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EDITH STEIN: NOT A SELF-HATING JEW

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Abstract

This paper explores the life and thought of Edith Stein (1891-1942), arguing that despite her complex and at times uncomfortable relationship with Judaism, she never rejected her Jewish identity. Although some have labeled her a self-hating Jew, the intersection of her Jewish background with her intellectual and ethical commitments remains a vital area for further study. While Stein rejected Judaism as a religion, this paper demonstrates that she did not renounce her Jewishness—and that, perhaps unknowingly, elements of Jewish religious thought continued to shape her convictions.

Keywords: Edith Stein; Jewishness; phenomenology; religious conversion; Catholicism.

Edith Stein was born in 1891 in a well-educated family that identified with Western liberalism, and as such, was a child of Enlightenment. Her thought was grounded in the humanistic creed as a guideline to the moral redemption of the world. Stein was a product of a society in which becoming emancipated often meant becoming non-Jewish. In her autobiography *Life in a Jewish Family*, Stein addressed her doubts and tensions with Judaism and expressed a well-defined admiration of German society.

Like many other assimilated German Jews, Stein was deeply patriotic; during World War I, her sense of German patriotism manifested in seven months of voluntary service as a nurse. Confronting pain, exhaustion, and loss during the war deepened her understanding of empathy and the complexity of human experience. These encounters awakened in her an intellectual desire to explore how one person perceives and relates to another's inner life – an inquiry that led her to the study of phenomenology and particularly the concept of empathy. Her wartime experience as a nurse undermined her youthful atheism, and her later philosophical inquiries no longer felt sufficient in her search for existential meaning. Instead, these experiences served as a bridge to her eventual conversion to Catholicism.

However, Stein remained committed to phenomenology throughout her life. A brief recourse to phenomenology explains Stein's approach. For her, phenomenology was "the intellectual armor [she] needed" (Graef 14). Applying phenomenological methods allowed her to examine in depth phenomena related to states of consciousness, such as fatigue, freshness, feverishness (Graef 27) and to approach experience without preconceived assumptions. She later applied the same methods even in areas where they did not fully apply, namely, in her efforts to interpret theological teachings.

Stein's phenomenological work is indebted to her mentor, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl's method included four essential steps: *epoché* (bracketing any preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon); immersion in the phenomenon, the examination and discernment of its essential structures, and detailed description. His process can be illustrated through different experiential domains, such as listening to music or recalling a memory. For instance, listening to music by focusing on: How does it feel? What emotions arise? How does time seem to flow? How is the sound present in consciousness? This method goes beyond intellectual analysis and analytical reasoning and allows for direct experience through deep immersion and sympathy rather than detached analysis.

In 1933, while waiting to join the Carmelite convent, Stein began writing her autobiography. Her reminiscence extended only to 1916—the year of her conversion to Catholicism—and focused on her Jewish upbringing, deliberately avoiding discussion of her conversion (Brenner 127–128). Employing a phenomenological approach allowed her to emphasize how events, feelings, and experiences were lived rather than merely recounted in chronological order. This method appealed to her academic training while offering a reflective framework through which she sought to reconcile her Jewish and Christian identities and to counter anti-Jewish prejudice rooted in ignorance. She maintained that antisemitic attitudes arose from ignorance and the absence of genuine knowledge about Jewish people, their life, and their traditions.

Because of her conversion to Catholicism, some scholars have characterized Stein as a self-hating Jew. In this paper, I use *self-hatred* to denote the internalization of antisemitic tropes—a phenomenon widely discussed in Jewish philosophy and literature. The most paradigmatic example is Theodor Lessing, who, in *Jewish Self-Hatred* (1930), coined this term and described it as the inversion of external hatred inward. Other examples include Jean-Paul Sartre, who in *Antisemite and Jew* (1946) argued that assimilation stems from rejecting Jewish identity due to a lack of meaningful ties to Jewish culture and tradition. Similarly, Cynthia Ozick, in "The Riddle of the Ordinary" and other essays (1975), suggested that Jewish ignorance fosters internalized loathing. Finally, George Steiner, in *Bluebeard's Castle* (1971), contended that embracing Western high culture often displaced Jewish knowledge and resulted in existential dissonance and vulnerability.

Before reviewing whether this definition is accurately describing Stein, I turn to Isaac Deutscher and Heinrich Heine, similarly defined in these terms.[1] Isaac Deutscher (1907-1967), was a Jewish-Polish Marxist writer who is often portrayed as a prototype of the "self-hating Jew." He was an atheist and a socialist, uninterested in any religion, not just Judaism. He defined himself as a "non-Jewish *Jew*," never abandoning his Jewishness. While Stein had only a limited

[1] I have chosen these two characters while being well aware that there are many more that fall under this definition, in some cases, deserving and in others, not. See also Ilana Maymind, "On the Concept of Self-Hatred: A Misnomer." *Journal of Jewish Identities*, Issue 9, Number 1, January 2016, pp. 19-37.

understanding of Judaism and, for her spiritual needs, had chosen Catholicism, Deutscher was deeply knowledgeable of Judaism, yet he did not embrace that knowledge in a religious sense. In *The Non-Jewish Jew* (1968), Deutscher writes:

What then makes a Jew? Religion? I am an atheist. Jewish nationalism? I am an internationalist. In neither sense am I, therefore, a Jew. I am, however, a Jew by force of my unconditional solidarity with the persecuted and exterminated. I am a Jew because I feel the Jewish tragedy as my own tragedy; because I feel the pulse of Jewish history; because I should like to do all I can to assure the real, not spurious, security and self-respect of the Jews.

My next reading brought me to Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), a German Jewish poet, writer, and literary critic. In his *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). He writes:

My fondness for the Hellenes has since then been on the decline. I now see that the Greeks were only beautiful youths, but the Jews were always men—powerful, uncompromising men—not only in the far past, but also up to the present day, despite eighteen centuries of persecution and misery. In the meantime, I have learned to appreciate them more, and if it were not the case that any sense of pride in one's birth is a foolish contradiction for a warrior of the revolution and its democratic principles, the author of these pages might well be proud that his ancestors belonged to the noble house of Israel, that he is a descendant of those martyrs who gave the world one God and one morality and have fought and suffered on all the battlefields of thought. (Heine, from "Confessions," 1854.)

Heine himself spoke of his conversion to Protestantism in 1825 as his "entry ticket into European culture." The conversion did not help him secure employment. About his relationship with Judaism, he said: "I have not returned to Judaism, since I never left it." Like Deutscher, Heine never disowned his Jewishness. Not being a religious Jew did not make either of them self-hating Jews.

But was Stein a self-hating Jew or, like Deutscher and to some degree Heine, rejected Judaism as a religion, but not Jewishness as peoplehood to which she belonged? In her *Life in a Jewish Family*, to fight the antisemitic tropes, she writes that a personal connection allows people to recognize that

> having associated with Jewish families as employees, neighbors or fellow students, have found in them such goodness of heart, understanding, warm empathy, and so consistently helpful an attitude that, now, their sense of justice is outraged by the condemnation of this people to a pariah existence (Stein 24).

Stein's translator writes about Stein:

> The beloved daughter of a Jewish family, a staunch German patriot, a young woman, confident in the academic world, a philosopher whose depth of empathy helped her to establish and maintain warm relationships. As a Carmelite, she came to see with clarity what awaited her, her people, Germany, and the world (Translator's Afterword to *Life in a Jewish Family*).

By "her people," she indisputably meant Jewish people.

Hilda Graef, herself a Jewish convert to Catholicism, offers important insights in *The Scholar and the Cross: The Life and Work of Edith Stein*. She discusses Stein's admiration for St. Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), a Carmelite nun and Spanish mystic who, through her paternal line, had Jewish ancestry. Stein first encountered Teresa's biography in 1921. Teresa herself descended from conversos (Jewish converts scrutinized under Spain's *limpieza de sangre* statutes), facing suspicion as a "New Christian." Yet both women defy the historical pattern where Jewish converts to Catholicism—especially pre-modern—vehemently renounced Jews to affirm their new *bona fides*. Stein's affinity for Teresa, Judith, Esther, and Mary underscores this exception. Graef argues that Stein's attraction to Catholicism was, paradoxically, a means of reconnecting with her Jewish roots because she regarded Catholicism as demonstrating "perfect loyalty to the true meaning of Judaism" (Graef 36). Like her veneration of St. Teresa, Stein also admired the biblical figures Judith and Esther, as well as "the crown of all women, Our Lady herself" (Graef 74). This affinity for strong Jewish biblical characters distinguished her from many other converts who sought to "amalgamate completely with the 'Gentiles' among whom they live" (Graef 74).

Graef discusses some unsettling points in Stein's reasoning about her conversion, namely, her views on martyrdom. Ostensibly, Stein's embrace of Catholicism does not engage with the history of anti-Judaism, leaving out the 12th-century Crusades massacres and extending to the Inquisition's targeting of conversos like Teresa's family. Her writings show no explicit engagement with these events. Stein's theology is based on the pre-Vatican II context (e.g., Jewish suffering as divine judgment for unbelief). This approach was later reframed by Paul VI's 1965 Nostra aetate, which rejected deicide charges and affirmed Jews' ongoing covenant. Given her engagement with the pre-Vatican II context, a troubling theological paradox becomes apparent: in seeking to reconcile her Jewish origins with her Christian faith, she absorbed and reinterpreted ideas that ultimately positioned Jewish suffering as divinely ordained. This self-offering, presenting herself as a Catholic martyr *for* her Jewish people, blended her desire for solidarity ("the destiny of this people was my own") with supersessionist theology ("atonement for the unbelief of the Jewish people"). However, her wish to offer herself as a martyr did not appear to exhibit triumphalist supersession (replacement theology) but rather manifested her grief and desire for reconciliation rather than replacement of Judaism.

However, Graef notes that when Stein spoke against National Socialism and racism, she implied that there is a curse laid on the Jewish people—"her own people"—and need to ask for forgiveness that stemmed from her view that Jews had rejected Christ, their Messiah. For her, the punishment was the judgment of God of her people, "which she loved so much that she herself wanted to be a victim for it, though her way toward that goal had not become clear" (Graef 94). As she contemplated conversion, she became convinced that her baptism "had really deepened her attachment to her people; after all, our Lord himself was a Jew according to this humanity, and faith in Him was meant to be the fulfillment of the faith of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" (194). Where have all these convictions come from, and how has Stein's embeddedness in German society influenced her? Lastly, how has this society rewarded Stein for her unwavering commitment to her country and her faith?

A brief overview of Germany's political landscape at the close of the 19th century helps contextualize Stein's life and later developments in Germany to better understand her choices and predicament. Between 1891 and 1942, Germany underwent profound political, social, and ideological transformations, culminating in one of the most catastrophic periods in modern Jewish history. In the 1890s, Imperial Germany, under Kaiser Wilhelm II, pursued an assertive foreign policy known as *Weltpolitik*, aimed at expanding the nation's colonial and naval power. Domestically, the country remained an authoritarian monarchy, but it was also a dynamic industrial society with a growing socialist movement. The Social Democratic Party (SPD) gained support among workers, while conservative elites resisted democratization and scapegoated marginalized groups, including Jews (Blackbourn 313–315). Blackbourn writes: "These perpetual-motion political adventurers were prototypes of the later Nazi activist: disrespectful and demagogic, hostile to government and elites as well as socialists and Jews, they imparted a new tone to German politics" (Blackbourn 315).

As mentioned, Stein's family—like many other German Jews of this period—was largely assimilated, actively participating in professional, cultural, and economic life. However, they remained targets of recurring antisemitism, particularly from nationalist and *völkisch* (ethno-nationalist) movements that cast Jews as both capitalist exploiters and socialist subversives—an ideological contradiction that persisted well into the 20th century (Pulzer 114–16). While Jews were granted full civil rights under the 1871 Constitution, their belonging within German national identity remained contested. They were accepted only insofar as they recognized that the society they wished to join was fundamentally "Christian-German" (Pulzer 251).

Antisemitism increasingly assumed intellectual prestige: "The cloak of academic respectability which was being thrown over antisemitism helped to secure its growing acceptance among *bien-pensants* (prone to conformism). This was due, at least in part, to the conscious effort on its behalf by recognized scholars" (Pulzer 247). This trend was especially evident during 1900–1914, though its roots extended earlier. Already in 1879–80, the highly influential Heinrich von Treitschke had proclaimed Jews "our misfortune" (Pulzer 249). Recalling Stein's unsuccessful attempts to secure an academic position, what role did these "recognized scholars" play in fueling antisemitism—a prejudice that eventually contributed to the near-complete annihilation of the Jewish people?

Max Weinreich, in *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes Against the Jewish People*, illuminates these questions. Between 1919 and 1933, most German scholars proved intellectually receptive to National Socialist philosophy, which they embraced alongside virulent antisemitism. Jews were depicted as wielding excessive power and causing Germany's woes. Several prominent scholars articulated these views with particular force.

Among them was Philipp Lenard (1862–1947), the renowned physicist and Nobel laureate who became a fervent Hitler supporter and fierce opponent of "Jewish science," especially Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. As early as 1924, Lenard published work praising Hitler and the Nazi Party. Similarly, the celebrated physicist Johannes Stark (1874–1957), Nobel winner in 1919, hailed Hitler as "God's gift" (Weinreich 12). In 1935, Stark denounced Jewish scientists, targeting Einstein's work as "artificial formulae on the basis of arbitrary definitions and transformations of the space and time coordinates," insisting that "Jewish formalism in natural science is to be rejected by all means" (12). He dismissed Jewish contributions as a mere "pseudo-logical verbal skirmish" (13). Beyond denigrating Jewish science, Stark championed the "science of racial policy," arguing that racial policies were essential to eradicate Jewish influence deemed detrimental to the German people. He promoted "biological cognition," a cornerstone of National Socialist "racial hygiene" ideology, which sought to cultivate a "pure, superior Aryan race" while eliminating those classified as genetically inferior.

Another noteworthy scholar was the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). He skillfully cloaked his intentions in philosophical terms, proclaiming that he sought not merely to seize existing power but to affect a complete revolution in German existence. Carl Schmitt (1888–1985), yet another key figure, was a German jurist and political theorist who developed the "friend-foe" distinction, arguing that the stranger—the one who is different—must be eliminated rather than compromised with. These scholars, along with many others, intellectualized Nazism, rendering it attractive through ostensibly academic and scientific justification. It should be noted that Stein first tried to secure a university position in 1919. She attempted again in 1930-1931.

Scholars and professors were instrumental in bringing Nazism to universities and beyond. However, for the Nazis to be sure, they established their own learning institutions as well, such as the Academy of German Law and the Reich Institute for the History of the New Germany and other similar institutions. In the meantime, in 1935/1936, universities underwent complete Nazification. Just in 1936, about 1,500 professors had been dismissed for either racial or political reasons. To ensure their total control, for those who remained, Nazis demanded not only to agree with their policies, but the denial of their former views. The ideas of Enlightenment were no longer considered relevant and were pronounced as obsolete and unbinding, given that life's conditions and fate changed. The ideas of totalitarianism replaced Enlightenment. Their views were expected to reflect this change.

Alfred Rosenberg was the key person to advance antisemitism by incorporating and building the new philosophy that highlighted the German struggle against the Jewish democratic myth. Rosenberg was a Nazi ideologue, philosopher, and so-called "architect of racial theory." Already in 1923, he proclaimed Hitler to be Germany's Führer. His *Myth of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1930, was a cornerstone of Nazi ideology. In this book, he blended racial pseudoscience, antisemitism, and anti-Christianity. He advanced his conspiracy theories with unquestionable organizational skills. Rosenberg was able to recruit young academics eager to advance their careers by giving them assignments in the Nazi machinery. By 1938, he had established a close relationship with the academic world to further infiltrate his ideas. But already by 1934, he proudly announced the birth of a new racial "science." In his speech to promote and intellectualize his views, he called Socrates "an intellectual social Democrat" (Weinreich 27).[2]

There was no lack of scientists interested in contributing to this new "science." The Institute of Hereditary Biology and Race Research was established to focus on anthropology, eugenics, human constitution-research, and experimental genetics. The Jew was presented as an exemplar of "the embodiment of everything to be resented, feared, and despised" (Weinreich 28) and defined as "racially alien." Neither religion, nor the degree of rootedness (assimilation), nor citizenship were any longer relevant.

[2] See also Jurgen Matthaus and Frank Bajohr, *The Political Diary of Alfred Rosenberg and the Onset of the Holocaust* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

Next step was the 1935 Nuremberg Laws, which formally stripped Jews of German citizenship and prohibited marriage or sexual relations between Jews and "Aryans." The process of assimilation was no longer simply chosen but imposed and monitored by bureaucratic means, with full emancipation to be granted only at the end of the process. As time went by, the success of Jewish assimilation was increasingly questioned. Assimilation was colored by the fear that there would be "racial degeneration" resulting from "the penetration of the Jews into the German body politic, into German society, and into the German bloodstream" (Friedlander 87). The various themes of redemptive antisemitism manifested themselves in *völkisch* ideology and in the *völkisch* obsession with a return to "the mystical cult of sacred Aryan blood" (Friedlander 87).

As Nazi policy radicalized, violence escalated. Kristallnacht, the nationwide pogrom of November 9–10, 1938, marked a turning point: synagogues were burned, Jewish businesses were destroyed, and thousands were arrested and sent to concentration camps. With the outbreak of World War II in 1939 and Germany's occupation of Eastern Europe, Nazi policy shifted from persecution to systematic extermination. By 1942, the Wannsee Conference formalized the "Final Solution"—the coordinated effort to annihilate the Jewish population of Europe, leading to industrialized mass murder in death camps such as Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Treblinka (Browning 96–98).

This was the environment in which Stein started writing her autobiography in 1933 as antisemitism continued to escalate. In an environment of intensifying nationalism and social polarization—where Jewish identity was already viewed with suspicion—any indication of religious ambiguity or apostasy could be seized upon as evidence of divided loyalties or assimilationist betrayal. Her intention was "to redeem her Jewish past" and "to suppress her Christian present" (Brenner 128).

When describing her interest in writing her autobiography, Stein explained that her preoccupation with human personality was not merely theoretical but was shaped by her personal observations of human behavior in the traumatic war situation. She wrote: "I had seen the strength and weakness of human beings under fire and had come to realize that the study of the soul must be joined to the study of life" (Stein 346). The danger she observed around her made her even more committed to liberal ideas and, perhaps ironically, to a trust in humanity. In her autobiography, Stein shared how she was influenced by the thought of Max Scheler (1874–1928), particularly his understanding of "the other." According to Scheler, "the other" is an aspect of human personality essential to a person's sense of well-being. For Scheler, individuals are not only part of society; society and social bonds are integral to one's sense of self, so that an individual human being is, in a sense, also a collective person. While influenced by Scheler's ideas, Stein developed her own conception of "the other" and built her theory of empathy on this foundation. She argued that someone else's experience is "not the same as mine, but it can be like mine."

In her chapter entitled "The Essence of Acts of Empathy" in *On the Problem of Empathy*, Edith described an individual as someone who is "not given as a physical body, but as a sensitive, living body belonging to an 'I,' an 'I' that senses, feels, and wills" (5). She addressed empathy by stating that when someone experiences pain, "the pain is not a thing and is not given to me as a thing, even when I am aware of it 'in' the pained countenance." Instead, she argued, "the pain is given 'at one' with it" (6). We "experience" someone's pain by seeing the face and expression of those who experience it, so pain is "given at one" with the person, a sensitive being who is living through it.

Regrettably, Stein was unaware of the Jewish view on empathy, which is deeply rooted in both biblical and rabbinic tradition. While the term "empathy" (a modern word) does not appear in classical Jewish texts, the concept—feeling with another and acting compassionately as a result—is central to Jewish ethics. The Jewish view on compassion (*rachamim*) is central to its ethical and theological framework. It is considered both a divine attribute and a human obligation. In Jewish tradition, God is described as *rachum v'chanun*—" compassionate and gracious"—in the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy (Exodus 34:6–7). This theological concept serves as the basis for human emulation: "Just as He is compassionate, so you should be compassionate" (Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 133b). The idea that humans should imitate God (*imitatio Dei*) by practicing mercy and compassion is foundational in Jewish ethics. None of this was familiar to Stein.

Further, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is a foundational verse interpreted by Rabbi Akiva as a central principle of the Torah (Sifra on Leviticus 19). Empathy is implicit: to "love as yourself" requires imagining and caring about another's emotional state as your own. "You were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:20; Deut. 10:19). The Torah repeatedly commands care for the stranger (*ger*), grounding it in historical empathy: because the Israelites were strangers, they must understand the vulnerability of others. Maimonides (Rambam) underscores this in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:49), viewing it as cultivating moral sensitivity. In *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilchot De'ot* 6:3, Maimonides discusses *gemilut chasadim* (acts of lovingkindness), including visiting the sick and comforting mourners, which require empathic presence. He calls these acts obligations, implying that emotional engagement is not optional but a duty. Unbeknownst to herself, Stein was drawn to these precepts, seeking to find them outside of Judaism. Her knowledge of Judaism would have enhanced her self-understanding and reduced her internal struggles.

For Stein, empathy served as a corrective against potential deception. Understanding others, she believed, depends on empathic interaction with them—a connection among people that she viewed as central, with "the other" perceived as equal in ways that precede and transcend circumstantial factors such as political, ideological, or historical conditions (Brenner 34). She argued for recognizing both our own experiences and those of others, writing: "My whole past could be dreamed or be a deceptive recollection. … But 'I,' the experiencing subject who considers the world and my own person as phenomenon, 'I' am an experience and only in it, am just as indubitable and impossible to cancel as experience itself" (*On the Problem of Empathy* 5). These statements underscore her view that our relations with others require us never to doubt someone else's experience. According to Stein, none of this can be achieved without self-understanding; self-knowledge is a prerequisite for developing empathy. Despite everything transpiring around her, these ideas remained central to Stein throughout her life. Sadly, despite her brilliant mind, she remained mostly illiterate about the significance of these concepts in Judaism

Stein believed in teaching the young generation to distinguish dogma and patriarchal interpretations from the actual text of the Hebrew Bible. For example, she offered an interpretation of the Genesis creation story, refuting the traditional centrality of male reading historically used to justify women's subservient position (Espín 128). Stein contrasted this with Christian Scriptures' stronger Pauline advocacy of female subordination (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:11-15; Ephesians 5:22-24), which outstrips the Hebrew Bible's nuanced matriarchs (Sarah, Rebecca, Ruth, Esther).[3] However, no direct evidence shows her systematically weighing this tension against Church doctrine, despite the fact that her phenomenological lens prioritized lived experience over rigid interpretation. Stein argued that "there is no theological reason that women should not become priests" (Espín 129), though she avoided directly challenging Church teachings.

A close reading of Stein's autobiography reveals her confusion and discomfort with Judaism. Describing her experience at age ten attending a funeral, she demonstrates her lack of connection, viewing Jewish approaches to death as overly focused on temporal life:

The personal immortality of the soul is not considered an article of faith; all of one's effort is concentrated on what is temporal. Even the piety of the pious is directed toward the sanctification of this life. A Jew is able to endure severe hardship and untiring labor coupled with extreme privation for years on end as long as he sees a goal ahead. Deprive him of this goal and you destroy his vigor; life then appears meaningless, and so he can readily decide to throw it away. The true believer, of course, is deterred from such a course by his submission to the will of God (Stein 82).

However, *Teshuvah* 3:1–2 records Maimonides teaching the soul's immortality: "The soul that leaves the body returns to its source, and its eternal existence begins. The dead do not return to life, nor do they again return to the body. The body returns to dust, but the soul is eternal." He also emphasizes that repentance (*teshuvah*) remains possible until death. This reflects the medieval Jewish view of death as a transition to the spiritual realm. Unfortunately, Stein's limited Jewish education prevented deeper and more nuanced engagement with these ideas.

[3] See https://sljinstitute.net/pauls-epistles/1timothy/pauline-thoughts-on-the-role-of-women-in-the-church-ii/

We know that as a Jew, Stein was unable to secure a university position, but how was Stein, an educated and highly assimilated Jew, treated otherwise? Stein was not spared from antisemitism, nor was she unaware of its existence. She encountered it during World War I, when she volunteered as a nurse at the lazaretto. She writes, "In the lazaretto, of course, antisemitic remarks were to be heard at times. On such occasions, Suse [a coworker] forthrightly envied me the ability to come forward with a simple acknowledgment that I was Jewish" (Stein 343). It is noteworthy that Edith adds parenthetically, "By the way, this used to astound people, since no one took me to be Jewish" (Stein 343).

Stein's visual description of Jews seems to mirror and internalize, at least to some degree, the perceptions of those outside Judaism. For instance, she describes a fellow phenomenology student: "The two of us were as unlike as one could imagine. Her appearance was typically Jewish: dark-haired, more than normally heavy, loud and lively, with effervescent wit and sharp repartee" (Stein 395). In contrast, she describes herself as having "quiet, serious ways" (Stein 395).

In 1933, after Stein's unsuccessful attempts to launch an academic career, she became part of a group of lecturers at the Catholic Pedagogical Institute of Münster. There, she was involved in developing an outline for Catholic education. However, she felt the heavy presence of Hitler's National Socialism, and her services were soon terminated. Stein became acutely aware that she would have no academic future in Germany as a woman and as a Jew, despite her distance from Judaism.

As mentioned, Stein was enamored by St. Teresa of Ávila, and her conviction that "we are in this world to serve humanity" (Stein 177) was shaped by Teresa's autobiography. Stein came to believe that God was calling her to offer her life for the protection and salvation of the Jewish people, even though her theological outlook reflected the limitations and tensions of her time, marked by a growing sense of persecution and injustice.

Stein's convictions about empathy aligned with her belief in the moral obligation to serve humanity. She connected Esther's biblical story of saving the Jewish people with her own life and asked the Mother Prioress in Echt for permission to make such an offering to God. In her last testament, composed in 1938, she wrote: "I had indeed already heard of severe measures being taken against the Jews. But now all of a sudden it was luminously clear to me that once again God's hand lay heavy on His people, and the destiny of this people was my own" (Espín 130–131).

She added:

> I asked the Lord to accept my life and death for His honor and glorification, for all concerns of the most Holy Heart of Jesus and Mary and the Holy Church, especially for sanctification and completion of our Holy Order—particularly the Carmels of Cologne and Echt—for the atonement for the unbelief of the Jewish people, and in order that the Lord may be accepted by His own [people] and that His Kingdom come in magnificence; for the deliverance of Germany and world peace, destruction of the Antichrist, and finally for my relatives both living and dead and all whom God has given me: that none of them may be lost (Espín n23, 147).

As this testament demonstrates, while Stein felt connected to the Jewish people, her connection was embedded in her Catholic perspective that mistakenly attributed Jewish suffering to "unbelief." Here and there, we notice inevitable tensions and misunderstandings in Stein's self-awareness related to Judaism, but also her inability to entirely separate herself from it. Perhaps her most directly courageous act was her public statement in the letter she wrote to Pope Pius XI in April 1933. In it, Stein defines herself as a Jew and pleads with the Pope to speak out against the unfolding atrocities under the newly installed Nazi regime:

> As a child of the Jewish people who, by the grace of God, has for the past eleven years also been a child of the Catholic Church, I dare to speak to the Father of Christianity about that which oppresses millions of Germans… For weeks now, we have seen deeds committed in Germany which mock any sense of justice and humanity, not to mention love of neighbor. For years the leaders of National Socialism have been

> preaching hatred of the Jews... But the responsibility must fall, after all, on those who brought them to this point and it also falls on those who keep silent in the face of such happenings.
>
> —Letter to Pope Pius XI, April 1933

Yet we observe signs of inner conflict, and the claim that Stein viewed herself as a sacrificial martyr should be reconsidered in light of her letters. Even in 1940, Stein still hoped for survival. She continued to pursue her religious and academic interests while appreciating life's small but meaningful moments. Determined to protect herself and her sister, she sought refuge in a convent. She wrote, "I do know that Switzerland is strictly closed to immigrants, but I could imagine that, under these particular circumstances, an exception will be made" (Stein 342).

Addressing the "Jewish question," she explained, "Any other country is practically out of the question. If we are unable to get out in this way, we will be deported by the authorities in any case. In that manner, one of my sisters—the one who remains in Breslau—was deported to a so-called 'Jewish residential community' in Silesia" (Stein 342). These letters show that Stein was fully aware of her situation and of her identity as a Jew, which she never renounced, while also demonstrating her desire to continue living.

Stein's approach to Judaism is best understood within the context of post-emancipation Jewish culture, which was shaped by the perception that Christianity represented "a universal religion whose message of forgiveness, compassion, and love for humankind made it appear preferable to the parents' rigidity and severity of the Jewish law" (Brenner 55). Notably, from 18th-century Berlin salon culture to 19th-century philosophy, there appears a recurring pattern among assimilated German Jews (Rahel Varnhagen, Henriette Herz, Edmund Husserl, Max Scheler). Not all were contemporaries of Stein, nor did they share the same religious trajectories. In addition, we note such people as Ludwig Feuerbach, whose views underpinned secular antisemitism in the 1840s–1870s. In his articulation, Judaism was reduced to egoistic anthropomorphism, and the Jewish God mirrored human greed. Feuerbach critiqued Jewish particularism and argued that it hindered universal humanity.

Karl Marx, baptized in childhood, was influenced by Feuerbach's ideas. In his 1843 essay "On the Jewish Question," he portrayed the Jewish God as a symbol of practical self-interest and reduced the Jewish approach to life to economic egoism that persists even in a secularized world. Such cases complicate the comparison but underscore the point of the shared pressures of emancipation and desire for cultural integration. Stein expressed theological disagreement and shared sentiments with Henriette Herz, who believed Judaism lacked emotional depth.

While some thinkers—such as Simone Weil, Feuerbach, and Marx—expressed open hostility toward Judaism (Brenner 55–57), Stein did not share their views. Although she showed little engagement with Jewish theological or intellectual traditions, she never expressed hostility toward Judaism nor rejected her Jewish origins; rather, she felt it did not meet her spiritual needs. Given that Stein internalized certain bigoted perceptions related to one's image, her conversion is best understood as situated between social and theological motivations, with the latter playing the more decisive role. She died as a Jew in the gas chambers of Auschwitz II-Birkenau on August 9, 1942.

CONCLUSION

Edith Stein is often viewed through the lens of her complex relationship with Judaism—a relationship some scholars label "self-hatred," as discussed above with Lessing, Sartre, Ozick, and Steiner. While she showed limited Jewish literacy and embraced Catholicism (seemingly mimicking the ignorance trope her autobiography sought to dismantle), she consistently described herself as a Jewish child. Unlike Deutscher, the "non-Jewish Jew" who combined atheism and socialism, Stein echoes Heine's cultural Jewishness while admiring St. Teresa of Ávila—a fellow Jew by ancestry—revealing continuity rather than rejection. This paper argues that she remained a daughter of the Jewish people, holding this conviction as steadfastly as the religious beliefs she embraced outside Judaism.

Does rejecting Judaism as a religion—without denying one's Jewishness—always amount to self-hatred? This returns us to the perennial debate of "Who is a Jew?"—a deeply contentious issue in Jewish studies encompassing identity, assimilation, rejection, and accusations of internalized antisemitism or "self-hatred." This analysis challenges the

uncritical assumption that rejecting Judaism equates to self-hatred. The binary—"either you're proud of your Judaism or you're self-hating"—oversimplifies the layered realities of Jewish lives under European antisemitism. Edith Stein defies easy categorization: a baptized Catholic who died as a Jew in Auschwitz, her life exposes tensions between Jewish communal boundaries and Catholic soteriology.

The debates over "Who is a Jew?" remain unresolved—and perhaps unresolvable—especially when identity spans halakhic, cultural, ethnic, national, and existential definitions. Many Jewish thinkers who shaped modern thought (Hannah Arendt, Freud, Benjamin, Buber, among others) lived in that in-between space where identity was unchosen, reinterpreted, resisted, and reclaimed.

I conclude by posing two questions: What do we risk by viewing complex Jewish figures through the narrow lens of identity affirmation or betrayal? What does it reveal about contemporary Jewish anxieties that we revisit this debate with such moral urgency? Stein demonstrated the complexity of the theological, social, and historical reasons that prevent us from assigning her to a category of self-hate, despite the presence of certain internalized antisemitic perceptions.

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