Introduction

Once, during Germany's darkest days, a twin brother and sister, closer than close, found themselves venturing in different directions. One was cast from a privileged life into one of fear and exile. The other fell in love and found the ground he had long sought in the heart of Nazi Germany.

In the "magical" spring of 1939, the brother, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, enjoyed London's sights and cinemas with his beloved twin, Sabine, and his best friend Eberhard Bethge. War loomed, and during idle moments in Sabine's garden amid the forsythia and dark mauve lilacs, Dietrich wondered if he should stay in England with the two people in the world with whom, "in contrast to . . . other people" he felt "a remarkable sense of closeness."[1] Instead, he returned to Germany.

Nazi Germany changed both twins' lives. One would die young at Nazi hands and become an international superstar. The other, who piqued my interest, would live through harrowing events but survive the war. Yet when I went looking for a book on Dietrich Bonhoeffer and women—certainly, I reasoned, such a famous and influential man with a twin sister had spawned at least half a dozen?—I was stunned to find nothing but two articles. Where in all his story were his sisters, I wondered . . . and all the other women—mother, grandmother, friends, fiancée—who were part of his life? Why were they pushed to the margins or off the screen? This book, though in ways I never expected, attempts to address that question. And in doing so, it becomes more than a book about the women.

I discovered during my research that the Bonhoeffer we think we "know" differs from the Bonhoeffer hiding in plain sight. To a large extent, Bonhoeffer's saga has become what filmmaker Laura Poitras calls a "locked narrative," a single version of a story that has been told so many times that it gains a truth of its own. According to the locked narrative, Bonhoeffer, pastor and martyr, functioned as the courageous man's man who nobly kept

1. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 16*, 78.

the female sex at bay in order to fight the Nazis. He alone was responsible for the "remarkable achievement" of writing two dissertations before age twenty-five. He alone—or with a handful of other men—fought the Nazi church. Only at the end of his life did he suddenly fall in love with a much younger woman. Bonhoeffer himself participated, if unwittingly, in creating this male-centered narrative, and it continued after his death, propelled along by his biographer Eberhard Bethge.

Why so marginalize the women who, as it happens, were highly important in his life? Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies* offers one explanation:

> A further word about biographical tradition. To Ernst Bluher, one of the founders of the wandervogel, that tradition [biography] was anything but naive convention. Quite the contrary: commenting on the autobiography of Carl Peters, a German colonial in Africa, Bluher noted . . . "The book is very personal, more than one would expect; and women play almost no role in that personal content. Even mothers are given short shrift. . . . We see before us one of those indefatigable conquerors and organizers; one of those men of action and politicians who has nothing to do with women; one who needs male society, the constant company of men, an endless cycle of making and breaking friendships with them . . ."
>
> It seems to be the way of men to keep silent about their (private) women in their (public) biographies. . . . Should our analysis not then take into account cultural norms? Indeed, it must.[2]

It no doubt has been, in part, biographical convention that has obscured the women, and this erasure has dogged Bonhoeffer scholarship to this day. For example, Charles Marsh, in his recent Bonhoeffer biography, writes that Ruth von Kleist-Retzow regarded Bonhoeffer's engagement with her granddaughter with "displeasure." This is not exactly the story, but Marsh does not focus on the women.[3]

In fact, the women's real stories have not been erased: the women have released portions of them, then tactfully receded. Women played a vitally important role in Bonhoeffer's life, but often they flit across the texts as disembodied shadows, easily missed, even when they speak. The gaps in the conventional narrative can be surprising: in one striking instance that becomes a metaphor for how biographers have literally *not seen* a woman purportedly significant in Bonhoeffer's life—no photo of Elisabeth Zinn,

2. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies,* vol. 1, 27 and 26.

3. See Marsh, *Strange Glory.*

proposed by Eric Metxas in his best-selling biography as Bonhoeffer's first fiancée, has ever been published. This surprised me—and I was grateful when Zinn's daughter provided me with the picture I include in this book. Yet perhaps I should have expected this, for no book until now has given an accurate account of the women in Bonhoeffer's life.

Shining a spotlight on the women reveals how much they mattered to Bonhoeffer, even if he often took them for granted. Although most often understood as a operating in a masculine arena, Bonhoeffer, in his last decade, had an inner circle consisting of two, and then three *women*: his twin sister Sabine, Ruth von Kleist Retzow, and in the last years, his fiancée Maria—and one man, Eberhard Bethge. This completely turns on its head the male-centered German biographical tradition. And the real story of these women—especially of Ruth and Maria—has been missed.

As Stephan Haynes aptly outlines in *The Bonhoeffer Phenomenon*, a wide range of religious groups from evangelical to liberal to radical have appropriated Bonhoeffer as one of their own. This becomes possible because Bonhoeffer reflects a prewar—what we might call a pre-postmodern—consciousness, a consciousness that no longer fully exists. We view him anachronistically, through our different set of lenses, and thus he shatters or refracts, like an abstract painting, into a dozen disparate images because he doesn't fit conventional postwar paradigms. He remains, in some sense, untranslatable. His death, shortly before the end of World War II, freezes him forever in a lost time, like the Grecian figures on Keats's urn. His world couldn't fully be laid to rest until it faced the Holocaust, the atom bomb, and the enormity of the costs of racism, colonialism, war, and the unbridled will to power. As Leo Damrosch writes in his biography of Swift, quoting Yeats: "We should see certain men and women as if at the edge of a cliff, time broken away from their feet."[4]

Being on the cusp of a new time can also explain Bonhoeffer's treatment of women. A patriarchal culture that routinely devalued the female produced him. In Weimar and Nazi Germany, this culture sometimes went so far as to valorize a male-only cult of hypermasculinity. In taking women for granted, Bonhoeffer behaved normally for his time and place. We need both to acknowledge this and be willing to interrogate this mind-set.

During his life, Bonhoeffer kept glancing backward, then forward. Modernity, which he experienced in the form of National Socialism, meant the destruction of Christianity, civilization, morality, decency, and humanity.

4. Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift,* 4.

As time went on, Bonhoeffer began to hope for a restoration of monarchy, rejected women leaving the home, and may have been celibate because of a deep, Victorian aversion to sex. He moved comfortably in a world of top hats and tails, princes and clicking heels, countesses and chauffeurs. His young fiancée would criticize his embrace of yesteryear's forms, such as his appreciation of the old aristocratic women who put on gloves to touch their shoes.

Yet Bonhoeffer recognized too that the backward gaze boxed him in: this, arguably, explains why he dropped his prison fiction projects. Instead, he took his theology as far out as it could go forward in his letters to best friend Eberhard Bethge, paving the way for the postwar world. In many ways, Galileo is an apt cognate, a man who recognized that the earth revolved around the sun, but who lacked the theoretical apparatus to prove it—stunningly, the man could drop objects of different weights from a tower and measure their rate of fall, yet lived in a world that had not conceived of gravity. Galileo died the year of Newton's birth, a hairsbreadth before gravity would have made sense of his observations. Bonhoeffer died the year a new world started to come into being.

A Doubled Life

Living in Nazi Germany forced Bonhoeffer to pretend to be what he was not, to lead a double life. As Iranian literary critic Azar Nafisi notes, "the worst crime committed by totalitarian mindsets is that they force their citizens, including their victims, to become complicit in their crimes."[5] From habitual lying as he pretended to be a loyal citizen of the Reich to getting involved in an assassination plot, survival meant appearing to become a mirror of what Bonhoeffer hated, as all the while he struggled to maintain his integrity. Nafisi writes that it's easy to undervalue the immense import of the small gesture in a totalitarian setting: a loose lock of hair escaping the veil in 1980s Tehran or a psalm reading (considered "Jewish") at Bonhoeffer's Finkenwalde seminary in Nazi Germany both became subversive gestures.

The world of his childhood home stuck deeply with Bonhoeffer, and he called it "a refuge, even a sacred space." He sought to replicate it all his adult life, especially as a defense against the National Socialist state. As many have mentioned, it permeated his vision of his various seminaries. As he himself repeatedly noted, he did not find people fungible: he couldn't simply randomly replace one person with another, and the very idea repulsed him. Yet

5. Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* 76.

at the same time, he did replicate or double in his adult life the *patterns* of his childhood.

Bonhoeffer's personality also could be double-sided. Like the fictional Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice,* he could be cold to outsiders, shunning those he disliked or who didn't interest him, and yet filled with warmth and generosity to those who made it into his inner sanctum—or to those more peripheral figures on whom he freely bestowed his charm.

Silences

In the inverted world of Nazi Germany, gaps and absences become presences or clues. People in Nazi Germany routinely wrote and spoke in what Leo Strauss called esoteric language, language with one meaning in ordinary discourse and another to those in the know. When the Bonhoeffer family would otherwise look bad in primary source documents, footnotes often explain a statement as code, but in some cases, the meaning of what one suspects might be code—such as late in his prison experience Bonhoeffer asking his fiancé Maria to fix his underwear—is lost.

As Bethge himself points out, silences speak—missing diary pages, for example, in his opinion, indicate Bonhoeffer's involvement in the anti-Hitler conspiracy. Bethge, naturally, does not point to his own silences or evasions—nor do the women around Bonhoeffer, who are so careful in their wording. Yet patterns emerge as these habits of silence and double entendre extend beyond the war and become texts through which we can read a different story from the locked narrative.

The rich, complex density of Bonhoeffer's life also complicates writing his story. Bethge's biography reflects this complexity: it extends to more than 900 pages, and yet it leaves out almost everything about the women—Bonhoeffer's extraordinary relationship to Maria, for example, covers a scant three pages. (The Bonhoeffer world cries out for an exhaustive, multivolume biography.)

Given that I added the stories of important women in his life to an already complex narrative, writing a manageable account inevitably became for me an exercise in compression. Thus, this biography is not an account of the Confessing Church struggle nor is it an account of the anti-Hitler conspiracy. Instead, it goes *behind* the church struggle and the plot against Hitler to the people, like Sabine, who motivated Bonhoeffer's actions and brought life to his theology. For Bonhoeffer, this personal experience was crucial: he found the personal in the theological and the theological in the personal. As Robin Lovin and Jonathan Gosser note, coming to grips with

Bonhoeffer's life becomes not an interesting add-on but "a necessary project." They write, "it is only as the man emerges for us from his work [or, I would say, as that work emerges from the man] that we are restrained from appropriating his suggestive, enigmatic and fragmentary words and twisting them entirely to our own purposes."[6]

I don't dwell unduly on Bonhoeffer's theology, but my understanding of it deeply informs my understanding of Bonhoeffer himself. A few basic principles or premises about his theology underlie this book and can be summed up as follows:

As mentioned above, the theological is always the personal for Bonhoeffer. He could be reticent about his personal life, but his theology is always shaped by his dialogue with his circumstances.

Bonhoeffer's theology is deeply this-worldly. He finds his grounding for this in what he calls the Old Testament and what we might call the Hebrew bible. He deeply appreciates prayer, but as a complement to, not a substitute for, action. He values the sensual joys of this life—but sacrifices them too.

His theology is also deeply communitarian. He rejects a theology that runs as followed: I—an individual—am "saved" because I have verbally accepted Jesus Christ, am baptized, go to church, pray, and take communion. He rejects a notion of personal salvation that allows people to bury their heads in the sand and ignore injustice as long as they themselves are "churched." He rejects a theology that says we don't have to worry about worldly suffering because this will get worked out in heaven after we die.

In tandem with the above, Bonhoeffer rejects piousness and religiosity focused on personal purity. He is willing to risk sin—and sin boldly—to save others.

Bonhoeffer's theology is radically centered in Christ. Christ for him is the Jesus of the Sermon of the Mount who preached peace and forgiveness. He rejects attempts to fashion less demanding substitutes for this theology: worship of nation, custom, or institutions, even the church.

While I initially tried to include every woman who crossed Bonhoeffer's path in my book, I had to cut deeply or end up with a biography of multivolume proportions. I have instead offered a few examples of women who flitted peripherally across his life, alongside the women most important to him. I have also, with regret, compressed Bonhoeffer's rich time in Barcelona, Manhattan, and Berlin before the Nazi takeover, because these periods

6. Lovin and Gosser, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer," 148.

brushed only glancingly against the relationships on which I focus. Compression also inevitably meant losing some of the movement that characterized Bonhoeffer and others of his class, who crisscrossed their country with dizzying frequency, travelling around Germany so often, even during the height of the World War II, that our own "on the road" Americans begin to look pedestrian.

Life doesn't rhyme, and although I initially meant to write book reframing Bonhoeffer through the lens of women, I very quickly found that impossible without highlighting the central role of Bethge, whose arrival on the scene almost exactly ten years before Dietrich's death was the seismic event of Bonhoeffer's last decade—and arguably of his life. Without acknowledging this, no sense could be made of the configuration of his relationships with women.

If women have been routinely downplayed in Bonhoeffer's story, Bethge, the all-important best friend, has not. As early as the 1950s, the intimacy of the prison letters raised questions about the nature of his relationship with Bonhoeffer: were the two more than close friends? John de Gruchy, in his Bethge biography *Daring, Trusting Spirit*, all but connects the dots about the "special friendship" between the two men—but never does. In his recent biography, Charles Marsh, while hovering suggestively around the issue of Bonhoeffer's sexuality, also doesn't take a definitive stand, beyond opining that Bonhoeffer was celibate. My book explores this issue, while making a distinction between being same-sex attracted and *acting* on the orientation—to be same-sex attracted doesn't imply "crossing a line," whatever that means. I will openly argue, however, that Bonhoeffer went beyond emotional friendship with Bethge and was *in love* with him—and that Bonhoeffer's fiancée knew it. And while the *physicality*, though not the orientation of the Bethge/Bonhoeffer relationship is largely irrelevant to my project, the book will weigh the evidence as to celibacy. It will, as well, explore the seeds of a nascent queer theology in Bonhoeffer's writing.

Truth-telling is essential, no more so than when uncomfortable, and I hope an exploration of the sexuality of one of the Christian martyrs of the twentieth century might, like the Catholic Church's openness in revealing the faith struggles of Mother Teresa, help others who struggle. Paraphrasing Christian blogger Justin Lee, if we can accept that someone of Bonhoeffer's stature might have struggled with his sexual feelings, "maybe your nephew or best friend will have someone to look to as a role model, to know that he doesn't have to leave his faith behind because of what he's experiencing."[7] And as is so often the case with Bonhoeffer, either side can have it their own way.

7. Lee, "Questions from Christians #4."

The first pages of this book outline in quick strokes the early years of Bonhoeffer's life, with an emphasis on his close relationship with his sister Sabine. These years formed him, led him to become a theologian, and sent him into lonely wandering in search of "a ground to stand on." These years also included times of great foreboding, perhaps best illustrated through Sabine, in her younger days possibly the most polished of the four daughters (though she would deny it), the one who made the wealthiest match, a woman artistic, musical, nurturing, and witty, but so distressed by the Nazis that her life was thrown into upheaval.

Because Bonhoeffer met two of the most important women in his life, Ruth von Kleist-Retzlow and Maria von Wedermeyer, as well as Eberhard Bethge, in his last decade, I chose to concentrate on that period—the time, from the start of the Finkenwalde seminary, that Dietrich repeatedly called "the incomparable years." For from 1935, no matter how dark the outer world, Dietrich had found his long-sought "ground to stand on."

I tell the stories of three women in his inner circle: Sabine, Ruth, and the young woman dragged there unwittingly, Maria von Wedemeyer. Some have asked, why not concentrate more fully on Bonhoeffer's mother Paula? Paula clearly had an enormous influence on her son's life: she established the pattern of domestic living he loved and recreated in his seminaries, fostered his love of music, took an intense interest in his theology and the church struggle, and stayed in touch with him on almost daily basis: her importance can hardly be overstated. Yet Bonhoeffer did not include her in his innermost circle, did not make her privy to his innermost dramas. While highly involved in their lives, she kept her children at a distance, insisting on the prerogatives of rank: parents above children. Dietrich turned early to other women to meet his deeper intimacy needs: Sabine, his governess, his grandmother. Paula does sometimes joke with Dietrich, but with her, he is more reticent, more respectful, more careful in presentation, less likely to take on the casual and sometimes demanding tone he adopts in letters to his inner circle. Paula, though ever-present in this volume, as she was in her son's life, thus remains an outsider. And while the book focuses on the inner circle women, many others appear in the text: Bonhoeffer's sisters, including forthright Christel, who could intimidate Bethge (and reminded him of Paula), nurturing Ursel, whose self-starvation during the war years was possibly loving with a vengeance, and the outgoing but ever awkward Susi, as the youngest, always racing to keep up. The book also includes the scholar Berta Schulze, as well as dissident Elisabeth von Thadden, who signaled her contempt for Hitler by heiling with a limp wrist, along with aunts and governesses, friends and supporters, the indefatigable seminary housekeeper Mrs. Struwe—and Elisabeth Zinn—and because life does not

rhyme, periods when the women (seemingly) fade away and Bethge and the "brethren" necessarily take center stage.

The book attempts to include some of the look and feel of Germany during Bonhoeffer's life. It helps, for instance, to understand that the freezing temperatures Bonhoeffer repeatedly writes about from remote Sigurdshof in 1939–40 refer to the coldest winter in Europe in one hundred years. We can understand the heroic lengths Bonhoeffer's mother must have gone to when he sent her his laundry if we understand that during World War II, rationing meant every German got a single matchbox size bar of soap once a month for washing both body and clothes. It adds to our appreciation of his fiancée Maria's dedication to acknowledge the filthy train cars in which she travelled to visit him or the way Berlin's devastation confronted her every time she rode the trolley to his prison. In a similar way, I have tried to capture what to the modern mind is a startling aspect of the German church struggle: both the openness of the Nazi reaction against Christianity and the extent to which most of the clergy, though not Bonhoeffer, were willfully blind to the hostility.

Bonhoeffer and Hitler

It's almost impossible to write a book set in 1930s Germany without bumping up against Hitler.[8] Much as I wished the story we have of that period had taken a different turn, I had to accept that it didn't. I found myself, instead, desperately looking for redemptive moments in Hitler's life, as if by finding one, I could somehow make sense of the suffering he inflicted. I faced instead that Hitler never transcended his lowest instincts. His character comes across as, if opportunistic, also fundamentally rigid, unchanging, mechanistic, and frozen in outlook, lending credence to writers such as Lucy Dawidowicz, who insists Hitler knew what his goals were in 1919 and never deviated from them.

In contrast, people like Bonhoeffer, Maria, and Ruth, among many others in his circle, emerge as fully human, capable of growth, change, humility, empathy, and self-transcendence. The forceful Ruth, indomitable, dominating, self-willed, not one to second-guess her decisions, experienced moments of uncertainty and self doubt. Bonhoeffer had a deep experience of transformation after the failed Hitler assassination attempt of July 20,

8. To avoid entering the many lively debates on whether we should interpret history through the lens of the so-called great man or through impersonal socioeconomic forces, I use "Hitler" to represent both a distinct individual and the larger mind-set of National Socialist ideology.

1944—there's a reason beyond the obvious that Bethge kept his poem "The Friend" in his wallet for the rest of his life. And who can forget Maria, trekking with a rucksack (not a suitcase!) miles across a cold terrain in February 1945, trying to bring supplies to Bonhoeffer at Flossenbürg long before he had arrived?

Albert Speer, Hitler's architect and armaments minster, became for me a counterpoint to Bonhoeffer. Born just eleven months earlier than Bonhoeffer, he grew up in the same privileged milieu. Yet his choices could not have been more different. By throwing in his lot with Hitler, he earned unparalleled privilege and prestige at the same time that Bonhoeffer courted risk and reprisal. Yet amid his splendor, Speer recounts his torment at long afternoons spent with Hitler's entourage, almost entirely with people he despised as uneducated petit bourgeoisie. He sat through many a social weekend of excruciating monotony and boredom, the life sapped from him, years later almost snarling with resentment at the memory of what he endured for ambition's sake. In contrast, during this same period, Bonhoeffer experienced what he would call "a foretaste of paradise," surrounded with people he loved, and working to build Christian communities he hoped would redeem Germany.

It can seem as if ethical individuals like Bonhoeffer, Sabine, Ruth, and Maria sprang out of nowhere, but nothing could be less true. While reticent in talking about the depth of their faith lives, all those in Bonhoeffer's inner circle, including, of course, Bonhoeffer himself, were deeply religious in the purest sense, though Bonhoeffer vehemently came to reject the word *religious* as hypocritical and self-righteous. All the same, a deep-seated felt *experience* of the living Christ (not based on lip service nor mere intellectualism, though Bonhoeffer would consistently try to distance himself from "enthusiasm") animated the lives of Bonhoeffer's inner circle and made their moral discernment easy if anguished—they had no trouble telling barbarity from faith, cruelty from kindness, cowardice from courage, living spirit from intellectual abstraction or rationalization. This real faith—so difficult to write about as it only manifested in actions that are too easily divorced from their roots, as if the actions stand alone or come from rationality alone—defined the heart of this group. Yet it could also frustrate: If Bonhoeffer and his friends "got it," so many did not, notably the arid intellectuals in Manhattan espousing a philosophical/political social justice gospel cultivated parallel to rather than from faith, and fellow pastors in Germany who didn't see that the Christ spirit could never tolerate anti-Semitism. Bonhoeffer drew close to others who "understood"—among them, spirit-filled blacks in Harlem in whom he saw the face of Christ as well as his dissident church cohort in Germany. His inner circle—Sabine, Bethge, Ruth, Maria, and others in his life—based their lives

on this faith. These people all happened to be Christians, but Bonhoeffer also developed an extraordinary sensitivity to like-minded people whatever their faith backgrounds, whether Jewish, atheist, or something else—and touchingly, even on his last full day of life, rather than force his Christianity on another, he demurred from giving a sermon because an atheist prisoner might be offended. Only when the prisoner urged him to speak would Bonhoeffer proceed. An elite of such decency as he had known and been, which he understood cut across class and faith lines, he hoped, would one day run Germany.

As I sought to place myself in the world that Bonhoeffer and the women around him would have experienced, the German people also became a character in the story. I grew up with a post-war US narrative of Germans as the Other, but my immersion in their culture changed my views. Yes, as Theweleit argues in *Male Fantasies,* a group that became a nucleus of Nazism enjoyed violence for violence's sakes, reveling in blood spurting, people dismembered, screaming, dying, and smashed to pulp, just as some people today enjoy beheadings and live burnings, but these were and are a minority. One of National Socialism's chief challenges—and defeats—lay in its inability to change the way many ordinary Germans clung to human decency: imposing the death penalty for giving a loaf of bread to a foreign worker only reveals the desperation of a regime unable to stem small acts of kindness and mercy. I read over and over too from foreign travelers in Germany in the 1930s expressions of love for the German people and their awareness of how many suffered anguish over the actions of its leaders. This is not in any way to discount or excuse the atrocities committed by ordinary Germans or the inaction that Bonhoeffer so roundly condemns, or to equate qualms of conscience experienced amid ease and comfort with the immense bodily and mental sufferings of Jews and others, but to add gray areas to the story. Important to this book, though necessarily silent in their writing, is what people like Maria and Dietrich saw as they constantly crisscrossed Berlin and Germany. We know Maria witnessed the abused prisoners working on her family estate under the jurisdiction of the SS—she even obliquely comments on it once. This brings us back to both anachronism and silence—what people of the era knew and could not say, under fear of being accused of treason, is in many ways outside of our own everyday experience—and yet ever-present behind what the players write.

While it could be troubling at times to read accounts of Germans traumatized and outraged by being ousted from a house by a Pole at war's end, as if this somehow ranked worse than the immense slaughter, torture, and suffering of Jews, Poles, Russians, and others (and showing an all too

human propensity to highlight our own sufferings and discount those of others), I also found it refreshing to read the accounts of those who took responsibility, as Bonhoeffer had hoped to do. One of many that stands out is Anonyma,[9] who in *A Woman in Berlin,* while writing wrenchingly of the repeated and incessant rape she and other women suffered at the hands of the sitting Russian army, also acknowledges, as other Germans do, that whatever was done to them was more merciful than what their people had done. In this awareness of human moral responsibility, in this empathy, as Bonhoeffer (and Sabine and Ruth and Maria) so well understood, was the beginning of redemption and renewal.

The Phases

Bonhoeffer's life falls into six phases:

I. **Security:** Birth to age twenty (1906–1926). Sabine's marriage marks the first great rupture in his life. But 1918, when World War I hit home, also marks a division.

II. **Wandering:** Age twenty to twenty-nine (1926–1935). Bonhoeffer wanders and achieves, writing two dissertations, each published as a scholarly book, and a third book on Genesis 1–3. During this time he lives in Barcelona, Manhattan, and London. Manhattan marks a watershed: his whole view of the world changes during his year at Union Theological Seminary.

III. **Joy:** Age twenty-nine to thirty-six (1935–October 1, 1942). Bonhoeffer's incomparable years: He finds fulfilling work in running seminaries and meets crucially important people. He publishes *Discipleship* and *Life Together* and works on *Ethics*.

IV. **Change:** Age thirty-and-a-half to early thirty-seven (October 1, 1942–April 5, 1943): A liminal period during which it becomes clear he can't evade arrest and other changes.

V. **Imprisonment:** Age thirty-seven to early thirty-eight (April 5, 1943–July 20, 1944): First phase of imprisonment.

VI. **Sainthood:** Age thirty-eight-and-a-third to thirty-nine (July 21, 1944–April 9, 1945): Second phase of imprisonment.

9. Another is writer Christa Wolf.

How do we unearth some of the reality of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, this man for whom the personal was always the theological and the theological always the personal?

Beyond his own writings, we look inevitably—necessarily—to the fragmented and elusive, often frustrating, memories of those who knew him, to letters and memoirs.

Bonhoeffer and his cohort spent so much time on the phone I'm amazed we have any letters at all. I'm also surprised that nobody has yet stumbled on Gestapo tapes of phone conversations—the Gestapo were tapping Bonhoeffer and his brother-in-law's phone lines at least as of late 1942 and probably earlier. In writing or reading about Bonhoeffer, however, we necessarily fall back on the letters we have, keeping in mind that they represent the tip of the communication flow between people in almost constant phone contact: even before World War I, the parents had installed a phone line in their summer home in the Harz mountains, and friends over and over marveled during his life at the frequency of Bonhoeffer's calls to and from home. Ruth, a consummate networker, also seems to have been almost continuously on the phone.

I puzzled over why they wrote letters when they were always talking on the phone and recognized that the letters fall into several categories: Bonhoeffer routinely exchanged birthday letters with those closest to him, particularly, of course, Sabine, Ruth, and Bethge. Friends also commonly exchanged Christmas letters (falling in time anywhere from Advent to New Year's). People wrote personal thank you letters as well. Bonhoeffer often shoots off brief letters with packages home to his mother or postcards when in transit, for example, while "laid over" in Amsterdam on a flight from Berlin to London. In Manhattan in 1930, while he telegraphed home frequently, telephoning Berlin was so difficult and so expensive (the equivalent of $60 a minute in our money) that even the Bonhoeffers eschewed it, so Bonhoeffer wrote letters. At other times, letters clearly express emotions or ideas that can't be verbalized easily, put plans in writing, or continue conversations already begun. And "over and beyond all that" as Bonhoeffer might have said, moments simply occurred when people wanted to write to one another. Finally, we get to the prison years, where Bonhoeffer was without phone access most of the time. Here letters became a lifeline. But the letters don't reflect the fullness of the dense, close, entwined relationships.

I sometimes met with surprises during my research: for instance, while I expected them to be close, I was startled at how very close Dietrich felt to Sabine for his entire life. This became difficult to document, especially after World War II began. During the war, Sabine increasingly became a shadow in terms of texts: we have nothing like the robust interchange between

Bonhoeffer and Bethge or Bonhoeffer and von Wedemeyer. Yet, even without a detailed correspondence, we can trace that Sabine was never far from Bonhoeffer's thoughts—and at times his emotions burst out with surprising clarity, such as when he wrote in frustration to Bethge from prison that he kept asking his family over and over about Sabine and not getting a response. At other times, we find out how much she occupied his thoughts in more oblique ways. Bethge's biography also corroborates how close Dietrich felt to Sabine, but he does so with such understatement that it can be easy to overlook. In addition, as Bonhoeffer's niece Renate Bethge writes, Bonhoeffer himself stuck to a code of "reserve and keeping silent . . . above all, about things that affect one most deeply."[10]

Bonhoeffer's relationship with Ruth can seem confusing. His deep attachment to her becomes clear especially in his prison correspondence with Maria, but Ruth often felt neglected and frustrated by his absences. He was busy; she was demanding; he was a younger person in better health and hence with greater mobility—the older Ruth often could do little but invite and wait, saying she would not beg him visit, and he was the man, sometimes oblivious to how he was treating the woman—yet to him she was a muse, kindred spirit, and comfort, the dearly loved woman whose home, where he so often ended up, soothed his soul.

Sources

A helpful source for the layout of the church struggle and the extent to which women participated is Victoria Barnett's *For the Soul of the People*. Sabine Dramm's *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Resistance* offers a fine analysis of the various plots to kill Hitler. Ferdinard Schlingensiepen's lively biography of Bonhoeffer came out as I began working and I found it helpful as well. Renate Wind's short biography, *A Spoke in the Wheel*, offered useful snippets: for example, she contacted Elisabeth Zinn while Zinn was still alive. I discovered Lisa Dahill's feminist work on Bonhoeffer's theology early on and have found it lucid and validating. My understanding of Bonhoeffer has been informed and enriched as well by a host of Bonhoeffer scholars such as Ruth Zellner, John de Gruchy, and Clifford Green, just to name a few.

Despite being often largely overlooked, many of the women themselves wrote their stories: Sabine published a memoir, while Ruth von Kleist-Retzow left an unpublished draft of her life which became a main source for Jane Pejsa's *Matriarch of Conspiracy*. An anecdotal and helpful first-person source, *I Knew Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, includes accounts of various friends and

10. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 7*, 202.

family, including women. Mary Bosanquat's *The Life and Death of Dietrich Bonhoeffer,* the first Bonhoeffer biography, functions almost as a primary source, as it relies heavily on interviews with Bethge and Sabine, who Bosanquat became friends with in 1948, and even includes a smidgen of correspondence from Bonhoeffer's aged governesses. Fiancée Maria left her love letters and an essay about Bonhoeffer, some published diary entries, and a brief but telling 1974 television interview. Bonhoeffer's sister Susi wrote recollections that Schlingensiepen used. She also gave a filmed interview, as did sister-in-law Emmi Delbrück, and Maria's older sister, Ruth-Alice von Bismarck. Along with these sources, Fortress's sixteen-volume *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, now completely translated into English, includes letters by women. The context, introductions, notes, and appendices in these volumes have been very helpful.

Working with primary sources, while a gift, presents challenges and these must be treated with care—these accounts are subjective, inherently unreliable if invaluable, often leave out precisely what one wants to know, and sometimes are frustratingly vague as to dates, though they often present consistent and comprehensible emotional landscapes. As far as possible, I have tried to cross-reference or find logical reference points for dating and for corroborating information.

Remarkably few have consulted Maria von Wedemeyer's letters as a source of information. When in doubt, I have used them to place Dietrich and Maria, assuming he—or she—would know better than anyone else where they were at significant points in life, especially shortly after the fact. I have tried to correlate Maria's letters with the prison correspondence to Bethge as well as to the prison fiction, since Bonhoeffer did all this writing at the same time. Often, not surprisingly, Bonhoeffer would repeat himself in letters to Maria and Bethge, in which case what he omits in a letter to one or another becomes telling. If nothing else, I hope this book succeeds in beginning the recovery of Maria as the full and extraordinary—and too often misused—human being she was. In addition, since she has so often functioned as a stick figure in texts and hence not received full attention, I have included my own Maria timeline in the appendix, knowing that more will be revealed should her journals be made more fully available, as I hope they will. Maria's later memories of the events of her courtship have to be used with care, however, as her recollection of events grew hazier over time.

If we want to gain a sense of an embodied Bonhoeffer, the television interviews with the women, especially his sister Susi and sister-in-law Emmi, who grew up in the same neighborhood with him from the time he was ten, help flesh him out. We have no audio recordings of Bonhoeffer and only a one- or two-second snippet of film in which he tosses a ball. Bonhoeffer's

English might have had more of an American accent than his sister's and sister-in-law's, but from Susi and Emmi we can get a sense of the commanding (to American ears almost stereotypically "Nazi") cadence he must have had. Susi and Emmi speak decisively, assuredly, with self-possession and without hesitation. Since contemporary accounts emphasize Bonhoeffer's assurance, we can imagine he sounded, with a deeper voice, very much like these sisters. As I listened to them and watched them, I saw women used to being in charge, sure of their privilege, and completely unintimidated by the camera. This, I thought, was Bonhoeffer.

Bethge, the gatekeeper to Bonhoeffer, both eyewitness to many of the events in the last decade of Bonhoeffer's life as well as author of a monumental biography, pours out floods information—and yet withholds. His biography is labyrinthine, winding up and down and back and forth and sideways and all around—woe to the poor researcher who fails to note a page numbers. To some extent, this reproduces the labyrinthine, ever-moving quality of Bonhoeffer's life—but Bethge's method frustrates a straightforward narrative. I toyed with the idea of writing a non-chronological narrative, so that I could laser focus on the women and skip everything else, but feared leaving the reader entirely confused. Also, I had spent so much time unraveling chronology (the timelines in the Dietrich Bonhoeffer *Works* series were helpful starting points), that I felt I should preserve this part of the research.

As noted above, Bethge's monumental biography marginalizes women. Bethge had choices and his choice as late as the 1960s to write within an anachronistic tradition that downplayed females might say something to us about the Bonhoeffer he hoped to construct.

Bethge's *opinions* often function, in practice, as fact. One must be careful or what Bethge *believes* can come to carry the de facto weight of truth. I believe that Bethge deliberately obfuscates the nature of his relationship with Bonhoeffer, going so far, at least once, to quote from a letter and then supply an explanation of what Bonhoeffer meant that is badly out of context. He also evades issues by veering away from them (his weaving narrative adds to this), and by using understatement or esoteric language. Even the title of his biography: *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, A Biography,* implies an agenda-lessness, a dealing in objective fact, that no biography can reasonably assert. His story also sometimes simply varies from the other primary sources, especially for figures such as Maria von Wedemeyer. All the same, his book provides a valuable, often first-person account of a life, much as he tried to distance himself from that stance by using the third-person voice.

The periods of Bonhoeffer and Bethge's separation led to spikes in letter writing, and thus offer incomparable windows into their relationship—these

times include in the summer of 1936, June of 1939, the winter of 1940–41, and of course, the prison correspondence.

Charles Marsh's biography came out after my manuscript was almost complete. I have found it both well written and extraordinary, and at first my heart beat happily—sometimes wildly—as certain statements seemed to confirm a suspicion I held or to point to a passage of lyrical beauty I'd missed in the primary source material. My heart thumped, for example, when I read in Marsh that Elisabeth Zinn bore a striking resemblance to Sabine—I had only read, previously, accounts that she bore a vague, indefinable resemblance to his twin. As one of my working theses was, that in a gentle and humane way, Bonhoeffer replaced people in his life with people who reminded him of people he liked, I was excited, but I couldn't source this tidbit, and so had to drop it. In another instance, I thought I had missed a particularly colorful passage from a childhood trip to the beach in which, one night, "the wind caused an unfastened shutter to beat against the side of the house in loud, startling claps,"[11] but couldn't find that particular detail in the source: this is not at all to criticize a method that seeks to capture the lyrical essence of a moment but to note that our approaches differ. In the end, Marsh's primary interest is not the women.

Marsh's Bonhoeffer is not my Bonhoeffer—I agree, for example, that Bonhoeffer liked to dress well, but primarily from pride in his appearance rather than a "flamboyant abbot" quality. My Bonhoeffer is primarily masculine in dress, performance, and outlook. And while I don't miss the privilege Marsh notes, especially Bonhoeffer's blindness to his gender privilege, what most strikes me, as it does Marsh, is the man struggling, if often failing, to transcend his circumstances.

In addition to privilege, upheaval also formed him: Bonhoeffer truly led a doubled life. Despite privilege, he went hungry during World War I, an experience unknown to most modern Westerners. He worked, albeit briefly, on a farm as child: he gratefully gleaned wheat as if he were a biblical Ruth or Naomi. When he saw hungry people on the streets or on a train, wealthy as he was, their experience could not be abstract to him. If few of us can brag of living at the level of privilege that Bonhoeffer enjoyed—maids, chauffeurs, brilliant parties, grand pianos, first-class travel, summer homes, and access to palaces—most of us also haven't lived with bombings, raids, hunger, imprisonment, and finally, in a Nazi concentration camp.

Since laughter and lightheartedness don't predominate in Hitler's Germany, what can get lost in this grim period—one of deep threat—is the sense of humor Bonhoeffer and many of his cohort shared. I have tried to capture

11. Marsh, *Strange Glory,* 18.

some of the wry wit that shines forth from Sabine's memoir, and I have snagged some fleeting glimpses of Bonhoeffer's humor in his correspondence. Bethge shows flashes, as does Maria, who had a deeply sardonic outlook. These individuals' humanity perhaps emerges most deeply in their ability to joke through the dark moments.

We've tended to sanctify Dietrich Bonhoeffer, but by his late thirties, he himself had learned not to seek perfection. "A bit more selfishness would make one truly selfless," he wrote from Tegel prison on March 19, 1944, regarding his fiancée's mother, who was "always wanting to do 'good.'"[12] To him, too much self-sacrifice became a form of egotism—yet he laid down his life for his beliefs.

He did his best, however, not to die at Nazi hands and that reflected his theology. For him, one lived the religious life in the midst of the world's joys and struggles, in the center, as he put it, of the village. This reflected Old Testament—Jewish, hence in Nazi Germany, subversive if not illegal—theology. He never, like his mentor Harnack, advocated stripping the Jewish Scripture from the Christian Bible.

Against the backdrop of National Socialism, Bonhoeffer's struggle to be human and decent stands out sharply. I have tried to depict him as a full person, which I think makes him more admirable, not less. He himself resisted being cast as a "pillar saint," though ironically he became one. In life, he could be short-tempered, arrogant, demanding, and excluding—but he could also be a person who loved deeply and cared deeply, a person of extraordinary perception, groundedness, and gentleness, a person of deep loyalty, deep faith and deep conviction, a person largely able to maintain integrity in a extraordinarily dark period. He is worth reading about. Most of all, both he and the women around him have lives worth seeing—if that is ever possible—as they really were.

A Note on Usage: Dietrich, not Bonhoeffer

A problem emerged for me in writing as I strove for gender equity. How could I call Bonhoeffer "Bonhoeffer," while calling Maria von Wedemeyer "Maria" or Sabine Bonhoeffer-Leibholz "Sabine"? Yet a constant run of Leibholzes and von Wedemeyers became too clunky. I chose, therefore, to use first names, a move which underscores the intimacy of these relationships. Hence Bonhoeffer is Dietrich, a first name he was proud of. Exceptions include Hans von Dohnanyi and Franz Hildebrandt—their first names are so common that it made better sense to reference them by surname. I do refer

12. Bonhoeffer, *DBWE 8,* 325.

to Dietrich's grandmother sometimes as Tafel, her maiden surname, and I refer to Eberhard as Bethge when I want to indicate his role as biographer or chronicler rather than player in the action. The Bonhoeffer sisters I refer to by their more personal names: Susi instead of Susanne, Ursel instead of Ursula, and Christel instead of Christine, mostly to emphasize the closeness of this family. This underscores the extent to which I felt that I got to know the family—the dirt between Susi's toes as she throws herself into play in Friedrichsbrunn, the sweat I imagined pooling under Christel's arms as she ironed her brother's shirts in Tübingen. In other cases, I use names in the way I hope lends the greatest clarity to understanding.

This book uses both the 1971 *Letters and Papers in Prison* and the later translation of that work released by Fortress as *DWBE 8*. In some cases, the earlier translation of certain letters, such as Bonhoeffer's description of being formed by the Harz mountains, had become so familiar to me that it seemed odd to use the later translation, in the same way that non-King James versions of the Lord's Prayer can seem alien. In other cases, *DBWE 8* included information left out of the earlier version, so I also relied on it.