

REVIEW

Books offer insights, portraits of St. Edith Stein

Never Forget: Christian and Jewish Perspectives on Edith Stein, by Waltraud Herbstrith, OCD, translated by Susanne Batzdorff. Institute of Carmelite Studies (Washington, 1998). 304 pp., \$11.95.

Aunt Edith: The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint, by Susanne Batzdorff. Templegate Publishers (Springfield, Ill., 1998). 237 pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Eugene J. Fisher
Catholic News Service

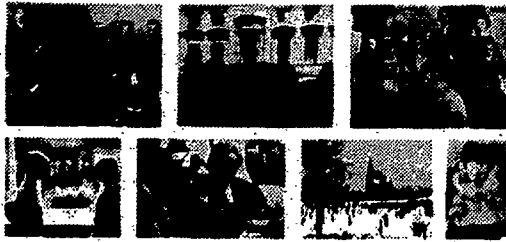
At the outset, I should acknowledge that I have short pieces in both of these works. So this article may be considered more of a book notice than a book review. On the other hand, I was sent the typescripts of both books before agreeing to appear in them. So my appearance in them does indicate a measure of my very positive reaction to them.

Waltraud Herbstrith's *Never Forget*, originally published in German to mark the beatification of St. Edith Stein, collects the reflections of more than 50 European Catholics and Jews: scholars, religious and cultural leaders, friends and members of the Stein family. To these the American edition has added helpful informational essays on the canonization and its process by Carmelite Fathers John Sullivan and Kieran Kavanaugh, and on the Edith Stein Guild by Victor J. Donovan, along with two trenchant and incisive articles by Rabbis Nancy Fuchs-Kriemer and Daniel Polish. The latter, along with some of the European Jewish contributions, explain Jewish concerns and sense of unease with the canonization.

Cardinal William H. Keeler, in a recent advisory sent to the U.S. bishops in his capacity as episcopal moderator for Catholic-Jewish relations, noted two central concerns in Jewish responses. First, the long history of attempts to convert Jews — too of-

AUNT EDITH

The Jewish Heritage of a Catholic Saint



Susanne M. Batzdorff

ten by force, even though this was officially banned by the Church — leads Jews to question whether the canonization and subsequent veneration of a Jewish convert will lead to similar proselytizing attempts with their tragic consequences, such as the expulsion of the Jews of Spain in 1492. In a statement in 1987, the bishops' Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs formally eschewed any such usage of the figure of Edith Stein.

The second, again quite understandable, Jewish fear arising from the canonization is

that it represents an attempt by the church to "take over" the Holocaust, by casting a Catholic in the role of victim. Again, the bishops' statement of 1987 was quite clear. Veneration of Edith Stein, they declared, should lead to contemplation on the sins of Christians against Jews over the centuries, especially considering the fact that her murderers, while hardly practicing Christianity, were baptized and raised as Christians.

The Jewish and Christian essays collected in *Never Forget* provide an invaluable personal, historical and theological set of insights not only into Edith Stein and her times (two World Wars and the Holocaust), but also into the sensitive and complex legacy that the church, in preserving her memory in this way, sets as a challenge for all future generations of Christians.

Susanne Batzdorff, the author of *Aunt Edith*, is an observant Jew, as is much of the extended family that survived Hitler's attempt at genocide. What she gives us here is truly remarkable

and precious. It is the story of a woman of greatness and spiritual humility, a detailed biography of her aunt, whom she knew and remembers. But it is also the story of her family, and of a tragic catastrophe of unprecedented proportions that washed over her once tightly knit family, dispersing around the globe those who survived. Edith Stein died in Auschwitz before a book she had been working on, *Life in a Jewish Family*, could be published. The book was designed to break down the anti-Semitic stereotypes then rampant in Eu-

rope. The saint's niece not only fulfills the hopes of her aunt for our times, but gives us an invaluable look at the remarkable Jewish family that produced a Catholic saint and remains Jewish to this day.

Edith Stein died as one of 6 million Jews. No more. No less. But her life and her profound spiritual and theological works will influence the church for centuries to come.

Fisher is associate director of the Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, and consultant to the Holy See's Commission on Religious Relations With the Jewish People.

Courier seeks prose, poetry

The *Catholic Courier* is looking for original Christmas short stories, memoirs and poetry for its keepsake Dec. 24 Christmas issue.

Stories and memoirs should be no longer than 1,000 words. Poetry may be in any style and format — rhymed, unrhymed, haiku, sonnets, free verse, etc. — but should be no longer than 24 lines.

All entries should be typed. The *Courier* staff will select works for publication from entries received by Thursday, Dec. 3. Authors desiring return of their works must include stamped, self-addressed envelopes.

Mail submissions to: Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, or e-mail them to catholic@frontiernet.net.

MISSION NEWS

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