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1906-1945

MARTYR, THINKER, MAN OF RESISTANCE

Ferdinand Schlingensiepen

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Dietrich Bonhoeffer
1906–1945

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1906–1945

Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance
Ferdinand Schlingensiepen

Translated by Isabel Best

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In memoriam

*Jean Freeman
and
Dr Harold Wilke*

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Several friends from the International Bonhoeffer Society read my manuscript or parts of it; I am thus indebted to Dr Ilse Tödt, Dr Christian Gremmels, Dr Jürgen Henkys, Martin Hüneke and Enno Obendiek for important suggestions and indications. The same is true for my friends Dr Rudolf Kreis, Dr Rainer Oechslen and Dr Jürgen Regul. To Dr Ekkehard Klaus of the Memorial to the German Resistance, and Peter Schünemann of the German Academy for Language and Poetry, I also owe thanks for their critical reading of the manuscript.

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Without the friendship of Eberhard and Renate Bethge, which I have enjoyed for over fifty years, I would hardly have been likely to write this book. I also remember with gratitude conversations about the church struggle with my father, Confessing Church pastor Hermann Schlingensiepen, and with Bishop Kurt Scharf on whose staff I served for 10 years. My wife Elisabeth and our daughters Stephanie and Irmela have offered criticisms of my manuscript which ensured that I was always brought back to the necessary objectivity about my subject. Elisabeth also proofread each new version of the manuscript.

My sincere thanks go also to my lector, Dr Ulrich Nolte, as well as

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A project such as this biography is like climbing a mountain. Towards the end, as the publisher's deadline approaches, it becomes ever steeper. But long before reaching this final phase, I had found in Dr Ulrich Kabitz a mountain guide who led me onward with an energy that belied his then 85 years. Decades ago he had also accompanied Eberhard Bethge in the writing of his Bonhoeffer biography; thus he had already been the guide on the first ascent. I remember the day when Eberhard Bethge gave me a copy of his biography, with the words 'I don't know what I'd have done without Ulrich Kabitz!'

For me, Kabitz was the friend who not only carefully read every new version of my manuscript, but also drew my attention to important bibliographical sources, kept me from misinterpretations and urged me to expand the most central points in the story. As the deadline neared and it was in fact getting harder, he telephoned almost daily to encourage and advise me. I shall never forget how he once said, 'My wife finds your new chapter exciting and well written, but I think there are a few things you should change.' In other words: Please write this chapter over again!

Ulrich Kabitz and I had become friends years earlier through our common interest in Bonhoeffer. But the guidance he provided through his knowledge of Bonhoeffer's works, the secondary literature and especially the Nazi period, of which he had been an alert witness, went far beyond what one expects from a friend. So I, too, now say, I don't know what I should have done without Ulrich Kabitz. To him above all I owe my heartfelt thanks.

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Preface

I first heard the name Dietrich Bonhoeffer in 1948, when I was given the small volume *Zeugnis eines Boten* (Testimony of a Messenger), edited by W. A. Visser 't Hooft of the Netherlands, the first General Secretary of the World Council of Churches. Fascinatingly, it brought the man to life. Still, it never occurred to me to ask my father about Bonhoeffer. Years later I learned that my father had not only known him, but had once travelled in a police van with him, spending the time in animated conversation, after being arrested together with other pastors at Martin Niemöller's home. Throughout my time at university, Bonhoeffer remained for me a name from the time of the church struggle, to be mentioned respectfully along with the names of Paul Schneider, Lutz Steil, Werner Sylten, Friedrich Weisler and Friedrich Justus Perels, pastors and staff members of the Confessing Church who also were murdered by the SS in their concentration camps.

In 1952 Bonhoeffer's image changed almost overnight, when his letters from prison were published under the title *Widerstand und Ergebung* (Resistance and Submission – published in English a year later as *Letters and Papers from Prison*) and became *the* topic of conversation among us younger people. The generation ahead of us were probably no less fascinated, but almost all older theologians to whom we mentioned the book found Bonhoeffer's new theological ideas 'too fragmentary' and therefore impossible to evaluate. They had experienced much of the church struggle too, but the period of the the Second World War, which for Bonhoeffer ended in death, had been entirely different for them. His new theology must have appeared utterly strange and alien to them.

I feel fortunate to this day that in 1954 I was sent to Bradford, in the north of England, to serve as pastor to a German-speaking congregation, because that was how I came to know Eberhard Bethge, close friend of Bonhoeffer's and his first biographer. He was working in London then, and in spite of the distance, we saw each other often and I was soon included in Eberhard and Renate Bethge's circle of friends. I knew about Bethge's laborious efforts to decipher the manuscripts of his friend in order to prepare them for publication. He was probably already working

on the biography; but he was generous to any theologian who wanted to write about Bonhoeffer. He would photocopy texts, advise visitors in long conversations and provide hospitality to them. So the first researchers on Bonhoeffer came to see him through the eyes of Eberhard Bethge. This was true for me too.

To this day, most of what we know about Bonhoeffer stems from Bethge's long biography of him which was published in 1967 (the English edition appeared in 1970). All subsequent biographies, including the present one, have to build on it. Since Bethge was at his friend's side throughout the decisive years, his work is one of the most important sources on Bonhoeffer's life. It is all the more admirable that Bethge was nevertheless able to distance himself from his subject as every biographer must.

Eberhard Bethge was convinced that, at 1080 pages, the biography was far too long for most readers. He asked me back then if I would like to write a shortened version. I set to work eagerly, but had to stop when I accepted a new position in 1969. It is only now, in the book that lies before you, that I feel I have finally fulfilled the request of the man whose friendship has meant so much to me. A shortened version of Bethge's work would now no longer meet the need for an up-to-date biography of Bonhoeffer. Bethge himself, in his foreword to the fifth edition of his book in 1983, asked whether it wasn't time to revise the 'image that was set in 1967'. This question has become ever more valid since then.

We know more today than we did several decades ago about Bonhoeffer's life and his thinking. For example, the publication in 1992 (in English in 1994) of *Love Letters from Cell 92* makes it possible to portray Bonhoeffer's engagement to Maria von Wedemeyer in more detail than Bethge could do in 1967. At least as significant is the fact that we know, since the publication of the complete correspondence between Bonhoeffer and Bethge, how modestly, for decades, Bethge kept in the background, behind his friend. Yet he was an indispensable dialogue partner for Bonhoeffer, whether in helping him to clarify important ideas or even inspiring them.

When Bethge was writing his book, the period of the Third Reich was much more clearly present in the consciousness of the German people than it is today. Bethge could assume that people were familiar with experiences in the Church and with words that we now have to explain. On the other hand, we today know much more about the Third Reich and the resistance to it than was known in Bethge's time. But it is especially people's estimation of the Resistance which has changed fundamentally.

It is no longer regarded with suspicion, but rather positively for the most part. Commemorations of the attempted overthrow on 20 July 1944 had been held since 1946, but were still an embarrassment to many politicians in 1967. Adenauer, though he had been consistently opposed to Hitler, never attended these ceremonies. He knew how unpopular it would have been for him as Chancellor to do so. Very few Germans in Adenauer's time would have mourned Hitler, but scarcely any wanted to confront questions about their own Nazi past, or even worse, to think about how they should have behaved. So Bethge still had to protect Bonhoeffer from denigration. His biography can be read in part as a defence of Bonhoeffer as a member of the Resistance.

Today Bonhoeffer enjoys great respect, not least of all because his opposition to Hitler began well before 1933. The accusation that the nationalist, conservative Resistance didn't turn away from Hitler until late in his regime does not apply to Bonhoeffer any more than to his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, or the other members of his family, just as it does not apply to Helmuth von Moltke and Adam von Trott. Bonhoeffer no longer needs to be defended.

Glad as one may be of this development, there is also a danger in it. A person whose hundredth birthday is ceremoniously celebrated, who died a martyr 60 years ago, can easily become the focus of universal veneration – all the more when he lived such a life as Bonhoeffer's, and when he left us a poem such as 'Von guten Mächten [Powers of Good]'. But Bonhoeffer did not want to be venerated; he wanted to be heard. Anyone who puts him up on a lonely pedestal is defusing that which, to this day, makes a thoughtful encounter with him worthwhile.

This includes the unique connection Bonhoeffer made between theology and political action, which still aroused mistrust during the postwar period. Thus, during the first decades after the Second World War, the Evangelical Church pastor Paul Schneider, murdered in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1939, was frequently held up as a 'genuine' martyr over against Bonhoeffer, who had been 'liquidated', not as a confessing Christian, but as a conspirator together with his companions in the Resistance. Hitler himself had given the orders, in his command bunker during the 'noon meeting' on 5 April 1945. Bonhoeffer is nevertheless a Christian martyr, because he did not enter into his role as a conspirator by chance; instead, it was theological thinking and decisions that made this Confessing Church pastor a member of the Resistance movement. He had already long been engaged in other ways in the political struggle.

And not least of all, his brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, and Colonel Oster persuaded him to join the conspiracy.

Bonhoeffer's attitude towards racism and colonialism was shared by few others in his time and was thus remarkably forward-looking. Before 1933 he had experienced, in a black church congregation in the USA, their acceptance of him as an equal in the midst of a racist society. He was hoping to travel to India to learn about the religions in that country shaped by colonialism. When he heard about Gandhi, it seemed to him that here was the quintessential teacher who stood up to the dangers of the time. That Bonhoeffer already had racism and colonialism in his field of vision was not the least of the reasons why he recognized, soon after Hitler came to power in 1933, anti-Semitism driven to the worst excesses as *the* issue, for church and politics, which would decide the future of Germany.

It is this vision, as clear-headed as it was committed, which makes Bonhoeffer interesting to people who want to look beyond the trends and interests of their day and sharpen their own perception of long-term developments. In September 1941 Bonhoeffer wrote from Switzerland, to his American friend Paul Lehmann, what we today can recognize as an astonishingly prophetic letter: 'The development that we believe is bound to come in the near future is world domination – if you will forgive me this expression – by America . . . But at any rate the power of the USA will be so overwhelming that hardly any country could represent a counterbalance' (DBWE 16, 219, original in English). Bonhoeffer was worried about this prospect, although he felt that 'world domination by America' was the only possible solution for the world in which he was then living. But what does this mean, if not that, decades ahead of time, he foresaw problems that have not been solved to this day. What he said about it challenges us to think further. This is also true, not least of all, for his ideas about guilt and how it should be handled.

'It would really be very interesting to study Islam on its own soil', he wrote in April 1924, aged 18, to his parents from Tripoli (DBWE 9, 120). Where are the theologians or the educational policymakers who are doing this today when it is urgently needed? But enough of such examples.

To be able to live, to act and to die as Bonhoeffer did requires traits that even he did not inherit, but rather acquired in youth, in his parents' home and during his time at university: intellectual curiosity, an incorruptible sense of right and wrong, and the courage to make

uncomfortable decisions with potentially dangerous consequences. In these ways Bonhoeffer is an example for others, and of interest even to people who no longer expect anything from the Church. However, they must be prepared – with intellectual curiosity of their own – to become engaged with what, for Bonhoeffer, theology was. Bonhoeffer wanted to expose theology to ‘the fresh air of modern thinking’. He insisted that the message of the Church must always apply concretely to the reality of the world. Timeless truths he considered useless, for ‘what is always true is precisely what is not true today’.

It is the biographer’s privilege not to need to write treatises on such ideas, but rather to tell a story which takes in all of that, and more.

*Ferdinand Schlingensiefen
Düsseldorf-Kaiserswerth
Good Friday 2005*

Preface to the English Edition

I am delighted that T&T Clark have decided to publish the English translation of my Bonhoeffer biography. My ties with the United Kingdom and the United States over the years have been many, beginning as long ago as 1950 with a scholarship from the Church of Scotland to study at New College, Edinburgh.

As someone with a degree of knowledge about the country I was then sent by the German Evangelical Church to Bradford/Yorkshire as minister to the German-speaking congregation, in 1954. During our time there my wife and I were able to form friendships that have lasted a lifetime and three of our four children were born British citizens.

My experiences in Scotland and England led to my appointment, in 1959, as ecumenical advisor to the Evangelische Kirche der Union with its headquarters in Berlin. This is the former 'Protestant Church in Prussia' of which Bonhoeffer had been a member.

The 1960s were a time of very lively ecumenical exchange between the many national churches that were members of the World Council of Churches. Based in Berlin, my role was to lend a helping hand and bring the relationships to life, with the Kyodan in Japan and the United Church of Christ in the United States in particular. The dialogue with these two churches, which began back then, endures to this day.

Another part of my job was to keep those congregations of our church that were behind the Iron Curtain informed about ecumenical affairs.

The fact that over time we were able to include ministers of the churches in (then) Communist East Germany (the German Democratic Republic) in our mutual exchange programme for pastors from Germany, Japan and the United States of America made my role all the more exciting.

On moving to a new post in Düsseldorf in 1969 I took a favourite project with me. I had been trying to assist Eberhard Bethge in his efforts to keep Bonhoeffer's ecumenical legacy alive. This is how in 1971 the first International Bonhoeffer Conference and the foundation of the Bonhoeffer Society in Düsseldorf-Kaiserswerth came about.

This Bonhoeffer biography, published in German in 2005, is the result of my personal involvement in this work. I am very grateful to Mrs Isabel

Best that an English translation is now available. Our year-long, intensive working relationship via email has been a joy to me. Later on, as the book was taking shape, I entered into an equally enjoyable, slightly more hectic relationship with Thomas Kraft, Associate Publisher of T&T Clark. To him I am equally grateful. Special thanks go to our daughter Stephanie Schlingensiepen for her advice to me during this project and for reading through the final manuscript.

I dedicate this book to the memory of two people who have had a profound influence on my relationship with Britain and the United States: Mrs Jean Freeman, long-time resident of the City of Bath and the Revd Harold Wilke from New York. I am deeply indebted to both of them. When I arrived in Bath in 1951 my friends teased me, gently, about my English, which they said was straight from the King James' version of the Bible, spoken with a Scottish accent. Jean Freeman began to introduce me to English literature by giving me the novels of Anthony Trollope and Jane Austen, and later the works of Lord Byron, to read. Our extended families are friends to this day.

Harold Wilke was the ecumenical advisor of the United Church of Christ. Together we developed the international exchange programme. He was one of the most impressive people I have ever met. Born without arms, he led his life as if his disability had not existed. After the thalidomide scandal he advised governments all over the world on the necessary support for those who had been affected

My friendship with Bonhoeffer's friend Eberhard Bethge and his wife Renate taught me to appreciate how vital personal friendships are in the life of the Church. I would like to include in my dedication all those who have made my life richer with their friendship.

Ferdinand Schlingensiepen
Spring 2009

Translator's Preface

This English translation of Ferdinand Schlingensiepen's biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is appearing over sixty years after Bonhoeffer's death at the end of the Second World War. Yet there is more interest than ever in Bonhoeffer and in early twentieth-century German history. The fall of the Berlin Wall 20 years ago made available a great deal of archive material previously inaccessible from the West, and a new generation of historians is at work. There is even a new Hollywood version, *Valkyrie*, of the last attempt at a military coup against Hitler.

A noteworthy contribution to these studies is being made by the Bonhoeffer Society's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English* (DBWE), published by Fortress Press, translating the German scholarly edition of Bonhoeffer's complete works, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke* (DBW), published by Kaiser Verlag. Dr Schlingensiepen quotes generously from the DBW volumes, and from many other sources, so that general readers as well as scholars can hear Bonhoeffer and his contemporaries speaking in their own words. The challenge for the translator has been to track these quotations in DBWE or DBW and cite them clearly.

Volumes 1–10, 13 and 16 of the DBWE have already been published. Quotations from these volumes are cited in parentheses as follows: (DBWE vol. no., page nos.). For two of the forthcoming volumes, DBWE 8 and 12, final texts exist, and these have been kindly made available to the translator by Victoria Barnett, DBWE series editor; they have been cited as follows: (DBWE vol. no., section no./document no.). Texts from the remaining volumes 11, 14 and 15 could not be quoted from DBWE, and have therefore been translated provisionally from the DBW originals and cited as follows: (DBW vol. no., page nos.) See the complete DBWE series list, including forthcoming volumes, on pp. xxv–xxvii.

The numerous quotations from *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* by Eberhard Bethge, in the English version of 2000, revised and edited by Victoria J. Barnett, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, are cited as (DB-ER page no.).

For quotations from other works which do not exist in English translation, of which English titles are given only in brackets in the endnotes,

English versions have been provided by this translator. In these cases, page numbers cited are those of the German original.

Biblical texts are quoted from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicized edition (Oxford, 1995) except as indicated, or as used in a translation quoted from another work.

In translation from German to English, often no precise equivalents can be found for names of church governing bodies and titles of officials. *Oberkirchenrat* can be either a high-level council or the title of a member of such a council. A consistory can be the council with its administrative office at either national or regional level. Germans tend to think more hierarchically, express more respect for authority, and thus organize things differently from the style of most American churches. They also have a previous history of the churches of the Reformation (Lutheran, Reformed, United) being under government protection, and the laws that since the nineteenth century have guaranteed the rights of the churches were a major issue under the Nazi state.

The same lack of exact equivalents in English pertains to military ranks and commands. A *Generaloberst* such as Ludwig Beck, for example, is something like a four-star general and can be in command over many generals of lower rank. Field marshal is the highest rank, as in Britain. Hitler's military organization was confusing, and he often fiddled with it to keep it that way and guarantee his own power to micro-manage anything he wished.

The word 'minister' has been used for the head of a department in the national government, or in a provincial government, so Christian parish ministers are here called 'pastors', the usual Lutheran term in any case. 'Ordinands' are candidates for ordination in the final stage of their preparation as parish pastors.

The 'Chancellor' is, to this day, the 'Prime Minister' of the German national government.

Besides the Notes, Chronology, Bonhoeffer family tree and Index, five complete texts in English translation have been included in the Appendix. The most famous statement made by the Confessing Church of Germany under the Hitler regime is the Theological Declaration of Barmen. It was the basis for the resolutions made at Dahlem to organize the Confessing Church, which Bonhoeffer upheld and for which he struggled, as a 'Dahlemite', with friends and opponents. To this day, the Barmen Declaration is reprinted in hymnals of the German Evangelical Church, so that the witness of the Confessing Church may be easily at hand and

may not be forgotten. The translation here is that of Arthur C. Cochrane, in his book *The Church's Confession under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962).

Another text which German Protestants have in their hymnals is Bonhoeffer's last poem, written in prison at the end of 1944 for his fiancée, family and friends: 'By Powers of Good', here translated by Nancy Lukens. The 'Poems for Prisoners', which Bonhoeffer also wrote in prison, were duplicated and distributed by the prison chaplains as part of their ministry to the inmates of Tegel military prison, many of whom were condemned to death and executed. The translations here are by Lisa E. Dahill. All other translations of Bonhoeffer's poems quoted in this book are by Nancy Lukens. These English versions of the poems are all found in DBWE 8, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

I would like to thank Victoria Barnett of the Bonhoeffer Society in the USA; Augsburg Fortress Press, Minneapolis; Andover Harvard Theological Library and Widener Library at Harvard College, both in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for their help with access to the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English and other necessary texts.

Warm thanks also to the author, Dr Ferdinand Schlingensiefen, for his patient and genial accompaniment of my work; to our publisher, Thomas Kraft, at T&T Clark/Continuum Books, London; and for expert assistance, collegial counsel and support, to Clifford Green of the Bonhoeffer Society as well as Victoria Barnett, Nancy Lukens and my husband, Tom Best.

This is an important book for the peoples of Britain and the United States, especially in the churches. As Germany's opponents in the Second World War, it is good for us to know more about the courageous Germans who resisted the Nazi state from within – not only the martyrs and heroes such as Bonhoeffer, but the colleagues, church leaders, friends and families who helped. May our remembering them help to keep our peoples together in friendship, not least of all those of us who belong to the worldwide Church.

*Isabel Best
Belmont, Massachusetts
Lent 2009*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works in English (DBWE) Series List

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1. Ancestors, Childhood and Youth

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life was bounded by the two world wars of the twentieth century. On 4 February 1906 – a few years before the First World War – he and his twin sister were born in Breslau, Silesia, then part of Germany, now in Poland. On 9 April 1945, a few days before the end of the Second World War, he was put to death, on Hitler's orders, in Flossenbürg, Germany.

At Dietrich Bonhoeffer's birth, Germany was an empire. He remembered this clearly, especially since the family moved to Berlin, the capital, in 1912. What war means entered, like nothing else, into his awareness with the death of his second-eldest brother Walter, in 1918, after being wounded in battle. His mother's grief over the death of this son was among Dietrich's most vivid childhood memories.

During his formative years at school and university, Germany was a republic which was increasingly bitterly resented by a majority of the population, though not in Bonhoeffer's parents' home or by the people who visited there. Thus to have a different political opinion from that of the majority was nothing unusual to him. He was at university during a time of political controversy. A year in Spain and another in the USA widened his view of the world, including his view of Germany. There then followed his first work experiences as a university lecturer and as a pastor, before Hitler came to power, bringing the dictatorship which was to last 12 years and during which Dietrich Bonhoeffer became a convincing witness for the 'other Germany'.

Ancestors

'After all, everyone's got a family tree,' Bonhoeffer said to colleagues in London when researching one's ancestors became fashionable in Germany.¹ For the Bonhoeffers it was taboo to talk about one's ancestors or put on airs about them. But on one occasion an interesting exception was made. When the Gestapo informed Dietrich Bonhoeffer, on 9 September 1940, that the SS's Reich Headquarters had banned him from

speaking publicly anywhere in the Reich, he protested vigorously to the dreaded SS:

The reason for this ban is stated as 'activity subverting the people'. I reject this charge. My entire outlook, my work as well as my background, make it inconceivable for me to allow myself to be identified with groups warranting the stigma of such a charge. I am proud to belong to a family that has rendered outstanding service to the German people and nation for generations. Among my ancestors are Field Marshal Count Kalckreuth² and the two great German artists of the same name, the Jena church historian Karl von Hase, renowned in the entire scholarly world of the past century, and the Cauer family of sculptors; my uncle is Major General Count von der Goltz, who liberated the Baltic lands; his son, the state attorney Count Rüdiger von der Goltz, is my first cousin; Major General von Hase, currently on active military duty, is my uncle. My father has been a full university professor of medicine in Berlin for nearly thirty years and serves to the present day in distinguished public offices; his ancestors lived for centuries as highly esteemed craftsmen and councillors of the then Imperial City of Schwäbisch Hall, and even today our pictures hang proudly in the city's main church. My brothers and brothers-in-law serve in high government positions, and one of my brothers was killed in the First World War. It has been the aspiration of these men and their families to serve the German nation and people at all times and to risk their lives in this service. In conscious affirmation of this spiritual legacy and moral position of my family, I cannot accept the charge of 'activity subverting the people'. (DBWE 16, 75)

Thus we get to hear today, courtesy of the SS Headquarters, something about his ancestors from Dietrich Bonhoeffer himself.

An upper middle-class family

The sort of family in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer grew up is hard to imagine for all but a very few people today. Karl Bonhoeffer, about whose ancestors we have already heard a little, was from Württemberg in southwest Germany and a professor of psychiatry in Breslau and from 1912 onwards in Berlin; his wife Paula, née von Hase, came from a pastor's family. Her father had been chaplain in the court of Emperor Wilhelm II in Potsdam, but had asked to be discharged after two years. The family knew of two reasons which could have led to this: he had resisted the inclination of Wilhelm II to do his own preaching, and had dared to contradict the Emperor when he referred to the proletariat as a 'rabble'. After leaving his post, Karl von Hase became a church official, as a member of the consistory of the church province of Silesia, and an

honorary professor in the theology faculty of the University of Breslau. His wife Clara, who had been born Countess Kalkreuth, made her home a meeting-place for scholars and artists. A junior doctor named Karl Bonhoeffer turned up there one day, and said later that on seeing Paula von Hase for the first time he knew immediately that he would marry her. It is said of Bonhoeffer's parents that on their golden wedding anniversary they counted up all the days they had been apart during 50 years of marriage, and it didn't even amount to one month.

The upper middle-class Bonhoeffer household employed five servants, and was later joined by a chauffeur. Even in those days this was unusually grand; but the mother spent a great deal of time with her eight children. She was a trained teacher and gave the older five children their first schooling herself, along with some of the neighbours' children. In her view, if at all possible, one should not turn one's children over to strangers during their early years, which are so important for the development of imagination and character. The Bonhoeffer family agreed with the saying that German boys 'had their backs broken' twice in life; first in school and then in the military. At the end of each school year, Paula Bonhoeffer's pupils did brilliantly in the state examinations, and were even able to skip years of school. Like his brothers and sisters, Dietrich took his *Abitur* (school-leaving exam) early. The best way to get a picture of this large family – which included Grandmother Bonhoeffer – is to look through the family album, in which many interesting photos are preserved.

'True Berliners come from Silesia,' people used to say, and this applies to Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He remembered Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland), the city of his birth, as a paradise for children. The family lived in the suburb of Scheitnig, where his father was director of a psychiatric clinic, in a villa built in the 1870s, during the foundational period of modern industrial Germany. This house is now a guesthouse, and bears a plaque stating that Bonhoeffer lived there between the ages of three and six. The big garden was ideal for children to play in, and the house had, in addition to bedrooms and living room, a schoolroom where the mother taught the older children, a room for doing crafts and handiwork and, to the horror of the servants, also a room where live snakes, lizards, squirrels and pigeons were kept, and where a collection of bugs and butterflies was on display. This children's paradise also included a holiday house in Wölfelsgrund, where the children could have their father, too, all to themselves.



Family photo on the occasion of Karl Bonhoeffer's 75th birthday, 31 March 1943. Seated in front, left to right: Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Paula Bonhoeffer holding Walter Bonhoeffer, Karl Bonhoeffer holding Andreas Dress, Ursula Schleicher. Standing, first row, left to right: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Christine von Dohnanyi, Christoph von Dohnanyi, Friedrich Bonhoeffer, Christine Schleicher, Susanne Dress with Cornelia Bonhoeffer in front, Barbara von Dohnanyi, Michael Dress in front, Dorothee Schleicher, Klaus von Dohnanyi, Thomas Bonhoeffer in front, Rüdiger Schleicher, Emmi Bonhoeffer, Klaus Bonhoeffer, Walter Dress. Back at left, Eberhard Bethge, to the left of the door, Jürg Zutt with his wife, in front of the right door-jamb, Hans Gerhard Creutzfeld and Ferdinand Sauerbruch, further right Maria Czeppan and Friedrich Justus Perels

For Dietrich Bonhoeffer, his family was the centre of his life, to which he returned again and again. In the above photograph we see him (far left) at his father's 75th birthday celebration. Not all of the Bonhoeffer parents' 18 grandchildren are to be seen here, but there are friends offering congratulations, such as Ferdinand Sauerbruch, then the most famous surgeon in Germany (back row, third from right). It is a photo which could illustrate an essay on the patriarchy of a bygone era. But if one knows the family history, this image of a big, happy gathering already foreshadows something quite different. Five days after the picture was taken, three members of the family, Hans and Christine von Dohnanyi and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, were arrested. Four family members were murdered, on Hitler's orders, shortly before the end of the war: Rüdiger Schleicher, Hans von Dohnanyi, and Klaus and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The

parents' faces, in the photograph taken little more than two years later, are deeply marked by their experiences.

But let us turn back to the early pages. The albums of almost all such large families of the time have photographs such as the one on the next page, when the Bonhoeffers were still leading a happy and carefree life in Breslau.

Eight children in ten years was not at all the rule even then. Karl Bonhoeffer wrote in 1909:

In spite of having eight children, which surprises many people at the present time, we do not have the feeling that it is too many. The house is spacious, the children have developed normally, we parents are not too old, and we try not to spoil them but to give them a happy childhood. (DB-ER 16)



Dietrich Bonhoeffer's parents after the war

The eldest was Karl-Friedrich (1899–1957). He was to become professor of physical chemistry at the early age of 31. Dietrich was particularly attached to him, and – as their lively correspondence showed – respected him all his life as the eldest brother. Walter (1899–1918), the second son, seems to have been his mother's favourite. The further history of this big family reveals that Dietrich, the youngest son, later occupied the place of this second-eldest brother in her affections. For many years, parents, brothers and sisters mourned Walter, who had died so prematurely, and began each year's Christmas celebration with a visit to his grave. Klaus (1901–1945) became a lawyer. His father found him 'the most difficult but also the most amusing and intelligent' of his children (DB-ER 18).

The three eldest sons were followed by two daughters, very different from one another. Ursula (1902–1983) took the part of 'mother' to the other children when they were on their own. She was warmhearted and had a strong sense of duty. In a novel that Bonhoeffer was trying to write while in Tegel Prison, he included a loving portrayal of this sister with whom he shared a deeply trusting relationship. The next younger sister, Christine (1903–1965) was altogether different; lively, intellectually curious and critical, she enjoyed outshining her schoolmates and fellow



Bonhoeffer's parents and their children

students. For Sabine (1906–1999) and Susanne (1909–1991), Dietrich was the 'big brother' who was fond of pointing out, as a child, that he was 10 minutes older than his twin sister. But both younger sisters said of him later that, from early on, he was their knight in shining armour who protected them, so they were happy to let him play the role of older brother.

In the picture, Dietrich with his chin in his hands, looks somewhat subdued, as if it wasn't that easy to have five older brothers and sisters as well as his parents in authority over him. It was not easy, and would take a long time, for him to find his role in the family. There were always 'the older ones' who were already so far ahead of him, and could therefore attract their parents' attention in ways not yet open to 'the little ones'. And it is very possible for younger children in such a large family just to run along with the rest, and to develop feelings of loneliness without the parents suspecting it. The memoirs of Bonhoeffer's youngest sister Susanne



Dietrich at the age of 11



The Bonhoeffer home in Berlin-Grünwald, Wangenheimstraße 14 and the holiday home in Friedrichsbrunn/Harz

illustrate this very well.³ In a 'New Year's Eve Journal' kept by their father to record the family history, the entry for 1911 says: 'The twins this year are not yet in school, both however want to be useful around the house and Dietrich is an avid learner. Hopefully this will remain so' (DB-ER 19). References to the younger children became shorter and shorter. Four years later, there is this brief entry: 'Dietrich does his work independently and tidily. He likes fighting, and does a great deal of it' (DB-ER 24).

If Bonhoeffer himself said later that he was terribly ambitious (DB-ER 204), this must have something to do with his role as sixth child and youngest son. It is a role against which one can rebel, but which nonetheless continues to be defining; one can catch up with the older ones in one area or another, but this will never happen without ambition. So, for example, Dietrich was astonishingly quick to take over from his eldest brother as accompanist on the piano. His sisters and mother enjoyed singing the songs of the Romantic period. At the age of 12, Dietrich was already playing Mozart sonatas, and not long afterwards he would take the leading role in musical evenings at home. When the siblings and their friends went hiking, he took his guitar along.

One of the most important persons in Bonhoeffer's life was, from his early childhood, his grandmother in Tübingen, Julie Bonhoeffer, née Tafel. She was politically alert, had been interested in women's issues from early on, and like his parents set an example for making one's own decisions as to what is right and what one should do. When, on 1 April 1933, the Nazis declared an official boycott of Jewish businesses, this 91-year-old lady went shopping at the leading department store in Berlin, the '*Kaufhaus des Westens*', walking through the cordon of SA men in front of it to demonstrate against this injustice. She had moved to Berlin with her housekeeper in 1925, occupying a couple of rooms in the Bonhoeffers' house, where the



The much beloved grandmother Julie Bonhoeffer



Dietrich Bonhoeffer with his guitar

grandchildren loved to be invited to tea. Since she was a great reader, they could also discuss the latest works of literature with her, for example those of Thomas Mann.⁴

At a commemoration of Bonhoeffer in Geneva, Switzerland in 1976, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, the well-known physicist and philosopher, said of him:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one of those *homines religiosi* who make the decision to offer themselves to the service of God early in childhood, in a way that escapes the observation of their fellows. Certainly there were theological precursors in that cultivated, liberal, upper middle-class family; in its well-ordered but free family life, evening prayers with the children were still customary although Sunday church-going was no longer the practice ... A child can, without detriment to his natural development as a child, have a silent and intensive life with God in which the environment only provides him with the culturally distinctive patterns in which he can interpret and cultivate this inner experience. Some such experience, begun in childhood and probably never fully disclosed to another human soul was, it seems to me, the vital spring of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's entire life right until his death.⁵

However, the youngest sister's memoirs show that the 'three little ones' had a sort of religious community amongst themselves from an early age, of which the rest of the family apparently were hardly

aware. Their nanny, Maria Horn, affectionately known as 'Hörnchen' to the whole family, may have had something to do with this. She was considered a member of the family, was respected by all in her Moravian piety,⁶ and for the twins and especially for Susanne was an important influence in their upbringing. 'She was teased a lot, and loved even more.'

In their make-believe games, the three youngest were 'always poor people, never kings or counts or fairies'. A special favourite was the 'criminal who is converted'. At bedtime they prayed together and agreed to 'think about "forever"', the last word of the Lord's Prayer. Dietrich had a phase in which he imagined himself dying in faith, and everyone mourning for him. But when Susanne had similar imaginings a few years later, he said to her, 'You'd just love that, wouldn't you, to lie in a box and do nothing all day. Life is pretty hard, but it gets better with practice.'

Their summer house in the Harz Mountains, which their parents had bought in place of the house in Wölfelsgrund, played a large part in the lives of all the Bonhoeffer children. It was the setting for the loveliest memories which Susanne Dress relates, for example how they came to know the family that looked after the house when none of them were there. Mother Bonhoeffer had told her daughter Susanne that she could celebrate her seventh birthday in Friedrichsbrunn and invite whomever she liked. In the end there were 57 children. It was 1916 and wartime, but the whole family helped to make it a day glowing with happiness. It ended with a procession with paper lanterns, then the parents came to collect the young guests, but five children were left. Paula Bonhoeffer took them home herself, and found Mr and Mrs S. arm in arm in front of a shack. They had not come to fetch their children because they were too poorly dressed. They were considered 'outsiders' because they came from another village, 10 kilometres away, and had no work and no money.

By the time she got home, my mother already had a plan. We could clear out the big washhouse ... My big brothers didn't really need a workshop in there any more. By adding one interior wall we could make it two rooms plus kitchen, and would have people on the property who looked out for the curtains when we weren't there ... As usual, Father was content with this.

The curtains and other things had been stolen in previous winters. But the S. family didn't steal anything, they simply 'borrowed'. He was a carpenter and probably also a locksmith. No matter how tightly we closed the shutters, or put safety locks on the doors, he could always get in during our absence ... When we

arrived, we would simply go and say, 'May I please have the big zinc tub and the white bucket, the grater and the big kettle, that you borrowed,' and we got it all back.

Not even when mattresses were borrowed and came back full of fleas did this disturb the Bonhoeffers' relations with the S. family, which by then had nine children. 'We loved them in spite of everything. They worked hard and didn't really have any vices, just never enough money.'

In the shadow of the Great War

The twins were taught by Käthe Horn, sister of 'Hörnchen', for their first year of school. After that Dietrich was sent, like his brothers, to the Friedrich Werder Gymnasium (college preparatory school) in Berlin, which also had a primary school. All the way through to his school-leaving examinations, he never found schoolwork very demanding.

The event which loomed over his early school years was the beginning of the First World War. Although his parents did not share in the enthusiasm for the war that was initially widespread among the population, eight-year-old Dietrich followed the early successes of the German troops with childish patriotism. His older brothers showed him how to mark the progress of the fronts from day to day on a map with coloured pins. From 1916 onwards, when it became harder to supply the population with food, he developed unexpected talents. His older brothers strictly refused to eat black market bread or meat, but Dietrich became, as his father noted in the 'New Year's Eve' book, the family's 'messenger and food scout' (DB-ER 26). For his mother, to whom it was more important that her patriotic sons be adequately nourished, he found out where things were available and soon knew all the black market prices. These activities of his were kept secret from his older brothers.

It was in these years that Dietrich became an expert on wild mushrooms. During holidays in Friedrichsbrunn one could gather mushrooms to one's heart's content, dry them and take them back to Berlin along with the berries which had been picked and made into jam. When Dietrich spent holidays with his cousin Hans Christoph von Hase, he gleaned ears of grain in the fields, had them milled and brought a sackful of flour home with him. That others were not so fortunate was something he always confronted anew on the way to school, and spoke of later in the United States.

The number of the suicides increased in a terrifying way. I remember very well, I had on the way to my school to pass by a bridge and in the winters from 1917 to 1919 almost every morning when I came to this bridge I saw a group of people standing on the river and everybody, who passed by, knew what had happened. These impressions were hard for young boys. (DBWE 10, 414, original in English)

None of this detracted from Bonhoeffer's school career; it was taken for granted that he was one of the best pupils. But it soon became evident that his interests were different from those of his scientifically inclined brothers. He liked to read 'exciting books', and developed very early a love of German literature. At 14 he read Theodor Fontane's *Der Stechlin* and was enthralled by its 'brilliantly portrayed' characters (DBWE 9, 36).

In March 1916 the Bonhoeffers moved to a large one-family house in Grunewald, not far from the Halensee city railway station. Towards the end of his rule, Bismarck, the nineteenth-century first Chancellor of the German empire, gave over the northern part of the state-owned forest between Berlin and the imperial city of Potsdam for the development of an exclusive residential district. Well-to do merchants built fine houses there and scholars and artists found properties to rent. The prominent publisher Samuel Fischer lived there, as did theologian Adolf von Harnack and his brother-in-law, the historian Hans Delbrück. The Bonhoeffers could hardly have found more stimulating surroundings in Berlin. But in 1916 it was the garden that attracted them most, where one could grow vegetables and even keep a goat to provide the family with milk. In the holidays the goat was taken along to Friedrichsbrunn on the train.

As clever as he was at helping to provide for the family, Dietrich was still a normal 10-year-old, as a letter to his cousin Hans Christoph shows. He urges his cousin to write to him, reminding him that he is counting on an invitation for the holidays, without which he can't come, and then what would become of 'our wonderful plans'?

We are building an underground cave and tunnel [in the garden] ... It's there so that in case we fight with Klaus again, we can either bring reinforcements from the cave ... or attack the enemy from behind. We're building a wall in front of the cave and a pit, and a very deep hole. Then when someone falls in, we can drag him into the hole. (DB-ER 28)

The expression 'bring reinforcements' came from reading the news from the front, and his rivalry, at age 10, with his 15-year-old brother Klaus is unmistakable. Karl-Friedrich and Walter were looking forward to joining

the real army as soon as possible; it had been a long time since they had taken part in any battles in the garden.

The year 1917 was the one in which, through the entry of the United States into the war, it began to appear likely that Germany would be defeated. Starting with the 'turnip winter' (when there was nothing else but turnips to be had), it became a year of hunger which no one who experienced it could ever forget. Bonhoeffer later described this nationwide hunger to church groups in the United States, when he was studying there on a scholarship. But nobody in Germany wanted to believe that they could lose the war. General Ludendorff, Hindenburg's chief of staff, was the most powerful man in the empire and was then already trying to organize 'total war'. The propaganda left no one in doubt that the Emperor and Germany's just cause would be victorious in the end. During this time Karl-Friedrich and Walter were called up, and after a brief period of training were sent to the front. During an advance on 23 April 1918, Walter, an officer cadet, was severely wounded. On 28 April, three hours before his death in the field hospital, he dictated a last letter to his family:

My technique of not thinking about the pain had to serve here too. But there are more interesting things in the world at present than my wound. Mount Kemmel and its possible consequences, and today's news that Ypres has been taken, give us great cause for hope. I dare not think about my poor regiment, which has suffered so in the last few days, but wonder how it's going for the other officer cadets. Thinking of you with longing, my dears, every minute of the long days and nights. Love from so far away, Walter.

The death of this son was more than Paula Bonhoeffer could bear. For weeks she lay in bed, as if paralysed, in the home of the Schönes next door and was screened off from everyone. The father kept silent and quietly left the room whenever Walter's death was mentioned. For 10 years there were no more entries in his New Year's Eve Journal. Twelve-year-old Dietrich could never forget his mother's wild suffering. Family holidays ceased. The three youngest children were sent to the seashore, on the Baltic, with Maria Horn. His sister Susanne writes that Dietrich's behaviour there was 'rather rude', trying to get over Walter's death. In Boltenhagen they saw two air force pilots, both accompanied by their fiancées, take off in their aeroplanes, gain altitude and then collide in mid-air. One of the pilots survived, but had to be stopped from trying to drown himself in the sea. Susanne Dreß, in her memoirs, remembered

with admiration that Maria Horn did not gloss over this accident, but rather discussed it quite realistically with the three children. But one evening after their return to Berlin they heard 'Hörnchen' sobbing, and so they learned that the King had abdicated. Klaus had witnessed this as an 18-year-old soldier at General Headquarters. None of the Bonhoeffers shed a tear for King Wilhelm II. To the contrary: Karl-Friedrich, then in the Charité Hospital with less serious wounds, had become a USPD⁷ sympathizer. A republic was now proclaimed in Germany.

Bonhoeffer had continued to attend the Friedrich Werder Gymnasium until 1918. Now he transferred to the elite Grunewald Gymnasium, to which he could walk. On his way there he saw some of the street fighting during the 'Spartacus Uprising' (November Revolution), and began to be interested in politics, with youthful excitement. He wrote to his grandmother that suddenly in the middle of the night the family had soldiers billeted with them, an officer with his private, and that they had been able to hear the fighting around Halensee Station.

Karl-Friedrich has been discharged from the Charité. He would like to be part of this somehow, but Mama and Papa are not yet ready to consent. At present, thank heaven, the government troops are getting the better of it. Our holidays have been extended to 17 January. Either because of the unrest or because of the coal shortage.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer at school

Coal was scarce everywhere. During that period the Bonhoeffers heated only two rooms in their house: the kitchen, where conversation was allowed, and a living room, which was kept quiet for study. Like most Germans, Dietrich at 13 was angered by Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, which he could still recite from memory years later.

The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies.

He asked his parents: 'What do you think of the terms of peace? I hardly believe that one can accept them in their present form ... I hope that Ebert will call a general vote, so that he doesn't have to bear the responsibility alone ...' (DBWE 9, 29).

During this time Bonhoeffer joined the Boy Scouts. He wanted to do what his schoolmates were doing for once, instead of always following his brothers. At first he liked it. At ceremonies he was asked to play the piano, and he also enjoyed the sports and field games. But then he must have found that there was a bit too much marching, and when his family bought a collapsible rowing boat he left the Scouts and went along with his brothers and sisters again.

In the spring of 1921, the sum of reparations demanded by the Allies was settled at 132 billion Reichsmarks – in January they had still been saying 269 billion – but this time there was an ultimatum, that the Ruhr industrial region would be occupied if Germany did not accept this demand. Fifteen-year-old Dietrich mentioned this problem in a letter to his grandmother, in which he also asked what people in southern Germany thought about the assassination of the Roman Catholic 'Centre' politician Matthias Erzberger. The following year when Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau was assassinated, not far from Grunewald Gymnasium, Bonhoeffer expressed his opinion very decidedly both in class and in a letter to his twin sister: 'What a pack of right-wing Bolshevik scoundrels! He was murdered merely because he did not appeal to some conceited, idiotic ass. People are responding with crazed excitement and rage here in Berlin. They are having fistfights in the Reichstag' (DBWE 9, 49).

Marion Winter, later Countess Yorck and a member of the Resistance, was in Bonhoeffer's class and hers is one of the few accounts we have of his schooldays. In her memoirs she described her relationship with him.⁸ For

her, Rathenau's murder represented the shattering of an idyll. She wrote that about half the pupils at the Grunewald school were Jewish, but that religious loyalties played no part in their friendships. Like the Bonhoeffers, she herself had been brought up 'Christian, but not in the church'. Marion Winter's best friend, Ursula Andreae, was a niece of Rathenau. She sat in the same row in the classroom as Bonhoeffer, and Countess Yorck wrote that the three of them formed 'a nice clique'. Marion Winter was invited, with or without her friend, to dinner at the Bonhoeffers' about once a month, and Dietrich dined at their homes about as frequently.

Ursula Andreae, who was Jewish, decided like Bonhoeffer to take Hebrew as an elective subject, and like him she later also studied Protestant theology. Mr Kappus, the teacher of Hebrew, had been a tutor to princes before coming to the Grunewald Gymnasium. That sort of thing counted for something in those days. It was said that he spoke 11 foreign languages.

Going to the theatre together was an important activity for the three friends. For example, they saw Shakespeare's *Richard III* as produced by Leopold Jessner, with Fritz Kortner in the title role; both were famous names in the theatre at the time.

For a young person from an academically inclined upper middle-class family, which was 'Christian, but no longer in the church', to decide to study theology was as rare then as it is nowadays. Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker thought of Bonhoeffer's father and brothers as 'intellectual exponents of the modern mind', a class of people who 'have moved further and further away from the substance of the Christian faith'.⁹ However, it was not typical that the mother gave each of her eight children three years of serious religious instruction. She might well have been pleased, since she was a pastor's daughter, that her son Dietrich wanted a theological career; his father was surprised, and his brothers could be openly scornful. It didn't fit the family image. The children had lots of other opportunities open to them.

Bonhoeffer completed his schooling in March 1923, having been given a solid grounding in the humanities and a thorough familiarity with classical German literature. For his favourite teacher, Walther Kranz, an outstanding scholar of classical antiquity, he voluntarily wrote an essay on 'Catullus and Horace as Lyrical Poets'. He passed his *Abitur*, the school-leaving exam required for university entrance, with the top grade of 'very good'. Only his handwriting was considered 'unsatisfactory' by his teachers. He had just turned 17 a month before.