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London

"I FIND MYSELF IN radical opposition to all my friends," Dietrich wrote to theologian Karl Barth, justifying his exile shortly after his October arrival in damp, dismal London. "[I was] increasingly isolated .. . . All this has frightened me and shook [sic] my confidence . . . ."[1]

In England, Dietrich moved to 23 Manor Mount in Forest Hills, the neighborhood of the wealthier of his two London congregations, a comfortable suburb on the opposite side of the Thames from downtown London. His church, a brick neo-Gothic structure, had a tall, narrow steeple on one side pointing like a rocket toward the heavens. He lived near the 1854 Crystal Palace, a huge glass building that had been a technological marvel in its time. It had been moved across the Thames long ago and was undergoing a revival after years of neglect. It would burn down in 1936, but now hosted concerts and talks.

Dietrich's other parish, St. Paul's German Reformed Church, served a working-class population in London's East End, traditional Cockney territory. This church stood on Goulston Lane, where in 1888, police had discovered Jack the Ripper's fourth victim, Catherine Eddowe, along with anti-Semitic graffiti written in chalk on a wall: 'The Juwes [sic] are not the men to be blamed for nothing."[2]

Dietrich's East End congregation's members had largely assimilated into English culture, often speaking English as a first language. He would frequently preach to them in his heavily American-accented English,[3] and

1. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 13*, 23. The context of this letter is Barth's letter berating Bonhoeffer for leaving Germany when he was needed there for the church struggles.

2. "Jack the Ripper." The message may have been a hoax, but then, as in the 1930s, London became the destination for many Jews fleeing persecution, although in the 1880s they were fleeing from Russia.

3. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew,* 95.

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join them on hikes and picnics as they escaped the crowds, cobblestones, and coal smoke of the city's East End.[4]

Dietrich lived in the affluent Forest Hills, his rooms stretching across the attic level of his church's manse. Although his quarters are often described as two rooms, he had at least a large dining room, a study, and a guest room, as well as his own bedroom and kitchen.[5] A spacious, overgrown garden "reverting to wilderness" surrounded the home,[6] which leased most of its space to a German girls' school under the direction of a Fraulein Witte. The home, made of pale brick, stood at the top of steep lane of similar houses all lined in a row. Built in the 1860s, at the height of the British Empire, the houses reflected the fading glory of a once-great power.

The Bonhoeffer parsonage

Not long after arriving, Dietrich confessed a source of guilt that had been gnawing at him. He had not exaggerated in telling Barth that events in Germany had "frightened" him, and he poured out his feelings in a letter to Sabine, racked with regret that he had not preached at Gert's father's funeral: "it is a matter of constant remorse to me that at that time I did not simply accede to your request . . . . How could I have been so horribly timid?" He noted her tactful silence—"you . . . have not said anything to me about it

4. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 13*, 2–3.
5. Bethge and Gremmels, *A Life in Pictures,* 73.
6. Bosanquet, *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,* 131.

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. . . ."—and expressed his deep anguish: "It haunts me now as something quite dreadful . . . that now can never be made good. Today, therefore, I must simply beg you to forgive me for my weakness . . . ."[7]

He wrote of yearning for an end to the Nazis, "so deep a longing for that real and ultimate peace in which sorrow, the injustice, the lies and the cowardice are at last truly brought to an end," and repeated his refrain: "I think so often of you, even though I only write infrequently."[8]

Yet all was not misery. Paula sent furniture, including the Bechstein grand piano, a treasured item despite the Bechstein family's close ties to Hitler.[9] Paula also hired Dietrich a housekeeper.

Sunshine burst into Dietrich's life when his friend Franz Hildebrandt, a tall, slim Lutheran pastor with a mother of Jewish descent, joined him in the manse. The two had met right before Dietrich defended his dissertation in December 1927. With this fun-loving, musical, and argumentative friend, whose outgoing personality put Dietrich at ease, Bonhoeffer maintained the familiar contours of the life he had led with his family in Berlin—sharing meals, piano playing, singing, conversation, and storytelling, with the addition of theological debates and endless joking.[10] The brick building, damp and drafty, lacked central heating, so the two fed coins into a gas heater in a futile attempt to stay warm, while dodging the ever-present mice that infested the building.[11] Between the laughter and talk, Dietrich sniffled, sneezed, and coughed with frequent colds. Germany's predicament, as well as Sabine's, preoccupied him, and he travelled back to Berlin often. If in Manhattan he had spent huge sums telegraphing his family, here he phoned home so often that, according to local legend, the phone company reduced his enormous bill.[12]

On Christmas Day, 1933, Wolf Zimmermann joined Dietrich and Franz. Wolf shivered through morning baths in the drafty manse but loved the

7. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers,* 75.

8. Ibid., 75–76.

9. Hitler particularly charmed Helene Bechstein, who introduced him into Munich high society and purportedly wished he had been her son. Not surprisingly, given the boost the family gave him, the Bechstein became Hitler's favorite piano. The flat couldn't have been too small if it could accommodate such a piano, which the family had purchased before Hitler became a force to be reckoned with.

10. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 78.

11. Eberhard Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 328.

12. Wind, *A Spoke in the Wheel,* called it a "quantity rebate" (81).

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magnificent 11 o'clock breakfasts he shared with his friends.[13] Piano playing and animated, argumentative conversations often lasted into the wee hours.

Dietrich plunged into exploring London. He made friends with another German expatriate pastor, Julius Rieger, and together the two went to movies and out for Chinese food, a cuisine Dietrich "particularly relished."[14] In the 1930s, the average Londoner did not eat Chinese, so Dietrich would have rubbed shoulders with the avant-garde in settings that offered such atmospheric touches as Chinese lanterns, real ivory chopsticks, and vivid Chinese wall murals. The *Shanghai Restaurant's Cookery Book* from 1936 contained recipes for "prawn rolls, sharks' fins in soup, fried duck, lobster omelette, fried rice with crab, pork cubes with sour sweet sauce, [and] chicken chop suey" as well as "Birds Nest in Whole Chicken," boasting one-ounce bird nests sewn into a whole boned chickens rinsed out with gin.[15]

Dietrich found himself drawn to London's National Gallery of Art on Trafalgar Square.[16] Another friend noted that Dietrich played tennis—in part to "get his weight down, a matter that rather worried him."[17]

High-spirited Hildebrandt made fun of Dietrich's housekeeper Berta Schulze (today we would call her a personal assistant). Dietrich had met Schulze in Berlin in the mid 1920s, when both were senior theology students under Dr. Harnack. Schulze was "phenomenally gifted in historical and theological knowledge."[18] Peers recognized Harnack had offered her the honor of an invitation to his private seminar in 1929, as he had Dietrich.[19] Berta supported Dietrich's remarkable academic achievement of writing two dissertations by age twenty-one by "tirelessly track[ing] down quotations for his work and help[ing] in the library."[20] She also wrote summaries for him on the Protestant and Roman Catholic church relationship and the workers' movement.[21]

Although part of Harnack's inner circle, Schulze's ties with the professor lacked the personal connection of Dietrich's. Harnack's niece was Dietrich's sister-in-law, Emmi Delbrück. The Delbrücks, the Harnacks, and

13. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew,* 77.
14. Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain,* 26.
15. French, "London's Chinese Restaurant Scene in the 1930s."
16. Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain,* 26.
17. Zimmermann and Smith, eds., *I Knew*, 81.
18. Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 68.
19. Ibid., 137.
20. Ibid.
21. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 9*, 570

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the Bonhoeffers lived on same the block. Harnack himself, the picture of a genial German professor with his wire-framed glasses and tufts of white hair on either side of his bald head, would often walk chatting with Bonhoeffer through their leafy suburb to the train station—one that would later become notorious as a deportation point for Grunewald's Jews.[22] "For Harnack, Bonhoeffer was a highly valued pupil," Schulze said years later, and "one noticed this in the way he treated him. It was not customary in Harnack's seminars to receive praise."[23] Other students remember Dietrich challenging Harnack, politely but persistently.[24]

Dietrich called on Berta when he needed help. On January 5, 1932, he wrote to Friedrich Siegmund Schultze about a translation project that "someone nearby [Schulze], a friend of mine who does this kind of work extremely well and reliably, and would do [it] out of friendship. I of course, would check every questionable passage myself . . . I just don't have time to do every bit of it myself . . . ." [25] So was Schulze, a brilliant scholar, reduced to free translator by a man ten years her junior—who promised to check up on her.

Schulze's status became even more marginal under the Nazis, who were ideologically committed to returning women to the home.[26] A single woman in her late thirties with a PhD, Berta found more and more doors closed. Starting in 1933, National Socialist legislation limited the number of female staff in higher education to 10 percent.[27] Beyond that, Hitler himself denounced women's equality as "a symptom of depravity on par with parliamentary democracy," stating that "equal rights for women means that they receive the esteem they deserve in the sphere nature has assigned to them."[28] As the Nazi Dr. Kurt Rosten asked, typifying the Nazi's sentimental concept of womanhood: "Can woman conceive of anything more beautiful than to sit with her beloved husband in her cozy home and to listen inwardly to the loom of time weaving the weft and warp of motherhood through centuries and millennia?"[29]

22. Rumscheidt, "Harnack, Seeberg, and Bonhoeffer," 211.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
25. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 13*, 87.
26. Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich,* 240.
27. Aycoberry, *The Social History of the Third Reich,* 116.
28. Grunberger, *A Social History of the Third Reich,* 253.
29. Ibid., 254.

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Little wonder Berta agreed to work for her younger peer, managing his affairs and acting as his secretary. She must have arrived soon after Dietrich, as by January, three months into his stay, she had become the butt of jokes.

Berta had "intentions" toward Dietrich, thought Hildebrandt.[30] Berta's attentions, whether designed to "catch a husband" or simply part of a conscientious and detail-oriented personality, led Hildebrandt to mock her in a poem he sent to Dietrich as a 28th birthday gift: "Berta, however,/ I pray thee/ Beg thee as well/ Leave her behind."[31]

In her birthday letter to her son, Paula also referred to Berta: "We could just as well have sent the package last week, but I was worried about the cake. You'll be thinking that I sound like Berta!"[32]

According to Hildebrandt, Berta's apparent romantic interest "led to her dismissal."[33] But who dismissed her and when? From Bertha, who survived to 1987, we hear only a polite silence.

Among other bourgeois perks, Dietrich flew often from London to Berlin at a time when air travel was the domain of the wealthy. While the loud and bumpy rides left Dietrich uneasy, planes catered to a well-to-do clientele with plush seating, wet bars, wood paneling, and solicitous stewards. This, along with frequent phone calls, kept him in close contact with family. Both von Dohnanyis, with Christel, and Walter with Susi, came to visit.[34] While the living quarters were not what these well-heeled Berliners were used to, Dietrich made up for it with music and hospitality.

London pleasures included Dietrich's friendship with George Bell, the bishop of Chichester, with whom he shared a February 4th birthday and a consuming interest in the German church struggle. He visited the bishop at his home, Chichester Palace, enjoying "the great high rooms with their open fireplaces . . . ." [35] The top-hatted twosome also dined together at the exclusive Athenaeum Club, where Bell was a member, the building a neoclassic

30. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 13,* 95.

31. Ibid., 95. One hopes "behind" is not meant as a double entendre.

32. Ibid., 100. Indeed, Paula does sound solicitous, sending Dietrich a birthday package that includes a pillow "stuffed very firmly, to use for your back on the couch," the aforementioned cake, a brass bowl, and a picture.

33. Ibid., 95n. Without identifying Schulze, Keith Clements, in *Bonhoeffer and Britain*, notes the hazy stories of a housekeeper who has to be dismissed for "religious dementia" and also one with supposed designs on Bonhoeffer. "Possibly these are variants of the same story," Clements writes (26).

34. Bethge, *DB: A Biography*. Christel and Susi remain nameless to Bethge, referred to as "their wives" (328).

35. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers,* 113.

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square brightened by a frieze that ran around its exterior, recreating the Elgin marbles on a bright Wedgewood blue background. Class played its part. Bell liked the "well bred young German, who never got so carried away that he forgot his good manners."[36]

Bell had long mixed religious vocation with a love of the arts, support for the labor movement, and service to the poor. Like Dietrich, he had a fascination with Gandhi. Bell had, as well, been in Germany while the Protestant Church was debating its connection with the German (Nazi) Church, and had witnessed Nazi church anti-Semitism first hand.

One of the most charming descriptions of Bonhoeffer—and one that captures him at his charismatic best—comes from the bishop's wife, Henrietta Bell: "He was an especially attractive, vigorous, lively man with plenty of rather unruly chestnut hair and bright, eager blue eyes. And I remember after he left [a meal at Chichester Palace] saying, 'Well, that really was a very unusually attractive person.'"[37]

In 1934, as Dietrich enjoyed life at the heart of the British Empire, Sabine and Gert remained on edge in an increasingly frightening Germany. They bought a car in case of "urgent need." They left Göttingen, where the stigma of being Jewish clung, as often as possible, staying in Berlin or traveling abroad.[38] They discussed emigration.

In a letter from London, Dietrich expressed his anxiety over Sabine's daughters' schooling, sounding cold and haughty as he was wont to do when frightened. In school, first Marianne, and later Christianne, endured catty remarks from teachers and students. One child called out to young Christiane, "Your father is a Jew," an open insult in those times. Every day on the walk to school the girls passed under a sign saying "the father of the Jew is the devil." A newspaper box across from the school sold *Der Sturmer*, the virulently anti-Semitic newspaper. "The elder schoolchildren thronged in front of this," Sabine remembered.[39] Their father's Jewish blood barred the girls from the Hitler Youth, a relief to the parents, but isolating for the daughters.

"I am so very sorry you are having anxieties about the children," Dietrich wrote to Sabine. Why not, he asked, put them in the car and send them to stay in Berlin with the grandparents or an aunt or uncle? "I really don't understand this," he said, his stock phrase to express emotional distress.

36. Bethge, *DB: A Biography,* 361.

37. Clements, *Bonhoeffer and Britain,* 32.

38. The Jewish Confessing Church member Victor Klemperer, though he could ill afford to do so, also bought a car, and with his Aryan wife was pleased to travel to places like Berlin, where Victor could pass as Aryan.

39. Leibholz, *The Bonhoeffers,* 77.

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Late one night in 1934, the Leibholz phone rang unexpectedly. The family froze in fear as each shrill ring reverberated. Only the Gestapo would call at that hour. Was Gert about to be sent to a concentration camp? When they finally answered, they heard Dietrich's cheery voice on the other end of the line, ready for a chat from London. "I am sorry," he wrote later, "that . . . I gave you such a fright during the night, and in fact it was exceptionally stupid."[40]

People in Göttingen began to cross the street when they saw Gert coming. Like other non-Aryans, he was banned from entering the university. Rather than protest the discrimination, many Aryan faculty members approved.[41] In this, Göttingen was not unusual; like the clergy in the Protestant Church, the university system was conservative, if not reactionary, and lecturers often taught nationalism and anti-Semitism. "Most professors were fanatical nationalists who wished for the return of a conservative, monarchial Germany," wrote journalist William Shirer. These professors found the Nazis "too rowdy," but accepted the dictatorship.[42] Peter Gay characterized the universities as "nurseries of a wooly minded militarist idealism and centers of resistance to the new in art and social sciences . . . ." [43] Victor Klemperer, an assimilated Dresden Jew banned from teaching, wished that certain professors could be left hanging from the highest lamp posts for their betrayal of human decency.[44]

Many professors clung to their jobs, pledging allegiance to the regime despite its criminality and hostility to intellectualism. One professor called it "a scene of prostitution" as one university after another fell behind Hitler when opposing him could still have made a difference.[45] Meanwhile, Sabine worried about Gert, and Dietrich pondered his next step.

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40. Ibid.

41. Ibid, 74.

42. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 251.

43. Gay, *Weimar Culture*, 3.

44. Klemperer, *I Shall Bear Witness*, xix. Klemperer's journal accounts of living as an assimilated Jew and ousted professor, protected by an Aryan wife, provide valuable insight into Sabine and Gert's experience.

45. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich,* 251–52.

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