

## “Sacred Space”

WHEN DIETRICH WAS BORN, along with twin sister Sabine, on February 4, 1906 in Breslau, the sixth and seventh of eight children in a seemingly idyllic family, few could imagine the upheavals that would later mark, scar, and form him.

Dietrich's father, Karl, held a position as professor of psychiatry and director of the Breslau University Hospital of Nervous Diseases. In 1906, while servants and the prominent pediatrician A. Czerny<sup>1</sup> fussed over the new Bonhoeffer twins, Adolf Hitler, a lackluster teenager with a drooping face, drifted around Vienna on an orphan's pension, hoping to become a painter. Hitler was the last person anyone from Bonhoeffer's cohort could have imagined gaining the power to wreak havoc on the Western world. World War I remained blissfully unanticipated, at least by the Bonhoeffers.

If Sabine had been able to revisit Breslau after her return to Germany in 1947, she would have seen the city of her early childhood virtually obliterated. As in Berlin, long blocks of bombed-out buildings stood still and ash white like crumbling bones against the sky, while great, desolate hills of rubble filled the empty lots. The Holocaust had hollowed out this Jewish cultural center, once numbering 5 percent of Breslau's population in a country less than 1 percent Jewish. Now called Wrocław, part of Poland, the city worked to eradicate any vestige of a German past. Most Germans had been forcibly expelled, and what had not been destroyed, either by the Nazis or the Russians, faced an uncertain future.

Sabine, who as a German would no longer have been allowed in the ghostly ruins of her birthplace, had with Dietrich spent her earliest childhood in a house there at Birkenwäldchen 7, among a sea of siblings and servants. The family lived near Scheitinger Park, where broad walkways circled a placid lake, and one could stroll amid Japanese-style gardens across humped bridges, seeing in the distance park buildings topped with pagoda-like towers. Birch trees surrounded their family home, while a balcony overlooked

1. Bethge, *DB: A Biography*, 18.

the vast backyard. Older family members played tennis on the court next door. In this household, Sabine would later write, she and her siblings grew up in “an order that seemed firmly enough established to last forever.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1909, the younger Bonhoeffer generation swelled to eight, with the birth of Dietrich’s sister, Susanne, called Susi, the final child in the family. His parents grouped Dietrich with the two youngest daughters as the “little ones,” though in reality Susi was the odd one out in this trio. One idyllic photo shows the family circled harmoniously around infant Susi. Sabine and Dietrich, on either side of the sleeping bundle, glare at their new rival with intense and deadly concentration.

Dietrich and Sabine, he flaxen-haired liked an angel, she with a thick brown mane, grew up closer than close. “We were always united,” Sabine remembered, with a “special unity” they did not share with their other siblings.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, Dietrich would later refer to his three older brothers as of a different “generation.” They, in turn, dismissed him for having “no interests” because he did not share theirs.<sup>4</sup>

In 1910, Sabine sat by four-year-old Dietrich in his party frock, the white dress little boys wore, watching him stroke his blue silk underskirt with a small hand. Later, she remembered, he watched baby Susi as she sat on their grandfather’s knee, golden sunlight pouring in on them.

In quiet moments, their mother, Paula, told the tiny Sabine and Dietrich Bible stories. The children couldn’t yet read, so, to their delight, Paula, her hair wound in plaits, showed them illustrations from a big picture Bible.<sup>5</sup> Dietrich addressed his first theological questions to his mother, early on showing his penchant for placing God in “this world,” asking her if the “good God” loved the chimney sweep, and if God ate lunch.<sup>6</sup>

Paula, though a countess’s daughter, had trained as a teacher and passed the state teaching exams, so she taught her children herself in their early years. She also made sure her children grew up in an intellectually rich environment: her homes had classrooms with desks, books, a zoology room with live snakes and lizards, a carpentry room for the boys and a doll’s room for the girls, musical instruments, and a box of costumes for performances.

2. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 4.

3. *Ibid.*, 32.

4. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 10; also Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 41.

5. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 20.

6. *Ibid.*, 37.

In these early days, the twins played together in the sandbox behind their big brick house.<sup>7</sup> They built castles and volcanoes, created marble courses and magic fountains and galloped together on hobbyhorses. Sabine remembered Dietrich playing intensely, heedless of thirst, "a mass of ash blond hair around his sunburnt face."<sup>8</sup> They visited with the animals in a carriage house converted to a barn and baptized baby dolls, but Dietrich soon turned his attention to horses and a knight's castle.<sup>9</sup> Later, amid World War II's bombings destruction, fear, and food shortages, Paula would recall the "many happy children's birthdays with cakes, whipped cream, Punch and Judy shows and masquerades."<sup>10</sup>

At Christmas, the twins joined the family in festivities fit for *The Nutcracker*. As the youngest, Dietrich, Sabine, and little Susi walked in first on Christmas Eve to view the lighted tree. Holding hands and looking up in wonder at the flickering candles and shining ornaments, breathing in the scent of pine, the three would sing, in their childish voices, "Christmas tree, loveliest of trees." Dietrich's hair, almost white, was like a halo. As they sang, the older siblings, parents, and servants filed in and joined them.

Paula had been "a mystical vision" when her husband-to-be first saw her in all her blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty. Now, in a lace-collared black velvet dress, her fair skin flushed with pleasure, she read aloud the Christmas story, as everyone, including the "maids in their white aprons" sat in a circle around her in the parlor. Paula's eyes filled with tears as she spoke of Mary pondering the words of the Holy Spirit. This show of emotion distressed young Sabine and Dietrich, whose hearts lifted in relief when their mother's face once again cleared, and the joyous Christmas carols began.<sup>11</sup>

Highest in hierarchy amongst the small army of household help were the governesses Maria (called Horchen) and Käthe Horn. These sisters belonged to the Hernhuter branch of the Moravian Brethren. Paula herself had attended a Moravian boarding school in Gnadau. In the 1700s, this sect had been saved from persecution by the German Count Zinzendorf, who as a child had sent letters to Jesus fluttering from tower windows of his family castle.

Dietrich yearned to protect Käthe Horn. "When I am big, I shall marry you, then you will stay with us always," he told her.<sup>12</sup> During the Christmas

7. Bethge, ed., *Last Letters of the Resistance*, 95.

8. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 24.

9. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 19.

10. Bonhoeffer, *LPP*, 196.

11. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 32–33.

12. *Ibid.*, 29.

holidays in 1930 when he was studying in New York, he may have visited Käthe in Cuba,<sup>13</sup> amid palm trees and clusters of vultures on the roofs. The Horn sisters' Moravian teachings, hymns, and prayers would stay with him all his life, and it is tempting to imagine that the first seeds of his ecumenicalism were planted by these heirs to Zinzendorf, who had promoted ties between Moravian, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.

Around Easter of 1912, the Bonhoeffer family moved to Berlin, to a home near the royal palace and next to Bellevue Park where the royal children played. In a perhaps uncanny foreshadowing of so many of his children's futures, their father, in his memoir, described the new house as having "something of the character of a dungeon."<sup>14</sup> All of the large rooms, lined up in a row, communicated with a narrow corridor that ran the length of the home. Before school, the children, wearing the old-fashioned, hand-sewn clothes that their mother preferred, breakfasted on the verandah, eating rye bread, butter, jam, and hot milk—the hated milk often ending up poured in window boxes until Paula ordered it replaced with hot cocoa.

Berlin boomed in these prewar years, but remained a city of extraordinary cleanliness and order, despite its rapid growth. Foreign visitors linked the city's safety to the German respect for authority—perhaps too much respect in the eyes of some Americans, who noticed "verboten" signs everywhere.<sup>15</sup> Even so, in 1913, seven-year-old Dietrich was frightened when, separated from his twin, he had to head by himself to school at Friedrichs-Werder Gymnasium. Paula had a servant walk with him, but on the other side of the street, so that Dietrich would not be embarrassed.<sup>16</sup>

Dietrich was proud of having been born minutes before Sabine. Both sisters in the youthful trio dubbed him "their knight in shining armor who protected them." They were "happy to let him play the role of older brother." Dietrich would hold up his arm and make a fist to show off to Sabine his "splendid biceps."<sup>17</sup>

Between school terms the children sometimes holidayed in Tübingen near the Black Forest, home of their grandmother, Julie Tafel Bonhoeffer.

13. Bethge does not have him visiting Käthe in Cuba (see *DB: A Biography*, 151), but Bosanquet, who corresponded with the Horn sisters, does. See *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 87.

14. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 25.

15. Blackbourn, *History of Germany: 1780-1918*, 283. In 1900, Jerome K. Jerome wrote a satire on the German submission to authority, while in 1914 Thomas Mann finished *The Loyal Subject*, a novel about middle-class German "self-abasement" that became popular when published after the war.

16. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 33.

17. *Ibid.*, 31.

In Tübingen, church steeples mingled with red-tiled-roof buildings and crooked streets opened into cobbled plazas. Tall, half-timbered shops in the town squares evoked a German fairy-tale world—or perhaps a Disney World to modern eyes. From their grandmother's balcony, the twins gazed down on Neckar River, which wended its quiet way, sparkling in the sunshine and reflecting the patterns of the leaves of the plane trees that lined its shores. Strolls through the town led to a castle, perched on hill, or past the Tübingen synagogue, which would burn during the Nazi Kristallnacht in 1938.



"Tall, half-timbered shops . . . evoked a German fairy-tale world." Tübingen retains much of the character of a pre-war German city. The house overlooking the Neckar where Julie Tafel lived no longer stands.

On other holidays, the Horn governesses and the Bonhoeffer children took off in grand style in two reserved train compartments for the family vacation home in Friedrichsbrunn. The train chugged west, towards the Harz Mountains, usually during the Easter school holidays or summer break.

The children were, in birth order, the three older boys, Karl-Friedrich, Walter, and Klaus—Klaus, the youngest of these boys, five years older than Dietrich—and then sisters Ursel and Christel, twins Sabine and Dietrich, and finally, little Susi. The train would take them to the town of Thale with its steep hills, legends of dancing witches and Teutonic gods, and a grand stone Gothic church in the town square. The boys hiked the roughly four miles<sup>18</sup> through the mountain woods, where mosses and mushrooms grew, to the unelectrified brick Friedrichsbrunn summerhouse, while the girls, governesses, and trunks arrived in horse-drawn carts.<sup>19</sup>

Both Sabine and Dietrich adored their time in these mountains. “Some of my happiest childhood memories are of the holidays we spent there,”<sup>20</sup> wrote Sabine. Dietrich would later muse that the hills and forests of the Harz had formed him.

During these holidays, big brother Walter showed the younger children where to find strawberries, raspberries, and little lobsters amid the hills and trees. He built a raft for sailing on the mountain lakes. Once he killed a falcon with one shot, but when he saw the dead bird, he burst into tears.<sup>21</sup>

By day, the twins explored the nearby village, which stretched along a rambling dirt road with a small stone church near one end. They swam and gathered berries or crawled around on the ground to find mushrooms in the woods. Novels, including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, absorbed Dietrich as he sat under the rowan trees in the meadow by the house. In the evening, he and his siblings played games or sang songs, and watched the mists rise and wrap themselves around the tall fir trees.<sup>22</sup> Sometimes, the parents joined the children and their governesses.<sup>23</sup> One photo shows a governess surrounded by the Bonhoeffer brood, little Susi with her arms raised exuberantly in the air, while the parents watch benignly from the fringes of the scene. The children talked frequently with their often absent parents: the summerhouse might have no heat or electricity, but the parents did install a telephone.

On July 28, 1914, as eight-year-old Dietrich and Sabine enjoyed the horse-drawn merry-go-round and “pretty stalls” at the Friedrichsbrunn village shooting festival, cries went up: war had started. Miss Horn, her face pale and drawn, tore the children away to pack for Berlin, while the excited

18. Six kilometers.

19. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 7.

20. *Ibid.*, 6.

21. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

22. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 26.

23. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 26.

villagers dismantled the fair. Later that night the children heard the shouts and songs of the jubilant soldiers, ready for battle.<sup>24</sup>

The Kaiser and the German high command counted on a quick war, but instead, the fighting bogged down.

A few months into the war, their cousin Lothar arrived back in Berlin "half blinded and limping on crutches, head and legs swathed in bandages . . . [but] quite unbroken in spirit,"<sup>25</sup> a source of fascination to the twins. Another cousin, Hans von der Goltz, wearing a blue uniform, visited the family en route to the front. Delicate, fair haired, and blue eyed, he seemed too ethereal for war—and soon enough was killed.<sup>26</sup>

As the death tolls mounted, the twins would lie awake in their beds at night talking in their high-ceiling bedroom. "We had very serious discussions about death and eternal life," Sabine remembered. For months, they concentrated on the word *eternity*, trying to clear themselves of all other thoughts. They tried to imagine the nothingness, or perhaps transcendence, of death, comforted by the phosphorescent gleam of the glowing crosses above their beds. They said the word *eternity* over and over again. "We often felt dizzy," Sabine recalled. They shared intense conversations about theology and developed rituals to ward off evil, each vying to be the last to say "good night" to the other. By doing this, Sabine believed, she was saving Dietrich from being "devoured" by Satan." These rituals remained "an absolute secret between us twins," Sabine said. There was, as well, "a secret language between us."<sup>27</sup>

At eight, Dietrich began piano lessons and soon his talent shone forth, even amid a musical family. He showed sensitivity as an accompanist, often playing for Paula as she sang. The two grew closer over music.

Paula cried when nine-year-old Dietrich broke a front tooth and had to have it replaced with a false one. Sabine "was quite dismayed at Mama's tears."<sup>28</sup> During this period, Dietrich had a hard time writing school essays, and Sabine often helped him.<sup>29</sup>

Paula, with a long, slim face, her hair still often plaited and wrapped around her head, was "intelligent, warm-hearted and unaffected,"<sup>30</sup> but also emotional, with a temper. "If we were disrespectful to others she did not

24. Ibid., 4, and Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 34.

25. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 4.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 33, also, Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 24–25.

28. Since Bonhoeffer seldom opens his lips for a photo, it is impossible to see how the false tooth looked. As no one mentions it, it no doubt passed muster.

29. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 31.

30. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 19–20.

hesitate to box our ears,”<sup>31</sup> Sabine remembered. Sabine also noted, with some of her characteristic wryness, the double standard that prevailed in the house. Their father chided the children if they forgot to run an errand for their grandmother—“We were even then made to realize that such forgetfulness in the young was egoism and inexcusable thoughtlessness.” However, “if my mother forgot something it was because it was too much to demand and because she lacked the strength.”<sup>32</sup>

In 1916, hunger hit even this wealthy and privileged family. The German government, bent on a speedy war, had not worried as farm workers flocked to the front. But now, between the war dragging on and a British blockade, food disappeared. People, eating turnips, subsisted on starvation diets of 1,000 calories a day, not even enough for children.<sup>33</sup> More than 700,000 Germans starved during the war,<sup>34</sup> and many more feared they might.

In response, the Bonhoeffers moved to the Grunewald neighborhood on the western edge of Berlin, to a house at 14 Wangenheimstrasse. Their acre of grounds allowed them to keep a goat and poultry. Dietrich saved money for a hen, and became expert at learning to find black market sausage, milk, and butter.<sup>35</sup>

Like their other homes, this grand house held antiques, German mountain landscapes painted by relatives, and in their father’s study, great tiers of books that ran up the twelve-foot walls. A broad staircase swept to the upper floors. In the huge parlor, the obligatory grand piano “formed no more than an agreeable incident,” while in the dining room, the table that seated twelve stood like an island in “a lake of shining parquet.” Velvet curtains separated a smoking room from the dining room. Upstairs, the children found more rooms than they had ever before counted. Despite a family of ten, plus a staff of servants, the family easily absorbed frequent houseguests and sometimes soldiers.<sup>36</sup>

In these days of scarce food, Dietrich, a fast-growing boy, often complained to Sabine of his gnawing hunger. In January 1918, the eleven-year-old described to his grandmother a dinner at the next door neighbor’s house in Grunewald: sausage soup from a newly slaughtered pig, with “vegetables,

31. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 6.

32. *Ibid.*, 12.

33. “Starvation and Disease.”

34. *Ibid.* There’s debate about how many starved, versus dying of opportunistic diseases such as influenza, brought on by hunger, but the important point is many people died.

35. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 35.

36. *Ibid.*, 26–27.

asparagus and carrots," followed by coffee and preserves, tea, and cheese-cake, a simple enough meal in ordinary times, but a feast to a hungry boy. The youngster also drank a "very good wine, of which everyone was served quite a lot."<sup>37</sup>

Yet as 1918 moved onward, the Bonhoeffers remained insulated from the war's cruelest effects. Karl-Friedrich, who took physics books to the front with him in his knapsack, and Walter, who loved the outdoors, sallied off cheerfully to the Western front.

Now Paula moved Dietrich to a bedroom of his own, and Susi shared with Sabine. A wall separated him from his twin, his other half; he would knock on it so the two could continue their nightly meditations. Did he feel like a paper doll torn in half, alone for the first time in a dark, high-ceiling chamber, a thick, hushing layer of plaster separating him from Sabine? Susi remembered that he would knock on the wall three times to alert them each time he thought of God.

Games and school days continued. When choosing teams, Dietrich picked Sabine first, even over stronger players, so they could be together—even though he liked to win. "Inevitably we were a team," Sabine recalled. Each invited the other along when "some new adventure . . . presented itself"<sup>38</sup> One adventure involved digging "underground passages" in the backyard and plotting warlike stratagems against their enemies, brother Klaus among others, with the goal of trapping them in "a deep hole."<sup>39</sup> Other children often joined them, but Sabine and Dietrich needed only each other. They were, Sabine remembered, "self-contained with their own relationship."<sup>40</sup>

37. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 9, 19–20.

38. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers*, 32.

39. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE* 9, 23.

40. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 30.