [*The Science of the Cross*] and asked that it be returned to Echt.¹⁹ In her third letter, written on Thursday, the day before the transport was due to leave, she asked for personal items to be sent, the next volume of the breviary, a habit, aprons and a small veil. She repeated the request for identity cards and ration cards.

Pierre Cuypers and Piet O. van Kempen delivered some of the requested items to Westerbork. They later wrote a lengthy report which reads in part, “[Sr Benedicta] did not know how long they would have to stay in the camp. There was a rumor that they would be leaving on that day (Friday 7 August) perhaps for Silesia, their homeland, but no one knew for certain. ... All was well for Fräulein Rosa too ... If they had to leave, then no matter what kind of work she would be given (and this is still not known), nothing would be allowed to take precedence over prayer.”²⁰

Their expectation seemed to be that a similar plight to Frieda’s awaited them, as they speculated about where they might be going and the kind of work they might be given.

The evidence of these letters, that made practical requests for anticipated needs in the near future, and the report of the men who delivered some of these items, supports the conclusion that while at Westerbork Edith did not know of her impending death.²¹ She certainly did not know five days earlier at the time of her arrest.

Verified truth

We cannot know with certainty at what point Edith and Rosa knew they were going to die. What we do know from primary sources is that Edith escaped Germany after Kristallnacht and then did all within her power to “get out” (L 331) of the Netherlands. Her family who got out lived. Those who did not died. Along with Edith and Rosa this included their brother Paul and his wife Trude, their sister Frieda, and an intellectually ‘retarded’ niece Eva.²²

In the homily at the beatification ceremony, John Paul II said, “With her people and ‘for’ her people Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross traveled the road to death with her sister Rosa. She did not accept suffering and death passively, but instead combined these consciously with the atoning sacrifice of our savior Jesus Christ.”²³

The vigorous attempts that Edith made to escape in no way diminish these sentiments or her spiritual solidarity with her people’s plight (L 296). However, presenting her as refusing to try to escape and giving her foreknowledge of her impending death is not consistent with the evidence available in her letters and other early documents.²⁴ These reveal the true Edith Stein whom we now rightly honour as a Catholic saint.

¹⁹ See note 2 in *Letters*, p. 352.

²⁰ Posselt, p. 214.

²¹ The report that surfaced in 1982, *forty* years later, records *verbatim* a conversation at Breslau railway station on Friday August 7 1942 between a postal service employee and Edith Stein. It indicates that by then Edith knew she was going to her death. Herbstrith, p. 192-193.

²² Susanne M Batzdorff, *Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint*, 2nd ed, (Illinois, Templegate, 2003), Chapter 12 “Those who perished” p. 147 - 158.

²³ *Holiness Befits Your House*, p. 27.

²⁴ Another early document is her final testament. See Herbstrith, p 168-169. It is not referred to here as it can easily be read with the hindsight of our knowledge of Edith’s eventual death. To consider it adequately is beyond the scope of this short paper.

2467 words – full text