

# Beauty and Horror in a Concentration Camp

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The Story of Etty Hillesum

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# Beauty and Horror in a Concentration Camp

The Story of ETTY HILLESUM

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# Contents

Introduction .....	7
A Note on the Word “Holocaust” .....	15
A Brief Chronology .....	16
Chapter 1	
Who Was Etty Hillesum?	
Emancipated, Educated, Urbane .....	19
Chapter 2	
The Struggle to Find Herself:	
Confronting Her Inner Chaos .....	40
Chapter 3	
The Struggle to Find God:	
The Girl Who Learned to Kneel .....	52
Chapter 4	
Joy in a Nazi Camp: An Atypical Mystic .....	64
Chapter 5	
A Train Ride into Hell: Edith Stein’s Story .....	87
Chapter 6	
Life in Auschwitz-Birkenau:	
Three Months of Starvation and Abuse .....	108

Epilogue .....	124
Acknowledgments .....	127
Selected Bibliography .....	128
Notes .....	130

# Introduction

A combination of sex, religion, and violence is usually the makings of a good story, and Etty Hillesum's life certainly had all of that. She was a promiscuous Jewish woman who succeeded in dramatically turning her life around, and was murdered before the age of thirty. But that is not the reason I want to tell her story—at least not the main one! What attracts me to her is her mysticism and her astonishing interior joy in the face of the unspeakable atrocities of the Second World War. More people should know her amazing story, a journey that began in Holland and ended in the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration and extermination camp in German-occupied Poland, where she was killed in November 1943. Most Americans have scarcely even heard of her.

I was one of those Americans myself. Up to a few years ago I barely knew who she was, until a cousin gave me a spiritual book as a gift for my fiftieth anniversary of ordination. Titled *God's Passionate Desire* by William A. Barry, S.J., the book is a collection of retreat reflections, one of which briefly tells Etty Hillesum's story.<sup>1</sup> The passages Fr. Barry quotes from her diary moved me deeply, passages about how she handled the humiliation and isolation that Jews suffered in the Netherlands at that time. When she learned one afternoon that she could not even take a walk in the park anymore, her reaction was not what most of us would feel. "And everywhere signs barring Jews from the paths and the open country," she wrote. "But above the one narrow path still left to us stretches the sky intact. . . . I find life beautiful, and I feel free. The sky within me is as wide as the one stretching above my head."<sup>2</sup>

Sections like that one caused me to buy a copy of her diary, and I continued to be astonished at her writing. “The misery here is quite terrible,” she wrote from Westerbork transit camp shortly before she was killed. “And yet late at night, when the day has slunk away into the depths behind me, I often walk with a spring in my step along the barbed wire. And then, time and again, it soars straight from my heart—I can’t help it, that’s just the way it is, like some elemental force—the feeling that life is glorious and magnificent, and that one day we shall be building a whole new world.”<sup>3</sup>

Unusual words those, coming from a concentration camp. They are, as Fr. Barry points out, the words of a mystic! As I read them, I couldn’t help thinking of other Jews who suffered the same fate as Etty, but with very different feelings. I thought in particular of Elie Wiesel attending a Jewish New Year (Rosh Hashanah) celebration in Auschwitz that his fellow prisoners organized. It included a call to bless God’s name, a standard prayer for such celebrations. Wiesel would have been familiar with it, as an Orthodox Jew, but in this particular setting he wasn’t ready for it. Not in a concentration camp! “Why, but why would I bless Him,” he wrote later. “Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because He kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and Holy Days? . . . I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes had opened and I was alone, terribly alone in a world without God, without man. Without love or mercy.”<sup>4</sup>

Wiesel survived World War II and went on to live a long and productive life (he authored over fifty books), but the question of faith in God continued to haunt him. The Jewish survivors of the death camps, he said in an address in 1972, “had every reason in the world to deny God . . . every reason in the world to become ferocious nihilists, anarchists, carriers of fear



and nightmare.”<sup>5</sup> Wiesel did not reject God outright, however, but there are other Jewish intellectuals of the Holocaust who did. Richard Rubenstein, an American Jewish theologian, for example, said this in response to the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis:

God really died at Auschwitz. . . . [N]othing in human choice, decision, value or meaning can any longer have vertical reference to transcendent standards. We are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos. . . . Though most of us will refrain from antisocial behavior, we do so because of fear of ourselves and others rather than fear of God. . . . Ultimately, as with all things, it will pass away, for omnipotent Nothingness is Lord of All Creation.<sup>6</sup>

I do not mean to pass judgment on people like Wiesel and Rubenstein. Most of us would feel the way they did. But Etty Hillesum was a clear example of someone who did not. Not that she didn't share Wiesel's horror at what was happening around her—she called the Nazi policies “demonic.”<sup>7</sup> But at the same time she insisted that “there must be someone to live through it all and bear witness to the fact that God lived, even in these times. And why should I not be that witness?”<sup>8</sup>

## Typed Sheets and a Rusty Paperclip

The reason Etty's story is not better known has to do with the decisions of publishers. The writings of people like Elie Wiesel and Anne Frank and Viktor Frankl found their way into print soon after the war because publishers found them to be concise and readable. They considered Etty Hillesum's stream-of-consciousness style too repetitive and too philosophical. The result was that her ten tattered notebooks, written in longhand, gathered dust in the attic of a friend, Klaas Smelik, for almost

forty years before they saw the light of day. Eventually, Smelik's son Klaas A. D. Smelik picked up the cause and sent a sample of the diary to a publisher by the name of Jan Geurt Gaarlandt who said he would take a look at it.

That sample, which Gaarlandt described as a "small pile of letters and sheets of typed text held together by a rusty paperclip," sat on his desk for three more years before he finally got around to doing something with it.<sup>9</sup> When he finally began to read it, he was immediately captivated. "The very first sentences I read fascinated and shocked me, and they have remained with me ever since," he wrote later.<sup>10</sup>

The result was an abridged version of the diary called *Etty Hillesum: An Interrupted Life*, which appeared in Dutch in 1981 and in English in 1984. Then, in 1986, the full text of her diary and letters were published in Dutch, followed by an English version in 2002, with the title *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943, Complete and Unabridged*. Her writings are now available in over sixty languages. The abridged version, *An Interrupted Life*, continues to be more popular because of its brevity. The 800-page unabridged version (including 900 annotations) tends to be the focus of scholars who appreciate the full depth and complexity of her writing. For well over a decade now, these scholars have been doing intense study of her writings, and three International Etty Hillesum Conferences have been organized in Europe, two at Ghent University in Belgium (2008 and 2014), and one in Middelburg, the Netherlands (2018), bringing together experts from Canada, the United States, Ireland, Great Britain, Portugal, Spain, France, and the Low Countries. The proceedings of those conferences have been published in three volumes, and those books are an indispensable resource for anyone wishing to write about Etty Hillesum. But they are expensive and

highly academic; the three volumes together cost about \$900. Like the unabridged edition of her diary, they are not the kinds of books ordinary readers buy or read.

It should not be a surprise, then, that Etty Hillesum is still not well known outside the walls of academia—at least not in the United States. That may be why Pope Benedict XVI wanted to call attention to her in one of his last public talks before retiring in 2013.<sup>11</sup> Quoting from her diary, the pope held up the example of this young Jewish woman whose journey began so far from God and ended so near him. She found God deep down within herself, the pope said. *L'Osservatore Romano* has also featured her spiritual journey a number of times. One article published in 2012 focused on the encounter Etty Hillesum had with another mystic and Auschwitz victim, St. Edith Stein.<sup>12</sup> That article wonders what nonverbal communication might have passed between the two as their eyes met in Westerbork in 1942. It is speculation, of course. We know that the two noticed each other during Edith's four-day stay in the camp en route to Auschwitz. Etty mentions it in her diary, referring to Edith as the nun “from that rich, strictly orthodox and highly talented family in Breslau.”<sup>13</sup> But as for how much communication there was between the two, we can only surmise. Meeting or not, Etty Hillesum and Edith Stein are among the most interesting intellectuals of the twentieth century. We will devote a full chapter to comparing the two.

Our journey will also include people who survived the Holocaust, such as writers like Viktor Frankl and Elie Wiesel. These witnesses are important because they fill in the gaps in our knowledge of Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp and give us a good idea of what daily life was like when Etty Hillesum and Edith Stein were taken there. Etty herself has left us ample descriptions of Westerbork, but if she wrote anything about Auschwitz it has not survived.

The Auschwitz killing center was indeed a gruesome place, and I will not shy away from describing it: the starvation, the slave labor, the gas chambers, the unhygienic conditions, the mass graves into which Edith Stein and (presumably) Etty Hillesum were dumped. To water down that history, or to evade it, would dishonor the memory of those victims. It is a story that too many people today know little about. Some even deny that it ever happened. According to a 2020 survey of millennials and Gen Z adults, nearly two thirds of US young adults were unaware that six million Jews died in the Holocaust. Almost a quarter (23 percent) said they believed the Holocaust was either a myth, or had been exaggerated, or they weren't sure; and almost half (49 percent) said they had seen Holocaust denial or distortion posts online.<sup>14</sup> A similar display of ignorance is becoming apparent in Europe—even at a site as sacred as the Auschwitz-Birkenau memorial and museum. In October 2021, vandals sprayed slurs denying the Holocaust on nine of the barracks there.<sup>15</sup>

General Dwight Eisenhower foresaw the possibility that future generations would try to dismiss descriptions of the camps and Nazi atrocities as propaganda. At the end of the war, he made a point of going to see one of the concentration camps (Ohrdruf, about thirty miles west of Buchenwald) for himself. He ordered American soldiers and German civilians to go to the camps, in addition to inviting American journalists and members of Congress to do the same.

### A Catholic (Christian) Perspective

The reader should be aware of the lens through which I will interpret the life of Etty Hillesum. This story will be told from a Catholic viewpoint, despite the criticism of some experts that we Catholics are too eager to “canonize” Etty, or turn her into one of

our own. Etty Hillesum, those critics say, cannot be categorized or taken over by any particular religious tradition, Catholic or otherwise.<sup>16</sup> That is indeed true. Different writers see different sides to her life. As the introduction to the Proceedings of the 2008 Etty Hillesum Conference points out, it is remarkable how many scholars compare her with personages of widely different backgrounds, from German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard to German writer Franz Kafka and American philosopher William J. Durant.

By approaching Etty Hillesum's life from a Catholic perspective, I do not intend to "claim" her, but to explore how it was that Etty, an assimilated Jew steeped in the culture of the Christian Enlightenment in Europe, drew inspiration from the Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup> Doing so from a Catholic perspective—the only one I have—allows me to use the vocabulary shared by these Christian authors to describe the transformation Etty experienced in her inner life. The most influential authors in her life were, indeed, not Jewish but Christian: people like Rainer Maria Rilke, Carl Jung, St. Augustine of Hippo, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Meister Eckhart. With those writers in the background and the help of a skillful therapist in the foreground, Etty Hillesum went through a remarkable transformation that moved from her head to her heart, from excessive intellectualizing to total surrender before "a power greater than any ever I knew."<sup>18</sup> That surrender was a turning point in her search for God, and it was the gateway to her mysticism.

As a Catholic, I would make two further observations. It is readers who have experienced that surrender in their own lives who are most likely to notice its implications in her life. And those readers are most likely to see her transformation as the work of God rather than the work of Etty herself. From the Catholic (and Christian) perspective, Etty Hillesum's story is a story about

the work of the Holy Spirit. And that is the case whether Etty herself was aware of it or not. The initiative was God's, not hers, as it is with anyone who undertakes such important internal labor. It is a question of faith, not academic research (although rigorous research is also very important). In the words of Sister Jean Dwyer, O.P., in her book *The Unfolding Journey: The God Within: Etty Hillesum & Meister Eckhart*: "Her writings show us a very human and flawed individual chosen by God to soar to the heights of mystical union."<sup>19</sup> And in this case, let it be noted, God chose someone outside the Christian tradition. You don't have to be a Christian to be a mystic.

Authentic mysticism has two elements: a loving knowledge of God which comes from a personal encounter with the divine, and a way of life that leads to a loving union with the Mystery that is at the core of life.<sup>20</sup> That is a rough description, of course, not a precise definition, because a precise definition is difficult to come by. As the encyclopedia *Sacramentum Mundi* states, the Catholic Church "has never made any universal and binding declarations on the exact nature of true mystical experience. Revelation and the Church remain a *norma negativa* for mystical assertions."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the Church is more inclined to say what mysticism is *not* than what it is. At the same time, however, experts on the spiritual life say that mysticism is not some esoteric state that is confined to the privileged few. Mystical experiences may be more common than most people realize, and they are not confined to Christians. The Church is careful to give "respectful consideration to non-Christian mysticism."<sup>22</sup>

Etty Hillesum is in that non-Christian category. Exploring how she got there is the work of this book.

## A Note on the Word “Holocaust”

Many Jewish writers and historians, with reason, object to the use of the word *Holocaust* when referring to the annihilation of six million Jews during the Second World War. The reason is the theological and historical background of *holocaust*, which refers to a religious sacrifice. The intention of the Nazis was not to offer a sacrifice to some God. For this reason, the word *Holocaust* is used less and less in Europe today. The Hebrew word *Shoah*, meaning “catastrophe,” is used instead. When Pope Benedict XVI spoke about Etty Hillesum in 2013, he used *Shoah* in order to show respect for those who suffered in the concentration camps of World War II.

But Holocaust does continue to be used. The *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*, published by the Yad Vashem Memorial in Jerusalem, for example, does not use *Shoah* in place of Holocaust. Neither does *The Holocaust Encyclopedia*, published by Yale University Press. The editors of those encyclopedias made that decision for a good reason. Most people in the English-speaking world have not heard the word *Shoah*, let alone know what it means. As Walter Laqueur, editor of the Yale encyclopedia, points out in its preface, “In the English-speaking world the word [Holocaust] is so deeply rooted that it is impractical to deviate from it.”<sup>23</sup>

In this book, we follow the lead of those encyclopedias. Clarity of language demands that we use the word everyone knows. But we do so while being fully aware of its limitations and with the utmost respect for those who suffered the horrors of Nazi Germany.

# A Brief Chronology

**15 January 1914:** Etty Hillesum was born in the Netherlands.

**March 1937:** As a college student, Etty moved into the house of Han Wegerif with whom she would have an affair.

**9 November 1938:** The Night of Broken Glass, when thousands of Jewish businesses and synagogues in Germany and Austria were destroyed, and hundreds of Jews were arrested and sent to concentration camps.

**15 May 1940:** Holland capitulated to the Nazis.

**3 February 1941:** Etty met Julius Spier, who immediately became her therapist and lover.

**9 March 1941:** Etty made her first entry in her diary, describing in graphic detail her interior chaos and need for counseling.

**March 1942:** Two gas chambers, known as the “Little Red House” and the “Little White House,” opened in Birkenau. Much bigger gas chambers would be opened the following year.

**3 July 1942:** The tone of her diary changed; Etty began to look death in the eye.

**30 July 1942:** Etty began work at Westerbork concentration camp.

**First week of August 1942:** Etty met St. Edith Stein during Stein’s brief stay at Westerbork en route to Auschwitz.



**15 September 1942:** Julius Spier died in Amsterdam. Etty was in the city at the time due to sickness; she spent most of the winter of 1942–43 in Amsterdam.

**13 October 1942:** Etty's diary as we know it ended.

**6 June 1943:** Etty left Amsterdam for the last time. By this time, she had left her diary with a friend for safekeeping.

**21 June 1943:** Etty's parents and brother arrived in Westerbork.

**7 September 1943:** Etty, her parents, and her brother were put on a cattle train for Auschwitz.

**30 November 1943:** Etty died in Auschwitz.



## Chapter 1

# Who was Etty Hillesum? Emancipated, Educated, Urbane

Etty Hillesum was born into a middle-class Jewish family in Middelburg, in the southwestern Netherlands, on 15 January 1914. Religion didn't play an important role in her upbringing. The Hillesums were assimilated Jews who lived in a house full of books where the discourse at the dinner table was both learned and secular. Etty's father, Louis Hillesum, held a master's degree in classical languages, *cum laude*, from the University of Amsterdam, his native city, and after graduation succeeded in having his thesis (about the ancient Greek historian Thucydides) accepted for publication. He went on to teach Greek and Latin in three different Dutch towns, where initially he had difficulty controlling large classes because of his poor hearing and poor vision. Eventually he got a classics post in an exclusive high school in the eastern town of Deventer where he was appointed deputy headmaster and then headmaster in 1928.

Etty's mother, Riva Bernstein, was a refugee who fled her native Russia after an anti-Jewish pogrom, and she had a respectable level of education also. In the Netherlands she was listed as a Russian teacher. (The other members of her family followed her to Amsterdam, but later immigrated illegally to the United States.) Louis and Riva married in 1912 and had three children. Esther (Etty) was born in 1914, Jacob (Jaap) in 1916, and Michael (Mischa) in 1920. All three children were exceptionally

intelligent, although Etty's grades were never as high as those of her brothers. According to Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, who published the abbreviated version of Etty's diary, Jaap discovered several new vitamins at the age of seventeen for which he won admission to the national academic laboratories, an unusual honor for a student. He went on to study medicine at the University of Amsterdam and later at Leiden. His younger brother, Mischa, was a talented musician who played Beethoven in public at the age of six, and was considered by many to be one of the most promising pianists in Europe.<sup>24</sup> At the age of eleven, Mischa moved to Amsterdam to study at the famous Vossius Gymnasium where he became an accomplished pianist and composer; his compositions have been preserved. The famous Dutch pianist George van Renesse (1909–1994) was his mentor.<sup>25</sup>

Etty and her brothers spent their childhood moving with the family from town to town as her father changed jobs. She was starting fifth grade when he got his permanent job in Deventer in 1924, and after primary grades she attended the high school where he was deputy headmaster. Her studies included Hebrew, and for a while she attended meetings of the Zionist young people's group in Deventer. She was "witty, vivid, eager to read books and to study philosophy, and in these ways she was far ahead of her school friends," says Gaarlandt.<sup>26</sup> In 1932, she graduated from her father's school and went to the University of Amsterdam, first completing a master's degree in Dutch law in 1939, and then studying Slavic languages, an interest she inherited from her Russian mother. Because of the war, she was unable to complete a degree in that field, but continued to study Russian till the end of her life. To support herself, she gave classes in Russian, apparently with considerable success—one of the Russian language professors recommended her classes and sent students to her.<sup>27</sup> At the social level, she was much admired and had a wide circle of loyal

friends. She was, as one commentator put it, “a young woman of her time: emancipated, educated, urbane, with professional ambitions and a penchant for bohemian lifestyles.”<sup>28</sup>

## Two Lovers at Once

In Amsterdam Etty found lodging in a variety of places, sometimes sharing rooms with her brothers who had also come there to study. Finally, in March 1937, she moved into a room in the spacious house of a sixty-two-year-old accountant, Han Wegerif, who hired her “as a sort of housekeeper.”<sup>29</sup> Her room was in the front of the house on the third floor, overlooking the famous Museum Square in South Amsterdam. It was in this room-with-a-view that Etty wrote most of her diary. Although she was hired as a housekeeper, she soon began a romantic relationship with Wegerif (who was a widower), despite the difference in age and the presence of his twenty-one-year-old son who was also a boarder in the house. Some of the boarders became close friends of Etty’s, especially Maria Tuinzing, to whom Etty gave her diary before she left Amsterdam for the last time, with instructions that she pass it on to Klaas Smelik.

Etty also entered a second sexual relationship at this time. When invited by one of the boarders to attend a session with a psycho-chirologist (palmist) by the name of Julius Spier, she went along, probably out of curiosity. The session, on 3 February 1941, turned out to be a life-altering experience for Etty. She immediately asked to begin therapy sessions with Spier, then became his assistant and lover while continuing her relationship with Wegerif. She was twenty-seven years old and he was fifty-four. It was Spier (to whom she refers as “S” in her writing) who suggested that she begin keeping a diary as a therapeutic exercise, which she did over the next eighteen months. What she ended up