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Cardinal Michael Czerny poses for photographers prior to meeting relatives and friends after he was elevated to cardinal by Pope Francis, at the Vatican, Oct. 5, 2019. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini, File)

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A Vatican cardinal marked the 80th anniversary on Aug. 9 of the gas chamber killing of the Jewish-born Catholic convert Edith Stein by celebrating a Mass near the former Auschwitz death camp and telling the story of his own family's Jewish origins and their fate under the Nazis.

Michael Czerny is one of cardinals most closely associated with Pope Francis' pontificate. A Jesuit who ministered in El Salvador, Czerny heads the Vatican office responsible for Francis' priority portfolios of migration, the environment, development and social justice. A Czech-born Canadian, Czerny recently joined Francis on his landmark visit to Canada to apologize to Indigenous peoples for the Catholic Church's role in running the country's notorious residential schools.

On Aug. 9, Czerny commemorated the anniversary of the day Stein was killed in Auschwitz's gas chambers by celebrating Mass in a nearby Carmelite convent in Oswiecim, a Polish town under Nazi German occupation during the war. There, he delivered a homily that recounted Stein's story and how it intersected with his own and that of his relatives, who hailed from Brno, in the former Czechoslovakia.

Stein was a German Jew born in 1891 in Breslau, now the Polish city of Wroclaw, who converted to Catholicism in 1922 and became a nun. She joined the Carmelite order in Cologne, Germany, but was transferred to the Netherlands after the intensification of Nazi attacks in 1938. She was arrested in 1942 after Hitler ordered the arrest of Jewish converts and was sent to Auschwitz, where she was killed Aug. 9, 1942. St. John Paul II canonized Stein as a martyr in 1998 and made her a patron saint of Europe the following year.

Czerny, 76, noted that he and Stein shared their "Jewish origins, the Catholic faith, a vocation to religious life," as well as the fact that Stein and Czerny's maternal grandmother, Anna Hayek, were about the same age and "came to a similar end."

"My mother's family — both parents and two brothers — were also Catholic but shared the Jewish origins that the enemy abhorred," Czerny recalled in the text of his homily, which his office provided. "My maternal grandmother Anna, my grandfather Hans and my uncles Georg and Carl Robert, were all interned in Terezín, where Hans died," Czerny said, referring to the Theresienstadt concentration camp in the former Czechoslovakia.

"My grandmother and uncles were transported to Auschwitz. From here my uncles were sent to labor camps and eventually murdered there," he said.

His grandmother died of typhus in 1945, but the family has no trace of where she was buried.

Czerny's mother, a baptized Catholic, was forced to work as a farm laborer during the war because of her Jewish ancestry and was jailed in Theresienstadt and Leipzig for 20 months; his father was forced to work as a farm laborer because he refused to divorce her. In 1948, they moved to Canada as refugees with young Michael, who was born in 1946, and his brother, the cardinal said.

Czerny, who has made humanitarian visits to minister to refugees fleeing Ukraine on behalf of Francis, said he was honored to celebrate Stein in the year of Russia's war that he said "urges us to remember."

"Remembering both Edith and Anna with the six million others, we mourn and repent, ‘Lest we forget …,'" he said. "Through their intercession, we pray for peace in Ukraine and throughout the world."

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