

A black and white close-up portrait of a man with short hair, wearing round glasses. He has a serious expression and is looking slightly to the right of the camera. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights on his forehead and nose, and deep shadows on the sides of his face.

FOREWORD BY TIMOTHY J. KELLER,  
NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR  
OF THE REASON FOR GOD

# BONHOEFFER

PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY

ERIC METAXAS

NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF AMAZING GRACE

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—MARTIN DOBLMEIER, FILMMAKER, *BONHOEFFER*

“A captivating and inspiring read from start to finish. Sets the record straight on Bonhoeffer’s commitment to Scripture and his unyielding passion for truth that led him to give up his life in the battle to save the Jews of Europe. Buy it. *This book could change your life*.”

—JAMES N. LANE, FOUNDER, NEW CANAAN SOCIETY; FORMER GENERAL PARTNER,  
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Eric Metaxas has given us a portrait of Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose prophetic life in troubled times will chasten, clarify, and challenge our own. *Readers will be caught up in this vivid, lucid story* that draws deeply from the intellectual wells and poetic energy that inspired Bonhoeffer.

Some readers may not agree with all of Metaxas’s arguments about Bonhoeffer, but that is not the point of this book. The point is to unsettle, to provoke, and to inspire. *Crammed with insight, outrage, and urgency*, this book positions Bonhoeffer where he belongs, in the ranks of the great Christian humanists who have struggled against the prevailing winds of culture to faithfully and bravely interpret Christianity for their historical moment.

This is also a *deeply humanizing book*, full of vignettes that reveal Bonhoeffer as a son, as a lover, as a pastor, a friend, all in the context of the deadly work for which he is most remembered: resistance

the growing menace of Nazism.

—CALEB J. D. MASKSKELL, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR, JONATHAN EDWARDS CENTER  
YALE UNIVERSITY (2004-2007), DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION, PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

Eric Metaxas has delivered a masterwork of compelling literary and historical proportions.

This extraordinary biography exposes the formative impressions in Bonhoeffer's life that reveal him as a gifted, complex, humanely sensitive 20th century figure responding to the call of God and his unfolding spiritual understanding of his times. Witness his uniquely personal engagement with Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church and the Black spirituality, music, and racial concerns of the 1930s—and his desire to impart renewed relevance to the Church with a Biblical understanding of social justice. Metaxas traces the crisis of conscience that leads him back to his fate in Germany, a pacifist with a calling to stop a madman at any cost.

Against the inexorable rise of Nazism, Bonhoeffer fought the acquiescence of the evangelical state church to Hitler's demands. The lessons for the 21st century will not be lost here. Bonhoeffer's brilliant life spans to another generation of readers through Metaxas' inimitable style and contemporary sensibility. This book begs to be read and discussed widely today.

—GORDON RIDDLE PENNINGTON, CEO, BURNING MEDIA GROUP

As in his previous biography, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery*, Metaxas in *Bonhoeffer* brings to life the extraordinary and selfless accomplishments of a true hero. Metaxas has the rare skill of taking the mundane but crucial details of life and weaving them into a *history that flows like a novel*. For anyone interested in what the strength of belief and conviction can accomplish, *Bonhoeffer* is an essential read.

—GERALD SCHROEDER, PHD, ISRAELI PHYSICIST AND TEACHER AT THE AISH HADASSA TORAH COLLEGE OF JEWISH STUDIES IN JERUSALEM, AUTHOR OF *GENESIS AND THE BIG BANG AND THE SCIENCE OF GOD*.



BONHOEFFER

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PASTOR, MARTYR, PROPHET, SPY

A RIGHTEOUS GENTILE VS. THE THIRD REICH

ERIC METAXAS



NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO



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*Zum Andenken an meinen Großvater*

*Erich Kraegen (1912 - 1944)*

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*“Denn das ist der Wille des, der mich gesandt hat, daß,  
wer den Sohn sieht und glaubt an ihn, habe das ewige Leben;  
und ich werde ihn auferwecken am Jüngsten Tage.”*

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# FOREWORD

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I'm delighted that my friend Eric Metaxas has penned this volume on Dietrich Bonhoeffer. The English-speaking public needs to know far more than it does about his thought as well as his life. When I became a Christian in college, Bonhoeffer's *Cost of Discipleship* was one of the first books I read, followed not long after by his *Life Together*. Though this second book is perhaps the finest single volume I have ever read on the character of Christian community, it was the first book that set me on a lifelong journey to understand the meaning of grace.

It is impossible to understand Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge* without becoming acquainted with the shocking capitulation of the German church to Hitler in the 1930s. How could the "church of Luther," that great teacher of the gospel, have ever come to such a place? The answer is that the true gospel, summed up by Bonhoeffer as *costly grace*, had been lost. On the one hand, the church had become marked by formalism. That meant going to church and hearing that God just loves and forgives everyone, so it doesn't really matter much how you live. Bonhoeffer called this *cheap* grace. On the other hand, there was legalism, or salvation by law and good works. Legalism meant that God loves you because you have pulled yourself together and are trying to live a good, disciplined life.

Both of these impulses made it possible for Hitler to come to power. The formalists in Germany may have seen things that bothered them, but saw no need to sacrifice their safety to stand up to them. Legalists responded by having pharisaical attitudes toward other nations and races that approved Hitler's policies. But as one, Germany lost hold of the brilliant balance of the gospel that Luther so persistently expounded—"We are saved by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone." That is, we are saved, not by anything we do, but by grace. Yet if we have truly understood and believed the gospel, it will *change* what we do and how we live.

By the time of Hitler's ascension, much of the German church understood grace only as abstract acceptance—"God forgives; that's his job." But we know that true grace comes to us by costly sacrifice. And if God was willing to go to the cross and endure such pain and absorb such a cost in order to save us, then we must live sacrificially as we serve others. Anyone who truly understands how God's grace comes to us will have a changed life. That's the gospel, not salvation by law, or by cheap grace, but by costly grace. Costly grace changes you from the inside out. Neither law nor cheap grace can do that.

This lapse couldn't happen to us, today, surely, could it? Certainly it could. We still have a lot of legalism and moralism in our churches. In reaction to that, many Christians want to talk only about God's love and acceptance. They don't like talking about Jesus' death on the cross to satisfy divine wrath and justice. Some even call it "divine child abuse." Yet if they are not careful, they run the risk of falling into the belief in "cheap grace"—a noncostly love from a non-holy God who just loves and accepts us as we are. That will never change anyone's life.

So it looks like we still need to listen to Bonhoeffer and others who go deep in discussing the nature of the gospel.

Timothy J. Keller  
New York Times best-selling author of *The Reason for God*

## 27 JULY 1945, LONDON

*We are troubled on every side, yet not distressed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; cast down, but not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our body. For we which live are always delivered unto death for Jesus' sake, that the life also of Jesus might be made manifest in our mortal flesh. So then death worketh in us, but life in you.*

—2 CORINTHIANS 4:8-12

Peace had at last returned to Europe. Her familiar face—once evilly contorted and frightening—was again at rest, noble and fresh. What she had been through would take years to understand. It was as though she had undergone a terribly protracted exorcism, one that had extracted from her the last farthing. But in the very end, protesting with shrieks as they went, the legions of demons were driven out.

The war had been over for two months. The tyrant took his own life in a gray bunker beneath his shattered capital, and the Allies declared victory.

Slowly, slowly, life in Britain turned to the task of restoring itself. Then, as if on cue, summer arrived. It was the first summer of peace in six years. But as if to prove that the whole thing hadn't been a dream or a nightmare, there were constant fresh reminders of what had happened. And these were as awful as anything that had gone before. Often they were worse. In the early part of the summer, the ghastly news of the death camps emerged along with the unfathomable atrocities that the Nazis had visited upon their victims in the hellish outposts of their short-lived empire.

Rumors of such things circulated throughout the war, but now the reality was confirmed by photographs, newsreel footage, and eyewitness accounts from the soldiers who liberated the camps in April during the last days of the war. The depth of these horrors had not been known or imagined, and it was almost too much for the war-fatigued British public to absorb. Their hatred of the Germans was confirmed and reconfirmed afresh with every nauseating detail. The public reeled at the very evilness of the evil.

At the beginning of the war, it was possible to separate the Nazis from the Germans and recognize that not all Germans were Nazis. As the clash between the two nations wore on, and as more and more English fathers and sons and brothers died, distinguishing the difference became more difficult. Eventually the difference vanished altogether. Realizing he needed to fuel the British war effort, Prime Minister Winston Churchill fused the Germans and the Nazis into a single hated enemy, the better to defeat it swiftly and end the unrelenting nightmare.

When Germans working to defeat Hitler and the Nazis contacted Churchill and the British government, hoping for assistance to defeat their common enemy from the inside—hoping to tell the world that some Germans trapped inside the Reich felt much as they did—they were rebuffed. No one was interested in their overtures. It was too late. They couldn't participate in such evils and, when it was convenient, try to settle for a separate peace. For the purposes of the war effort, Churchill maintained the fiction that there were no good Germans. It would even be said that the only good German—if one needed to use the phrase—was a dead German. That lack of nuance was also part of the hellishness of war.

But now the war was over. And even as the full, unspeakable evil of the Third Reich was coming to light, the other side of things had to be seen too. Part of the restoration to peacetime thinking was the

ability to again see beyond the blacks and whites of the war, to again discern nuance and shade shadows and colors.

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And so today in Holy Trinity Church—just off the Brompton Road in London—a service was taking place that was incomprehensible to some. To many others it was distasteful and disturbing, especially to those who had lost loved ones during the war. The memorial service being held today on British soil and being broadcast on the BBC was for a German who had died three months earlier. The word of his demise so slowly staggered out of the war's fog and rubble that only recently had any of his friends and family learned of it. Most of them still knew nothing about it. But here in London were gathered those few who did.

In the pews were the man's thirty-nine-year-old twin sister, her half-Jewish husband, and their two girls. They had slipped out of Germany before the war, driving at night across the border into Switzerland. The dead man took part in arranging their illegal flight—although that was among the most negligible of his departures from National Socialist orthodoxy—and he helped establish them in London, where they settled.

The man counted among his friends a number of prominent persons, including George Bell, the bishop of Chichester. Bell arranged the service, for he had known and loved the man being honored. The bishop met him years before the war when the two were engaged in ecumenical efforts, trying to warn Europe against the designs of the Nazis, then trying to rescue Jews, and finally trying to bring news of the German resistance to the attention of the British government. Just hours before his execution in Flossenbürg concentration camp, the man directed his last words to this bishop. The Sunday he spoke them to a British officer, who was imprisoned with him, after he performed his last service and preached his last sermon. This officer was liberated and brought those last words and the news of the man's death across Europe with him.

Across the English Channel, across France, and across Germany, in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin, in a three-story house at 43 Marienburgerallee, an elderly couple sat by their radio. In her time the wife had given birth to eight children, four boys and four girls. The second son had been killed in the First War, and for a whole year his young mother had been unable to function. Twenty-seven years later, a second war would take two more boys from her. The husband was the most prominent psychiatrist in Germany. They had both opposed Hitler from the beginning and were proud of their sons and sons-in-law who had been involved in the conspiracy against him. They all knew the danger. But when the war at last ended, news of their two sons was slow to arrive in Berlin. A month earlier they had finally heard of the death of their third son, Klaus. But about their youngest son, Dietrich, they had heard nothing. Someone claimed to have seen him alive. Then a neighbor told them that the BBC would the next day broadcast a memorial service in London. It was for Dietrich.

At the appointed hour, the old couple turned on their radio. Soon enough the service was announced for their son. That was how they came to know of his death.

As the couple took in the hard news that the good man who was their son was now dead, so too many English took in the hard news that the dead man who was a German was good. Thus did the world again begin to reconcile itself to itself.

The man who died was engaged to be married. He was a pastor and a theologian. And he was executed for his role in the plot to assassinate Hitler.

This is his story.

# CHAPTER 1

## FAMILY AND CHILDHOOD

*The rich world of his ancestors set the standards for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's own life. It gave him a certainty of judgment and manner that cannot be acquired in a single generation. He grew up in a family that believed the essence of learning lay not in a formal education but in the deeply rooted obligation to be guardians of a great historical heritage and intellectual tradition.*

—EBERHARD BETHGE

In the winter of 1896, before the aforementioned older couple had met, they were invited to attend an “open evening” at the house of the physicist Oscar Meyer. “There,” wrote Karl Bonhoeffer years later, “I met a young, fair, blue-eyed girl whose bearing was so free and natural, and whose expression was so open and confident, that as soon as she entered the room she took me captive. This moment when I first laid eyes upon my future wife remains in my memory with an almost mystical force.”

Karl Bonhoeffer had come to Breslau—today Wrocław in Poland—three years earlier, to work as the assistant to Karl Wernicke, the internationally renowned professor of psychiatry. Life consisted of working at the clinic and socializing with a few friends from Tübingen, the charming university town where he had grown up. But after that memorable winter evening, his life would change dramatically. For one thing, he immediately began ice-skating on the canals in the mornings, hoping to meet—and often meeting—the captivating blue-eyed girl he had first beheld that evening. She was a teacher, and her name was Paula von Hase. They married on March 5, 1898, three weeks shy of the groom's thirtieth birthday. The bride was twenty-two.

Both of them—doctor and teacher—came from fabulously illustrious backgrounds. Paula Bonhoeffer's parents and family were closely connected to the emperor's court at Potsdam. Her aunt Pauline became a lady-in-waiting to Crown Princess Victoria, wife of Frederick III. Her father, Karl Alfred von Hase, had been a military chaplain, and in 1889 he became chaplain to Kaiser Wilhelm I but resigned after criticizing the kaiser's description of the proletariat as a “pack of dogs.”

Paula's grandfather, Karl August von Hase, loomed large in the family and had been a famous theologian in Jena, where he taught for sixty years and where his statue still stands today. He had been called to his post by Goethe himself—then a minister under the Duke of Weimar—and met privately with the eighty-year-old national treasure, who was composing his *Faust, Part Two*. Karl August's textbook on the history of dogma was still used by theological students in the twentieth century. Toward the end of his life, he was awarded a hereditary peerage by the Grand Duke of Weimar and personal peerage by the king of Württemberg.

The maternal side of Paula's family included artists and musicians. Her mother, Clara von Hase, nee Countess Kalkreuth (1851-1903), took piano lessons from Franz Liszt and Clara Schumann, wife of the composer. She bequeathed her love of music and singing to her daughter, and these would play a vital role in the Bonhoeffers' lives. Clara's father, Count Stanislaus Kalkreuth (1820-94), was a painter known for his large Alpine landscapes. Although from a family of military aristocrats and landed gentry, this count married into the Cauers family of sculptors and became director of the Grand Duke's School of Arts in Weimar. His son, Count Leopold Kalkreuth, improved upon his father's success as a painter; his works of poetical realism today hang in museums throughout Germany. The von Hases were also related to the socially and intellectually prominent Yorck von Wartenburgs, and they spent much time in their society. Count Hans Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg\* was a philosopher whose famous correspondence with Wilhelm Dilthey developed a hermeneutical philosophy of



history, which influenced Martin Heidegger.

The lineage of Karl Bonhoeffer was no less impressive. The family traced itself to 1403 in the annals of Nymwegen on the Waal River in the Netherlands, near the German border. In 1513, Caspar van den Boenhoff left the Netherlands to settle in the German city of Schwäbisch Hall. The family was afterward called Bonhöffer, retaining the umlaut until about 1800. *Bonhöffer* means “bean farmer” and the Bonhöffer coat of arms, still prominent on buildings around Schwäbisch Hall,<sup>\*</sup> pictures a lion holding a beanstalk on a blue background. Eberhard Bethge tells us that Dietrich Bonhoeffer sometimes wore a signet ring bearing this family crest.

The Bonhoeffers were among the first families of Schwäbisch Hall for three centuries. The earliest generations were goldsmiths; later generations included doctors, pastors, judges, professors, and lawyers. Through the centuries, seventy-eight council members and three mayors in Schwäbisch Hall were Bonhöffers. Their importance and influence may also be seen in the *Michaelskirche* (St. Michael’s Church), where Bonhöffers are marmorally and otherwise memorialized in baroque and rococo sculptures and epitaphs. In 1797, Karl’s grandfather, Sophonias Bonhoeffer, was the last of the family born there. Napoleon’s invasion in 1806 ended the free city status of Schwäbisch Hall and scattered the family, though it remained a shrine to which subsequent umlautless generations repaired. Karl Bonhoeffer’s father took his son to the medieval town many times and schooled his son in the details of their patrician history, down to the “famous black oak staircase in the Bonhoeffer house on the Herrengasse” and the portrait of the “lovely Bonhoeffer woman” that hung in the church, with a copy in the Bonhoeffers’ home during Dietrich’s childhood. Karl Bonhoeffer did the same for his own sons.

Karl Bonhoeffer’s father, Friedrich Ernst Philipp Tobias Bonhoeffer (1828-1907), was a high-ranking judiciary official throughout Württemberg, and he ended his career as president of the Provincial Court in Ulm. When he retired to Tübingen, the king awarded him a personal peerage. His father had been “a fine hearty parson, who drove about the district in his own carriage.” Karl Bonhoeffer’s mother, Julie Bonhoeffer, neé Tafel (1842-1936), came from a Swabian family that played a lead role in the democratic movement of the nineteenth century and was devotedly liberal. On his mother’s father, Karl Bonhoeffer later wrote, “My grandfather and his three brothers were plain, no average men. Each had his special trait, but common to them all was an idealistic streak, with fearless readiness to act on their convictions.” Two of them were temporarily banished from Württemberg for their democratic leanings, and in a telling coincidence, one of them, Karl’s great-uncle Gottlob Tafel, was imprisoned in the Hohenasperg fortress. He was there at the same time as Dietrich’s great-grandfather Karl August von Hase, who before embarking on his theological career went through a period of youthful political activity. These two forebears of Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to know each other during their mutual imprisonment. Karl Bonhoeffer’s mother lived to be ninety-three, and had a close relationship with her grandson Dietrich, who spoke the eulogy at her funeral in 1936 and treasured her as a living link to the greatness of her generation.

The family trees of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer are everywhere so laden with figures of accomplishment that one might expect future generations to be burdened by it all. But the welter of wonderfulness that was their heritage seems to have been a boon, one that buoyed them up so that each child seems not only to have stood on the shoulders of giants but also to have danced on them. And so in 1898 these two extraordinary lines intermingled in the marriage of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer, who brought eight children into the world within a decade. Their first two sons came into the world in the space of a year: Karl-Friedrich was born on January 13, 1899, and Walter—two

months premature—on December 10. Their third son, Klaus, was born in 1901, followed by two daughters, Ursula in 1902 and Christine in 1903. On February 4, 1906, their fourth and youngest son, Dietrich, was born ten minutes before his twin sister, Sabine, and he teased her about this advantage throughout their lives. The twins were baptized by the kaiser's former chaplain, their grandfather Karl Alfred von Hase, who lived a seven-minute walk away. Susanne, the last child, was born in 1909.

All of the Bonhoeffer children were born in Breslau, where Karl Bonhoeffer held the chair of psychiatry and neurology at the university, and was director of the hospital for nervous diseases. On New Year's Eve the year Susanne was born, he wrote in his diary, "Despite having eight children—which seems an enormous number in times like these—we have the impression that there are not too many of them! The house is big, the children develop normally, we parents are not too old, and so we endeavor not to spoil them, and to make their young years enjoyable."

Their house—at 7 Birkenwäldchen—was near the clinic. It was a gigantic, rambling three-story affair with gabled roofs, numerous chimneys, a screened porch, and a large balcony overlooking the spacious garden where the children played. They dug caves and climbed trees and put up tents. There was much visiting between the Bonhoeffer children and Grandfather Hase, who lived across the river on a branch of the Oder. His wife died in 1903, after which his other daughter, Elisabeth, looked after him. She, too, became an important part of the children's lives.

Despite his busy schedule, Karl Bonhoeffer took much joy in his children. "In winter," he wrote, "we poured water on an old tennis court with an asphalt surface, so that the two oldest children could do skating for the first time. We had a big outbuilding meant to hold a carriage. We didn't have a carriage or horses, but we did use this outbuilding to keep all kinds of animals." There were animals in the house proper as well. One room in the house became a zoo for the children's pets, which included rabbits, guinea pigs, turtledoves, squirrels, lizards, and snakes, and a natural history museum for the collections of birds' eggs and mounted beetles and butterflies. The two eldest girls had another room set up as a dolls' house, and on the first floor the three eldest boys had a workshop, complete with a carpenter's bench.

Their mother presided over the well-appointed home; the staff included a governess, a nursemaid, a housemaid, a parlor maid, and a cook. Upstairs was the schoolroom, with desks where Paula taught the children their lessons. It was somewhat shocking when Paula Bonhoeffer chose to take the teacher's examination as a single woman,\* but as a married woman, she used what she learned to great effect. She was openly distrustful of the German public schools and their Prussian educational methods. She subscribed to the maxim that Germans had their backs broken twice, once at school and once in the military; she wasn't about to entrust her children to the care of others less sensitive than she during their earliest years. When they were a bit older, she sent them to the local public schools, where they invariably excelled. But until each was seven or eight, she was the sole educator.

Paula Bonhoeffer had memorized an impressive repertoire of poems, hymns, and folk songs, which she taught her children, who remembered them into their old age. The children enjoyed dressing up and performing plays for each other and for the adults. There was also a family puppet theater, and every year on December 30—her birthday—Paula Bonhoeffer put on a performance of "Little Red Riding Hood." This continued into her old age, when she did it for her grandchildren. One of them, Renate Bethge, said, "She was the soul and spirit of the house."

In 1910 the Bonhoeffers decided to look for a place to spend their holidays and chose a remote idyll in the woods of the Glatz Mountains near the Bohemian border. It was a two-hour train ride south of Breslau. Karl Bonhoeffer described it as being "in a little valley at the foot of Mount Urnitz, right

the edge of the wood, with a meadow, a little brook, an old barn, and a fruit-tree which had a raised seat with a little bench for the children built into its wide branches.” The name of this rustic paradise was Wolfesgründ. It was so far off the beaten track that the family never saw another soul, save for a single odd character: a “bigoted forestry official” who wandered through now and again. Bonhoeffer later memorialized him in a fictionalized account as the character *Gelbstiefel* (Yellow Boots).

We get our first glimpses of Dietrich during this time, when he was four and five years old. They come to us from his twin, Sabine:

My first memories go back to 1910. I see Dietrich in his party frock, stroking with his small hand the blue silk underskirt; later I see him beside our grandfather, who is sitting by the window with our baby sister Susanne on his knee, while the afternoon sun pours in in the golden light. Here the outlines blur, and only one more scene will form in my mind: first games in the garden in 1911, Dietrich with a mass of ash-blond hair around his sunburnt face, hot from romping, driving away the midges and looking for a shady corner, and yet only obeying very unwillingly the nursemaid’s call to come in, because the immensely energetic game is not yet finished. Heat and thirst were forgotten in the intensity of his play.

Dietrich was the only child to inherit his mother’s fair complexion and flaxen-colored hair. The three elder brothers were dark like their father. Klaus, the youngest of Dietrich’s brothers, was five years older than Dietrich. So his three brothers and two older sisters formed a natural quintet, which Dietrich found himself grouped with Sabine and their little sister, Susi, as the “three little ones.” In this trio, Dietrich enjoyed his role as the strong and chivalrous protector. “I shall never forget Dietrich’s sweetness of character,” Sabine later wrote, “which showed when we gathered berries on the hot summer slopes. He would fill my little pitcher with the raspberries he had toiled to collect, so that I would not have less than he, or share his drink with me.” When they read together, “he pushed the book in front of me . . . though this made his own reading difficult, and was always kind and helpful if asked for anything.”

His chivalrous bent went beyond his sisters. He adored Fräulein Käthe van Horn, their governess from infancy, and “of his own free will he assumed the role of her good spirit who helped and served her, and when her favourite dish was on the table he cried: ‘I have had enough,’ and forced her to eat his portion too. He told her: ‘When I am grown up I shall marry you, then you will always be with us.’”

Sabine also remembered when, at about age six, her brother marveled at the sight of a dragonfly hovering above a stream. Wide-eyed, he whispered to his mother: “Look! There is a creature over the water! But don’t be afraid, I will protect you!”

When Dietrich and Sabine were old enough to be schooled, their mother turned the duty over to Fräulein Käthe, though she still presided over the children’s religious instruction. Dietrich’s earliest recorded theological inquiries occurred when he was about four. He asked his mother: “Does the good God love the chimney sweep too?” and “Does God, too, sit down to lunch?”

Sisters Käthe and Maria van Horn came to the Bonhoeffers six months after the twins were born, and for two decades they formed a vital part of the family’s life. Fräulein Käthe was usually in charge of the three little ones. Both van Horn sisters were devout Christians schooled at the community Herrnhut, which means “the Lord’s watch tower,” and they had a decided spiritual influence on the Bonhoeffer children. Founded by Count Zinzendorf in the eighteenth century, Herrnhut continued the pietist tradition of the Moravian Brethren. As a girl, Paula Bonhoeffer had attended Herrnhut for some time.

Count Zinzendorf advocated the idea of a personal relationship with God, rather than the formal churchgoing Lutheranism of the day. Zinzendorf used the term *living faith*, which he contrasted unfavorably with the prevailing nominalism of dull Protestant orthodoxy. For him, faith was le

about an intellectual assent to doctrines than about a personal, transforming encounter with God, the Herrnhüter emphasized Bible reading and home devotions. His ideas influenced John Wesley, who visited Herrnhut in 1738, the year of his famous conversion.

The place of religion in the Bonhoeffer home was far from pietist, but followed some Herrnhüter traditions. For one thing, the Bonhoeffers rarely went to church; for baptisms and funerals, they usually turned to Paula's father or brother. The family was not anticlerical—indeed, the children loved to “play” at baptizing each other—but their Christianity was mostly of the homegrown variety. Daily life was filled with Bible reading and hymn singing, all of it led by Frau Bonhoeffer. Her reverence for the Scriptures was such that she read Bible stories to her children from the actual Bible text and not from a children's retelling. Still, she sometimes used an illustrated Bible, explaining the pictures as she went.\*

Paula Bonhoeffer's faith was most evident in the values that she and her husband taught the children. Exhibiting selflessness, expressing generosity, and helping others were central to the family culture. Fräulein Käthe remembered that the three children liked to surprise her by doing nice things for her: “For instance they would lay the table for supper, before I could do it. Whether Dietrich encouraged his sisters to do this I don't know, but I should suspect it.” The van Horn sisters described all the children as “high-spirited” but as absolutely never “rude or ill-mannered.” Still, their good behavior did not always come naturally. Fräulein Käthe remembered:

Dietrich was often mischievous and got up to various pranks, not always at the appropriate time. I remember that Dietrich specially liked to do this when the children were supposed to get washed and dressed quickly because we had been invited to go out. So one such day he was dancing round the room, singing and being a thorough nuisance. Suddenly the door opened, his mother descended upon him, boxed his ears right and left, and was gone. Then the nonsense was over. Without shedding a tear, he now did what he ought.

## The Move to Berlin, 1912

In 1912, Dietrich's father accepted an appointment to the chair of psychiatry and neurology in Berlin. This put him at the head of his field in Germany, a position he retained until his death in 1948. It is hard to overstate Karl Bonhoeffer's influence. Bethge said that his mere presence in Berlin “turned the city into a bastion against the invasion of Freud's and Jung's psycho-analysis. Not that he had a closed mind to unorthodox theories, or denied on principle the validity of efforts to investigate unexplored areas of the mind.” Karl Bonhoeffer never publicly dismissed Freud, Jung, or Adler and their theories, but he held them at arm's length with a measured skepticism borne of his devotion to empirical science. As a medical doctor and scientist, he took a dim view of excessive speculation into the unknown realm of the so-called psyche. Bethge quoted Karl Bonhoeffer's friend, Robert Gaupp, Heidelberg psychiatrist:

In intuitive psychology and scrupulous observation Bonhoeffer had no superior. But he came from the school of Wernicke, which was solely concerned with the brain, and permitted no departure from thinking in terms of cerebral pathology. . . . [He] had no urge to advance into the realm of dark, undemonstrable, bold and imaginative interpretation, where so much has to be assumed and so little can be proved. . . . [He] remained within the borders of the empirical world that was accessible to him.

Karl Bonhoeffer was wary of anything beyond what one might observe with one's senses or deduce from those observations. Concerning both psychoanalysis and religion, he might be termed an agnostic.

There was a strong atmosphere in his home against fuzzy thinking, which included a prejudice against certain kinds of religious expressions. But there was no conflict between the father's real

and the mother's. By all accounts, the two complemented each other beautifully. That these two people loved and respected each other was evident to all. Eberhard Bethge described theirs as "a happy relationship in which each partner adroitly supplemented the strength of the other. At their golden wedding anniversary it was said that they had not spent a total of one month apart during their fifty years of marriage, even counting single days."

Karl Bonhoeffer would not have called himself a Christian, but he respected his wife's tutelage of the children in this and lent his tacit approval to it, even if only by participating as an observer. He was not the sort of scientist who ruled out the existence of a realm beyond the physical and seemed to have had a genuine respect for the limits of reason. With the values that his wife taught the children he was entirely in agreement. Among those values was a serious respect for the feelings and opinions of others, including his wife's. She was the granddaughter, daughter, and sister of men whose lives were given to theology, and he knew she was serious about her faith and had hired governesses who were serious about it. He was present at family religious activities and at the holiday celebrations his wife orchestrated, which invariably included hymns, Bible readings, and prayers. "In all that pertained to our education," Sabine remembered, "our parents stood united as a wall. There was no question of one saying one thing and the other something else." It was an excellent environment for the budding theologian in their midst.

The faith that Paula Bonhoeffer evinced spoke for itself; it lived in actions and was evident in the way that she put others before herself and taught her children to do the same. "There was no place for false piety or any kind of bogus religiosity in our home," Sabine said. "Mama expected us to show great resolution." Mere churchgoing held little charm for her. The concept of cheap grace that Dietrich would later make so famous might have had its origins in his mother; perhaps not the term, but the idea behind it, that faith without works is not faith at all, but a simple lack of obedience to God. During the rise of the Nazis, she respectfully but firmly prodded her son to make the church live on what it claimed to believe by speaking publicly against Hitler and the Nazis, and taking action against them.

The family seemed to have the best of what we today might think of as conservative and liberal values, of traditional and progressive ones. Emmi Bonhoeffer, who had known the family long before she married Dietrich's brother, Klaus, recalled, "Without any doubt the mother ruled the house, in spirit and its affairs, but she would never have arranged or organized anything which the father would not have wanted her to do, and which would not have pleased him. According to Kierkegaard, man belongs either to the moral or the artistic type. He did not know this house which formed a harmony of both."

Sabine observed that her father possessed

great tolerance that left no room for narrow-mindedness and broadened the horizons of our home. He took it for granted that we would try to do what was right and expected much from us, but we could always count on his kindness and the fairness of his judgement. He had a great sense of humour and often helped us to overcome inhibitions with a timely joke. He had too firm a grip upon his own emotions to allow himself ever to speak a word to us which was not wholly suitable. His dislike of clichés did at times make some of us inarticulate and uncertain of ourselves. But it has the effect that as adults we no longer had any taste for catchwords, gossip, commonplaces or loquacity. He, himself, would never have used a catchword or a "trendy" phrase.

Karl Bonhoeffer taught his children to speak only when they had something to say. He did not tolerate sloppiness of expression any more than he tolerated self-pity or selfishness or boastful pride. His children loved and respected him in a way that made them eager to gain his approval; he hardly had to say anything to communicate his feelings on a subject. Often a cocked eyebrow was all it took

Professor Scheller, a colleague, once said, “Just as he utterly disliked all that is immoderate, exaggerated or undisciplined, so too, in his own person everything was completely controlled.” The Bonhoeffer children were taught to be in firm control of their emotions. Emotionalism, like sloppy communication, was thought to be self-indulgent. When his father died, Karl Bonhoeffer wrote, “Of his qualities, I would wish that our children inherit his simplicity and truthfulness. I never heard a cliché from him, he spoke little and was a firm enemy of everything faddish and unnatural.” The family’s move from Breslau to Berlin must have felt like a leap. For many, Berlin was the center of the universe. Its university was one of the best in the world, the city was an intellectual and cultural center, and it was the seat of an empire.

Their new house—on the Brückenallee, near the northwest part of the Tiergarten—was less spacious than their Breslau house and situated on smaller grounds. But it had the special distinction of sharing a wall with Bellevue Park, where the royal children played. One of the Bonhoeffers’ governesses—probably Fräulein Lenchen—was something of a monarchist, who ran excitedly with her charges to catch a glimpse of the kaiser or crown prince as they drove past. The Bonhoeffers valued humility and simplicity, and would not abide anything like gawking at royals. When Sabine boasted that one of the little princes had come close to her and tried to poke her with a stick, the response was disapproving silence.

In Berlin the older children were no longer taught at home, but went to the school nearby. Breakfasts were on the veranda: rye bread, butter and jam, with hot milk and sometimes cocoa. Classes began at eight. Lunch was small sandwiches—butter and cheese or sausage—wrapped in grease-proof paper which they carried to school in their satchels. There was no such thing as lunch in Germany in those days, so this meal was called a second breakfast.

In 1913, seven-year-old Dietrich began school outside the home. For the next six years he attended the Friedrich-Werder Gymnasium. Sabine said he was expected to walk to school by himself:

He feared walking there alone, which involved crossing a long bridge. So he had to be taken at first, and his companion walked on the other side of the street so that he need not be ashamed in front of the other children. He eventually overcame this fear. He was also very frightened of Santa Claus, and showed a certain fear of the water when we twins learned to swim. The first few times he raised a terrific outcry. . . . Later he was an excellent swimmer.

Dietrich did well in school, but was not beyond needing discipline, which his parents didn’t hesitate to provide. When he was eight, his father wrote, “Dietrich does his work naturally and tidily. He likes fighting, and does a great deal of it.” Once he attacked a schoolmate, whose mother suspected an atmosphere of anti-Semitism at home. Paula Bonhoeffer was horrified at the thought and made sure the woman knew that nothing of the kind was tolerated in her house.

## Friedrichsbrunn

With the move to Berlin their Wölfesgrund house was too far away, so they sold it and found a country home in Friedrichsbrunn in the Harz Mountains. It had once been a forester’s lodge, and they retained its feeling of simplicity. They didn’t install electricity for thirty years. Sabine described traveling there:

The journey, in two specially reserved compartments under the supervision of Fräulein Horn, was a joy in itself. At Thale two carriages and pairs would already be waiting for us, one for the smallest members of the party and the adults and one for the luggage. Most of the heavy luggage would have been sent on ahead and two housemaids would have travelled on in advance a few days earlier to clean and warm the house.

Sometimes the boys sent the carriage ahead at Thale and walked the remaining four miles through

the woods. The caretakers, Herr and Frau Sanderhoff, lived in a cottage on the property. Herr Sanderhoff kept the meadow scythed, and Frau Sanderhoff made sure there were vegetables from the garden and firewood.

The van Horn sisters usually went to Friedrichsbrunn ahead of the Bonhoeffer parents, taking the children with them. There was always great excitement over the parents' arrival. Sabine and Dietrich sometimes rode in the carriage down to the train station at Thale to greet them. "In the meantime . . . we would have lit up the house with little cup candles which we used to place in all the windows," Sabine recalled. "Thus even from afar the house would be aglow to greet the new arrivals."

In the thirtysomething years they visited Friedrichsbrunn, Dietrich had only one nightmarish memory. It happened in 1913, their first summer. One sweltering July day Fräulein Maria decided to take the three little ones and Ursula to a nearby mountain lake. Fräulein Lenchen went along to warn Fräulein Maria warned them to cool off before they went in, but Fräulein Lenchen ignored the warning and quickly swam toward the middle of the lake, where she promptly sank. Sabine remembered:

Dietrich was the first to notice it and uttered a piercing cry. At one glance Fräulein Horn took in what had happened. I can still see her throw her watch-chain aside and, in her long woollen skirt, swim out with strong, swift strokes, shouting back to us over her shoulder, "Stay on the shore everyone!"

We were seven years old and could not yet swim. We cried and trembled and held on very firmly to little Susie. We could hear our dear Fräulein Horn crying out to the drowning woman, "Keep swimming! Keep swimming!" We saw how difficult it was for Fräulein Horn to save Lenchen and bring her back. At first Lenchen hung onto her neck, but soon became unconscious, and we heard Fräulein Horn exclaiming, "Help me dear God, help me!" as she swam back with Fräulein Lenchen on her back. Fräulein Lenchen, still unconscious, was laid down on her side. Fräulein Horn put her finger down her throat so as to let out the water. Dietrich gently patted her on the back and we all crouched round Fräulein Lenchen. Soon she recovered consciousness and Fräulein Horn said a long prayer of thanksgiving.

The Bonhoeffer children brought friends to Friedrichsbrunn, although throughout Dietrich's childhood, his circle of friends was limited to family. His cousin Hans-Christoph von Hase visited for long stretches, and together they dug trenches and went for hikes in the vast pine woods to search for wild strawberries, onions, and mushrooms.

Dietrich spent much time reading too.

Under the rowan-trees on our meadow Dietrich loved to sit and read his favourite books, like *Rulamann*,\* the story of a man of the stone age, and *Pinocchio* which made him roar with laughter and whose funniest passages he read out to us again and again. He was about ten years old at that time, but he retained his sense of high-spirited comedy. The book *Heroes of Everyday*\* moved him very much. They were stories of young people who by their courage, presence of mind and selflessness saved others' lives, and these stories often ended sadly. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* kept him busy for a long time. Here in Friedrichsbrunn he also read the great classic poets for the first time, and in the evenings we did play-reading with different parts.

Sometimes in the evenings they played ball games with the village children in the meadow. Inside the house they played guessing games and sang folk songs. They "watched the mists from the meadows waft and rise along the fir-trees," Sabine noted, and they watched dusk fall. When the moon appeared, they sang "Der Mond ist Aufgegangen":

Der Mond ist aufgegangen,  
die goldnen Sternlein prangen  
am Himmel hell und klar!  
Der Wald steht schwarz und schweigt  
und aus den Wiesen steigt  
der weiße Nebel wunderbar. \*\*

The worlds of folklore and religion were so mingled in early twentieth-century German culture that

even families who didn't go to church were often deeply Christian. This folk song is typically beginning as a paean to the beauty of the natural world, but soon turning into a meditation on mankind's need for God and finally into a prayer, asking God to help us "poor and prideful sinners" to see his salvation when we die—and in the meantime here on earth to help us to be "like little children cheerful and faithful."

German culture was inescapably Christian. This was a result of the legacy of Martin Luther, the Catholic monk who invented Protestantism. Looming over the German culture and nation like both father and a mother, Luther was to Germany something like what Moses was to Israel; in his lusty and cranky person were the German nation and the Lutheran faith wonderfully and terribly combined. Luther's influence cannot be overestimated. His translation of the Bible into German was cataclysmic. Like a medieval Paul Bunyan, Luther in a single blow shattered the edifice of European Catholicism and in the bargain created the modern German language, which in turn effectively created the German people. Christendom was cleft in twain, and out of the earth beside it sprang the *Deutsche Volk*.

The Luther Bible was to the modern German language what the works of Shakespeare and the King James Bible were to the modern English language. Before Luther's Bible, there was no unified German language. It existed only in a hodgepodge of dialects. And Germany as a nation was an idea far in the future, a gleam in Luther's eye. But when Luther translated the Bible into German, he created a single language in a single book that everyone could read and did read. Indeed, there was nothing else to read. Soon everyone spoke German the way Luther's translation did. As television has had a homogenizing effect on the accents and dialects of Americans, watering down accents and sanding down sharp twangs, Luther's Bible created a single German tongue. Suddenly millers from München could communicate with bakers from Bremen. Out of this grew a sense of a common heritage and culture.

But Luther brought Germans to a fuller engagement with their faith through singing too. He wrote many hymns—the most well-known being "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God"—and introduced the idea of congregational singing. Before Luther, no one outside the choir sang in church.

## "Hurrah, There's a War!"

The Bonhoeffers spent the summer of 1914 at Friedrichsbrunn. But on the first day of August, when the three younger children and their governess were in the village enjoying themselves, the world changed. Flitting here and there through the crowd, until it reached them, was the stunning news that Germany had declared war on Russia. Dietrich and Sabine were eight and a half, and she recalled the scene:

The village was celebrating its local shooting festival. Our governess suddenly dragged us away from the pretty, enticing market stalls and the merry-go-round which was being pulled by a poor white horse, so as to bring us back as quickly as possible to our parents in Berlin. Sadly I looked at the now emptying scene of the festivities, where the stall-holders were hastily pulling down their tents. In the late evening we could hear through the window the songs and shouts of the soldiers in their farewell celebrations. Next day, after the adults had hastily done the packing, we found ourselves sitting in the train to Berlin.

When they arrived back home, one of the girls ran into the house and exclaimed, "Hurrah! There's war!" She was promptly slapped. The Bonhoeffers were not opposed to war, but neither would they celebrate it.

They were in the minority on that point, however, and a general tone of giddiness prevailed in those first days. But on August 4, the first discordant note was sounded: Britain declared war on Germany.



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