

CHAPTER ONE

FROM BRESLAU TO BERLIN, 1906–1923

Family Influences

Like many of those Germans who would join the political conspiracy to overthrow the National Socialist regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer came from a middle-class family. His father, Karl Bonhoeffer, was professor of psychiatry and neurology, first in Breslau (what is today Wrocław, Poland) and then after 1912 at the Charité Hospital in Berlin. He was the descendant of a middle-class family that had resided in Schwäbisch Hall, a town in the southern part of Germany, since the sixteenth century. Karl Bonhoeffer's mother, Julie Tafel, was a woman whose personality had been shaped by revolutionary and socialist ideas.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mother, Paula von Hase, was the daughter of the pastor and member of the Breslau Church Consistory, Karl Alfred von Hase, who in turn was the son of the renowned Jena professor of church history, Karl August von Hase. Paula von Hase's mother, Countess Clara von Kalckreuth, came from a Prussian artist's family and had taken piano lessons from Clara Schumann and Franz Liszt. As a result, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's family origins were characterized by middle-class ideals, the courage to reform society, a long

academic tradition, and the fine arts. All of these different influences can be detected in his life's journey.

Karl Bonhoeffer was a strict and controlling personality. One of his colleagues said of him: "Just as he utterly disliked all that is immoderate, exaggerated, or undisciplined, so too in his own person everything was completely controlled."¹ Academically, he had no use for the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud or Carl Gustav Jung, which looked for unconscious or suppressed feelings; this was also true of his son Dietrich, who would always remain skeptical about emotional self-reflection. Karl Bonhoeffer's own approach was based on neuropathology. Although sensitive in his personal dealings with others, he considered mastery of one's own feelings a virtue. He despised idle chatter in himself and in others. The Bonhoeffer children were only allowed to speak at the table when they were asked about the events of their day. Nonetheless, the children cared deeply for their father and always knew where they stood with him.



Paula Bonhoeffer with her eight children 1910

1. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers: Portrait of a Family* (Chicago: Covenant Publications, 1994), 10.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's mother was more strongly oriented toward relationships and feelings. "She was full of courage and optimism, and her speech was natural and vivacious. It was a matter of indifference to her what others thought of her; she did what she considered right."² Numerous maids assisted with the household. A Moravian woman, Maria Horn, was much loved by the children and helped raise them. Pedagogically trained and having taken the examination to be a teacher, Bonhoeffer's mother instructed the children partly herself and was later assisted by Maria Horn's sister, Käthe. Their mother, however, always was responsible for their religious instruction. She said grace at the table, prayed with the children each evening, and told them Bible stories. It was assumed that all the children would be confirmed in the Christian faith, yet the family almost never attended regular church services.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his twin sister, Sabine, were born on February 4, 1906. They were the sixth and seventh children, arriving after three boys, Karl-Friedrich, Walter, and Klaus, and two girls, Ursula and Christine. Susanne, born three years later, rounded out the group. Karl-Friedrich became a physicist, Walter died at the age of eighteen as a soldier in the First World War, and Klaus became a lawyer. Ursula married the lawyer Rüdiger Schleicher and Christine married the lawyer Hans von Dohnanyi. Both men, along with Klaus and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, would be part of the political conspiracy against Adolf Hitler; all paid for it in 1945 with their lives. Sabine married the legal scholar Gerhard Leibholz, and Susanne married a theologian, Walter Dress.

Childhood and Youth in Berlin

The family's move in 1912 from Breslau to Berlin would be decisive for Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life journey. At first the family lived near the center of town, in an apartment close to the zoo. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer was ten years old they moved to a villa in Grunewald, a neighborhood that included renowned figures such as the physicist Max Planck, the church historian Adolf von Harnack, and the historian Hans Delbrück.

Playing music together had a special place in the Bonhoeffers' family life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer studied piano and played regularly until his arrest in 1943. His parents purchased a vacation house, a former forester's cottage, in the Harz mountains in the heart of Germany. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's childhood

2. *Ibid.*, 5.

impressions of family vacations there stayed with him to his final prison days. In his prison cell he wrote:

In imagination I spend a good deal of time outdoors, in the midland mountains in summer, actually, in the forest glades near Friedrichsbrunn or on the slopes where one can look across Treseburg to the Brocken. I lie on my back in the grass, watching the clouds float across the blue sky in the breeze and listening to the sounds of the forest. It's remarkable how our whole outlook is shaped by childhood impressions like these, so that it seems impossible to me and against my nature that we could have had a house in the high mountains or by the sea! It's the central uplands which are my natural environment . . . and which made me who I am.³

When they were grown the children recalled a happy childhood, and their family ties remained close, as the numerous letters that passed back and forth between the family members attest. They had a trusting relationship with one another and knew that they could depend on each other, most especially on the support of their parents. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was aware of how good, yet unusual and seductive this was. As a student he once said, "I should like to live an unsheltered life for once. We cannot understand the others [who have not had such a sheltered life]. We always have our parents to help us over every difficulty. However far away we may be from them, this gives us such a blatant security."⁴

The Decision to Study Theology

The schools Bonhoeffer attended were crucial intellectual influences: Friedrichswerder Gymnasium and then the Grunewald Gymnasium (today called the Walther-Rathenau School), which he attended from 1919 to 1923. Both were well-known humanistic secondary schools. These schools met Bonhoeffer's youthful interest in history and literature, philosophy and the arts. Through the boy scouts Bonhoeffer came into contact with the Youth Movement (*Jugendbewegung*) of that era. "Every Sunday morning we do exercises, play war games, and such. It is always very nice," the thirteen-year-old wrote to

3. DBWE 8:294.

4. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography*, trans. Eric Mosbacher, et al., rev. and ed. Victoria J. Barnett (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 20.

his grandmother.⁵ In Berlin, he experienced firsthand political events like the 1918 November Revolution that led to the formation of the Weimar Republic and the 1922 assassination of foreign minister Walther Rathenau; indeed, he was able to hear the fatal shots at Rathenau from his classroom.

The family was surprised when Dietrich Bonhoeffer decided to study theology, since the institutional church played hardly any role in their everyday lives. His father was especially disappointed by the choice of profession. Later, when the Church Struggle reached its most intensive phase, he wrote his son that he had feared “that a quiet, uneventful pastor’s life, as I knew it from that of my Swabian uncle and as Eduard Mörike [a Swabian poet] describes it, would really be almost a pity for you. So far as uneventfulness is concerned, I was greatly mistaken.”⁶ Whatever moved Bonhoeffer to this decision ultimately remains obscure. Perhaps one reason was the early death of his brother Walter in April 1918 on the front, five days after being wounded in France. The entire family was shattered by this loss, and Bonhoeffer’s mother had difficulty recovering from it. She suffered for weeks under a strong depression, which was certainly hard for a twelve-year-old boy. For his confirmation Dietrich Bonhoeffer was given his brother’s Bible; he kept it for the rest of his life to read and used it as he prepared his sermons.

There were other deaths during the war in the family’s circle of acquaintances that troubled the children. Sabine Leibholz-Bonhoeffer later wrote:

We heard of the death of our older cousins and some of our classmates’ fathers. And so in the evenings after prayers and hymn singing . . . we used to lie awake for a long time and try to imagine what it must be like to be dead and to have entered eternal life . . . When Dietrich at the age of twelve got his own room we agreed that he would knock on the wall at night when Susi and I were “to think of God.”⁷

The war confronted the children with subjects and questions that normally would have played no role at that age. Later, when he was twenty-six, Bonhoeffer wrote that as a child he liked to think about death and wished for himself an early, God-given death so that others could recognize that “to a believer in

5. DBWE 9:30.

6. DBWE 13:97.

7. Leibholz-Bonhoeffer, *The Bonhoeffers*, 32–33, trans. altered.

God, dying was not hard but a glorious thing,” while noting at the same time how much he wanted to live—and was ashamed of this internal ambivalence.⁸

Eberhard Bethge, Bonhoeffer’s friend and biographer, suspected that in addition to the shock of the death of his brother, “at the root of his choice was a basic drive toward independence” and that “. . . because he was lonely he became a theologian, and because he became a theologian he was lonely.”⁹ Bonhoeffer himself later recounted that in addition to his personal faith there was a measure of vanity in his decision to study theology, which was spurred by a wish to be the center of attention.¹⁰

8. DBWE 11:397.

9. Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, 37.

10. DBWE 11:394–96.