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Exile in Ettal

Dietrich's question to Eberhard about the air raid shelter, if wry, was not casual. By fall, 1940, British bombings had begun over Berlin. On August 28, bombers for the first time killed civilians in the city.[1] When more raids followed, Hitler's outrage in a speech in early September expressed his typical mind-set: "Should the Royal Air Force drop two thousand, or three thousand, or four thousand kilograms of bombs, then we will now drop 150,000; 180,000; 230,000; 300,000; 400,000; yes one million kilograms in a single night. And should they declare they will greatly increase their attacks on our cities, then we will erase their cities!"[2]

In September 1940 the British bombed Berlin nineteen times. On October 7, two days before Dietrich's question to Eberhard about air raids, the British had attacked so early—shortly after 10 pm—that people were out on the streets, caught by surprise.[3]

Meanwhile, Dietrich spent the four-week period at Ruth's pondering his future. Having blundered so badly with the Königsberg retreat, he needed now to keep a low profile, but his past left a dangerous trail—more dangerous than he knew. By the end of his stay, he had finally decided to actively join the Abwehr as a double agent.

While Dietrich and Ruth's upper-class cohorts plotted yet another coup, Hitler's popularity surged. By 1940, Hitler had reduced unemployment, built the autobahn, restored order to Germany, and offered support to traditional families. After the deprivations of World War I and the economic shocks of the Weimar years, life had stabilized for the average German. This occurred despite a fascist state where the government and the industrialists worked together to suppress wages, an employee could not quit a job without a boss's approval, and surveillance was ever present. Now, with the

1. Moorhouse, *Berlin at War,* 140.
2. Ibid., 140–41.
3. Ibid., 143.

expansion of the German empire into the Ruhr, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, and the victories across Europe, many hailed Hitler as a miracle worker.

Dietrich's decision to participate in a resistance focused on assassination was all the more daring given Hitler's increasingly messianic status. Bonhoeffer would not be part of killing a mere political leader, but, in the eyes of many, Germany's spiritual savior. As one German remembered, "The Führer was . . . an idol that was emulated and served."[4] One woman, seeing Hitler in an open car, responded to his (to her) good looks: "He had beautiful blue eyes, like an Enzian (a flower) and was suntanned." Another woman's daughter remembered her mother walking in Berlin and suddenly finding herself close to Hitler's motorcade: "She . . . raised her hand . . . He nodded to her and waved." Then the SS pushed the mother away. The daughter—albeit telling the story from a postwar perspective—recalled her mother "feeling strangely" in Hitler's presence and later saying, "That man is extremely dangerous. He has eyes that you can say father to. But what's behind those eyes?" [5]

Why would an avowed pacifist get involved in a plot to kill? Dietrich himself struggled with that decision. He had been severely disappointed in the Confessing Church's tepid challenge to Nazism. He rejected Kantian moral absolutes and decided that his own moral purity meant less than helping to bring down the regime.

Dietrich did not flinch from the possibility that in plotting assassination he was participating in a sin. Yet, frustrated by the many Christians he encountered who felt their Christian ethics had nothing to do with politics, or who believed that they could maintain personal salvation through churchgoing, confession, and communion while closing their eyes to the injustices all around them, he saw little alternative but to take action. He was part of the elite in the country, to whom much had been given and from whom much was expected: who but he and his cohort should shoulder the responsibility of challenging Hitler? Should they not, in Luther's formulation, sin boldly? Finally, the double threats of conscription and possible arrest by the Gestapo hovered close.

Dietrich's sister-in-law, Klaus's wife Emmi Delbrück Bonhoeffer, supplied a rationale for the family's logic in supporting a coup, couching it in a story: While standing in a line to buy vegetables, she mentioned to a friend some Nazi atrocities she'd heard about. The saleslady in the store overheard her and said loudly, "Frau B, if you don't stop spreading such horror stories, you'll end up in a concentration camp too, and then no one can help you."

4. Johnson and Reuband, *What We Knew,* 338.

5. Ibid., 339.

Emmi came home and told her husband what had happened. He was upset: "'You are completely mad. Please understand that a dictatorship is a snake. You step on its tail, it bites you on the leg. You have to crush its head. . . . Only the military can do that.'"[6]

For Dietrich, according to Bethge, the decisive moment had been the fall of France. As Confessing Church friend Wilhelm Rott would write, "The belief of many of our circle that the clash of weapons would bring catastrophe on the regime had been shattered. We would have to adjust ourselves to Hitler's rule, at any rate for a long time."[7] The next impetus to action came in the form of the travel restrictions on Bonhoeffer. And behind it all, possibly even more real, was the growing "storm" swirling over Sabine, and the "longing . . . to be able to help again."

In the fall of 1940, no longer a "*Stiftsfraulein*" or "convent-girl" in an ankle-length skirt at the Magdalen-Stift, Maria entered Elisabeth von Thadden's Wieblingen School. The school, normally in Heidelberg, had been moved to Tutzing in Bavaria because authorities had decided it was too close to the Maginot Line.

Von Thadden, the school's founder, was formidable, courageous, and uncompromising. When her mother died, this nineteen-year-old, the oldest child, managed the family estate and took care of her younger siblings for eleven years. When her father remarried in 1920, to a woman five years younger than Elisabeth, the thirty-year-old left for Berlin to study education. The Weimar Republic granted enterprising women unprecedented opportunities, and Elisabeth studied progressive education.

In 1926, the chance came to lease the empty castle Wieblingen near Heidelberg. With an inheritance in hand, von Thadden leapt at the opportunity, quickly getting the licensing necessary, and opening the school's doors in 1927 to a class of thirteen girls. The stucco structure, with its green-shuttered windows and orange-tiled roof, housed and schooled the students in the same building, which overlooked a cobblestone courtyard surrounded by a high wall.

Von Thadden offered the "best and brightest"[8] girls the same quality of education as upper-class boys. She did so while grounding her progressive educational methods in Christian ethics. She aimed to train her students

6. Barnett, *For the Soul of the People,* 182. This echoes testimony at the Nuremberg trials, where some insisted that only a military coup could have dislodged Hitler.

7. Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 683.

8. Pejsa, *Matriarch of Conspiracy,* 281.

to think for themselves, behave with compassionate morality, and become emancipated women, all goals anathema to National Socialist aims.

Photos show the middle-aged and unmarried von Thadden with her dark, wavy hair either pulled severely back into a bun hidden behind her head—or cut as short as a man's. The hairline recedes and von Thadden wears a man's dress shirt with a pointy collar and a silk tie. Only her eyes, visionary and far away, show any softness.

The von Wedemeyers and von Kleists had as little interest as the Bonhoeffers in creating "emancipated" daughters. Neither Maria nor her older sister Ruth Alice had any expectation of stepping out of traditional gender roles. As far the Junker families were concerned, a woman's role as wife and mother was a settled affair. However, the attraction of the school would have been immense: von Thadden was a Prussian aristocrat and a strong Protestant with ties to the Confessing Church. More compelling to families that dreaded the influence of Nazism on their children, von Thadden despised National Socialism and even as late as 1940, when sixteen-year-old Maria arrived, was outspoken in her disdain.

Students noted the contemptuous way von Thadden would adopt the Nazi "heil Hitler" salute, raising her arm and then flicking her wrist limply, as if shooing away a fly. Despite pressure, she enrolled Jewish students, and even, on occasion, helped them with tuition, presumably a response to their parents' loss of ability to work.

Around the time Maria arrived, drama erupted when a student denounced von Thadden to the Gestapo. Authorities threatened to close the school for its failure to hang a portrait of Hitler, as well as for reading the psalms—considered Jewish—during worship services. At that point, von Thadden decided to take the school back to Wieblingen, where she hoped her good reputation would protect her.

Assertive, athletic, and academic, eager to please, and used to living away from home, Maria soon found her place as a leader at the school.

As the fall progressed, Dietrich made arrangements with the Confessing Church for a research and writing sabbatical, which freed him for working on his *Ethics* and making resistance contacts.

The leave of absence meant the Confessing Church—already severely financially strained—cut his salary. Dietrich had been never good with money. As Bethge with his typical tact put it, "His inadequate talents for the essentials of bookkeeping caused considerable difficulties for the Council

of Brethren [his employers] in their dealings with the tax authorities, and occasionally led to his having to answer further inquiries."[9]

The Gestapo focus on Bonhoeffer became so threatening that in November, Dohnanyi and others decided he'd be safest in Munich, away from his old haunts.[10] Dietrich's aunt, Countess "Ninne," offered him the use of her Munich home and address, so that he could register as a Munich resident—an address which offered the added protection of association with the aristocracy—and from there, he applied for "indispensable" (meaning draft exempt) status due to his intelligence work for the High Command of the Wehrmacht.[11]

When Dietrich arrived in Munich in November 1940, none of his military issues had been settled, but his time had been freed and the process of keeping him out of the army was in motion. From Munich, Dietrich moved near, and then into, the monastery of Ettal, Paula's idea,[12] to work on *Ethics*. Because of fears of attracting unwanted Gestapo attention, Dietrich for a time would stay fixed in this one place, highly unusual for him. As a result, he and Eberhard would have their longest separation to date. Eberhard would live in Berlin working for the Gossner Mission and traveling to east Prussia on Confessing Church business while Dietrich remained—sometimes impatiently—in Ettal. This separation led to frequent letters, a window into the relationship of this couple. As Eberhard would later write, "we put more into words this year."[13]

Ettal had been founded by the Benedictines in 1330. The original Gothic double abbey that had consisted of separate of communities of men and women, as well as a house for Teutonic Knights, had burned down in 1744. The marble edifice Dietrich encountered, rebuilt in a Baroque Italianate style, could be considered incongruous in an Alpine valley surrounding by mountain peaks, near a quaint German town of stucco and gables. This newer abbey included a lavish white marble church with a curved front flanked by towers. The interior was filled with white and pink marble trimmed in gold, with a huge crystal chandelier suspended on a long chain from the top of the church's large dome. Clear glass in Palladian windows that formed a circle just below the painted dome let in floods of light that spilled on

9. Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 701.

10. Ibid., 700.

11. Ibid., 700–701.

12. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 16,* 97: "Ettal was actually your idea, dear Mama. I have not forgotten that."

13. Ibid., 143.

the brilliant white marble, gold ornaments, and extravagantly gold-framed paintings adorning the church's walls. Marble statues of patrons, accented with gold, stood in niches or on pedestals flanking huge paintings, while the marble and gold pulpit was ornately carved and decorated with twisting figures. The setting overflowed with opulence, displaying earthly splendors meant to conjure the vast riches of heaven.

Dietrich stayed—at least for a time—at the Hotel Ludwig der Bayer, facing the monastery, a typical stucco rustic German building with shutters and cozy attic bedrooms.

At Ettal, Dietrich was a guest of the Abbot, Angelus Kupfer. This exile put him in contact with Roman Catholics resisting the regime, including priest Rupert Mayer, who the Nazis "kept at" the abbey from 1939–45 to stop his anti-Nazi preaching.

These Catholics, together with his contacts with Ruth's Junker aristocrats in the resistance, pulled Dietrich in a politically conservative direction.[14] Although he had once supported Weimar's democratic republic and even been called a socialist, Dietrich increasingly fell under the influence of people who interpreted the experiment in German democracy as a disaster. These (mostly) men, rooted in a nineteenth-century ethos, looked back to the glory years of the pre-World War I German Empire and saw a hereditary king at the helm. An intellectual voice for the resisters, Bonhoeffer now began to articulate a rationale for an at least temporary return to monarchy in the post-Hitlerean world.

In mid-November, as Dietrich settled into Ettal, he wrote to Eberhard: "I eat in the refectory, sleep in the hotel, use the library, have my own key to the cloister, and yesterday had a good and long talk with the Abbot. In short I have everything that one could desire. The only things missing are a desk, and what in these nearly six years has become a matter of course, the exchange of my impressions with you. . . . Come in December!"[15]

Unlike during Dietrich's 1939 month in Manhattan, letters shot back and forth between the two, some touching on money, which Dietrich treated as theirs, not his own: "Guess what?' wrote Dietrich after his arrival in Munich. "In the side pocket of my briefcase I found two hundred marks. Shall we use it for our Christmas trip? Or shall I send you something very nice? Half of it is yours, in any case."[16] Dietrich, hoping to track down information on royalties from his books *Discipleship* and *Life Together*, asked Eberhard: "I found out I earned 764 RM in March and April 1939 (when we were away).

14. Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 723.
15. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 16,* 86.
16. Ibid., 82.

Do you remember if we ever received it? . . . Say, did we already give Mama the taxes for November?"[17] "Your mother," responded Eberhard, "thinks she remembers the 1939 money . . . . She also said you have quite a nice sum accumulated there."[18]

Christel brought her children to Ettal in late November to escape the Berlin air raids.[19] Such raids, once unthinkable, had become routine.[20] Nazi officials ordered children to be "sent to the countryside," an awkward way to avoid saying "evacuated."[21] Officials wanted children moved under the authority of the Hitler Youth, an idea clearly anathema to the Bonhoeffers. But enrolling the children in the monastery school under Dietrich's watchful eye was acceptable.[22]

Small details abound in the correspondence. Dietrich added a postscript to his November 23 letter to Eberhard regarding Vibrans's upcoming marriage, to take place on the eve of Vibrans's departure to the front: "I was very pleased and amazed at Gerhard's decision. Now of all times!"[23]

17. Ibid., 103.
18. Ibid., 116.
19. Ibid., 87.
20. Moorhouse, *Berlin at War,* 159.
21. Ibid., 186.
22. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 16*, 93.
23. Ibid., 90.