

Features

GeVa panel addresses controversies encircling Edith Stein

By Lee Strong

Had the scene that played to a nearly packed house at GeVa Theatre November 13 been in a play, some critics might have labelled it as too improbable for the stage.

A nine-member panel — including two priests, a rabbi and a cantor — discussed the merits of a play about a Jewish woman who converted to Catholicism, became a Carmelite nun and died in the gas chambers at Auschwitz, then became the focus of controversy after the Catholic Church beatified her and

decided to build a convent in her name at the former death camp.

As panel member Father Joseph Brennan noted, "It's a remarkable phenomenon that we are here this afternoon, that Christians are able to hear expressed the anger and pain of their Jewish brothers and sisters."

The panel was part of GeVa Theatre's Sunday Salon performance of *Edith Stein*. The panel included Father Brennan of the University of Rochester Interfaith Chapel; Cantor Barbara Horowitz of Temple B'rith Kodesh;

Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh; Arthur Giron, who wrote the play; and Father Joseph Sullivan, O. Carm., of the Institute of Carmelite Studies in Washington, D.C., and the editor translating Stein's works into English. Sister Ann Patrice Carrigan, S.S.J., GeVa's literary director, moderated the discussion.

After introductions, the panel members each stated their positions on the play and some of the controversies surrounding Stein. Panel members then answered questions from the audience.

The tone for the discussion was set by Horowitz, who angrily spoke of her own relatives and relatives of friends who had suffered in the concentration camps. Many of these people lived for months and years in the camps, Horowitz noted, while Stein had only been in Auschwitz for about a week when she died on Aug. 9, 1942.

Horowitz spoke too of Christians who had suffered and died — some of them in concentration camps — for trying to help Jewish people. In contrast, she noted, Stein "saved no one, she hid no one."

The cantor said she had read some of Stein's works. "Her pages are full of me, me, me," she reported. "She denied her religion, and later her sexuality. She had a need to martyr herself."

Horowitz also criticized the Church's decision to beatify Stein. "Edith Stein died as a Jew," she declared.

Rabbi Miller echoed many of Horowitz's sentiments.

"Aristotle said the purpose of true drama is to create a catharsis," the rabbi observed. "(This play) hasn't been a catharsis; it is a ripping off of scar tissue. I think the play has done harm and hurt when it didn't need to."

The rabbi tried to explain the Jewish reaction to Stein's conversion and beatification with an analogy. "Try to imagine Mother Teresa suddenly becoming a Buddhist hermit," he said. "That's the way Jews feel about her conversion."

Rabbi Miller criticized the Church's decision to erect a convent at Auschwitz and noted that

when Jewish groups had requested permission to build a chapel there ten years earlier, they were dissuaded from doing so. He labelled the subsequent decision to establish a convent at the camp as political, and added that although the Church had agreed to move the convent, it had as yet not done so.

Rabbi Miller also linked the play to a disturbing trend toward forgetting the Jews who died in the camps. He noted that when he went to Auschwitz as a tourist, the tour guide never mentioned Jews. "If I hadn't known history, I wouldn't have known there were Jews who died there," he said. "What is at stake is how the Holocaust is to be remembered."

Father Brennan acknowledged that the Church, in deciding to build the convent at Auschwitz, showed a great deal of insensitivity. He further noted that he had an ambivalent reaction to the play, and wondered how Stein would have reacted to all of the fuss about her.

"I couldn't help asking myself throughout the play how she would feel about being beatified and how she would feel about having a convent at Auschwitz named after her," he said.

Father Sullivan felt fairly certain about how Stein would have reacted to the play.

"I think she would have been astounded to see what's been attributed to her," the Carmelite said. "She didn't want to have a fuss made about her, but I never saw such a fuss-making person as she's depicted in the play."

Father Sullivan called the play a "gripping work" but "a flawed work in respect to who Edith Stein is."

He acknowledged that a playwright has to take some liberties to make the work hold together dramatically. "I don't go to a Shakespeare play to learn about the kings of England," he noted. Instead, he said, he goes to gain insights into the characters and what motivates them.

Nevertheless, Sullivan felt that Giron took too many liberties with Stein's life. The play deals with spiritual issues that were not Stein's, but, he suspects, are Giron's.

He pointed specifically to the scene where Stein tries to gain acceptance to the convent and argues with the prioress as an instance when Giron's Stein differs from the historical accounts. Stein's own record of her entry to the convent was that it was a slow and nonconfrontational process. Stein did have to sing a hymn, as she is forced to do in the play, but not "Oh Come, Oh Come, Emmanuel" as Giron has her sing.

"That was to my mind's eye an ideological moment in that he wants to keep her flowing along as some kind of a savior for the Jewish people," Sullivan said. He noted that she did indeed care about her people, and did try to help them from within the convent, but not in the manic way portrayed in the play. In contrast, the actual song she sang was a song about Mary as an obedient servant of God.

Giron's decision to make Stein a savior of her people can also be easily misread, Sullivan noted.

"If you say they have to be saved from something, you're saying they're inferior," he observed. "If they're inferior, you can do anything you want to them. That's what could be read into it."

In looking at some of the objections raised during the discussion, Sullivan acknowledged that the Church's decision to build the convent at Auschwitz could have been handled differently.

"It's possible the Catholic Church could have made an attempt to poll Jewish organizations to find out what they this act would symbolize to them," he said. "Auschwitz is emblematic to the Jews, therefore it's special."

But as for Stein's beatification, "I believe that quite independent of her death that she had what she needed to be sanctified," the Carmelite said.

In beatifying a person, Father Sullivan noted, the Church looks for evidence of heroic virtues in them, and "patterns of life which show people radiate the presence of God in their lives. Sanctity is in the person or it isn't. That's what people saw in Stein."

The discussion finally ended not because people ran out of questions, but simply because the theater had to be cleared in readiness for the 7 p.m. performance of the play. Nevertheless, people lingered before the stage, asking questions of panel members and talking among themselves.

One gesture in particular seemed to sum up the evening's intent. As the panelists stood up to leave the stage, Rabbi Miller and Arthur Giron turned to each other, warmly smiled and shook hands.

Christian/Jewish Dialogue Group seeks to dispel misunderstandings

What is communion?

Imagine for a moment a group of Christians from various denominations discussing their answers.

Now imagine that the question was posed by a Jewish person, and that Jewish people are listening to and learning from the discussion.

This situation is not imaginary. Such discussions take place on a regular basis at St. Mary's Church in Rochester, where members of the Christian and Jewish communities meet 10 times a year to take part in the Jewish-Christian Dialogue Group.

"The purpose (of the group) is to provide a forum for discussion and understanding between Jews and Christians," explained Joseph Kelly, a Nazareth College theology professor who facilitates the noontime meetings.

"Christian and Jewish people often operate on assumptions about each other, and the best way to clear these up is just to talk to each other," noted Neil Jaschek of the Jewish Community Federation of Rochester. "It's preventative medicine if nothing else in terms of preventing bigotry and resolving misunderstandings."

The dialogue group was created last year by the Dialogue Committee of the Commission on Christian/Jewish Relations. The commission, which is jointly sponsored by the Jewish Community Federation and Genesee Ecumenical Ministries (GEM), was established in 1978 to provide a vehicle for Jewish and Christian people to work together

on issues of common concern, according to Larry Witmer, executive director of GEM.

"The commission represents both a desire to work together on issues of mutual concern in terms of common needs and justice issues, ... as well as the desire to be in dialogue about questions of concern to Christian and Jewish communities," Witmer said. Commission chairmen are Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh, and Margery Nürnberg, director of the diocesan Department of Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs.

To provide even more opportunity for dialogue between the two traditions, commission members decided to create a small Dialogue Committee, consisting of Nürnberg, Jaschek and John Hunter of the Evangelical Lutheran Church.

The committee then began to search for a site to begin the dialogues. In 1987, committee members contacted Sister Joan Sobala, S.S.J., at St. Mary's, and suggested that the dialogue group could become part of the parish's noontime forum series. Parish officials agreed, and the group began to meet in the fall of 1987.

One of Kelly's first ideas was to have the Christian and Jewish participants write on slips of paper any questions they had about each other's beliefs, traditions and history. Questions were then picked at random. Among the topics raised were the place of Israel in Jewish thinking; celibacy; conversion; and sacraments, especially the Eu-

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THOUGHTS TO CONSIDER



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