

Chapter 1

Roots, Genesis and Moulding of the Pastor

The illustrious family of Bonhoeffer could trace their roots back to 1403, to the annals of Nymwegen on the Waal River in the Netherlands near the German border. In 1513, Caspar van den Boenhoff left the Netherlands to settle in the German city of Schwäbisch Hall. Soon after, their name was Germanised to Bonhöffer, literally meaning “bean farmer,” but in 1800, they replaced the umlaut “ö” with “oe.” Buildings around Schwäbisch Hall still bear pictures of a lion holding a beanstalk on a blue background, and on more than one occasion, Dietrich would wear a signet ring with this family crest.¹

When he was born on the February 4 1906, he was followed ten minutes later by his twin sister Sabine. Naturally, Dietrich constantly enjoyed reminding Sabine of being her elder,² although she ended up outliving him by fifty-four years, passing away in 1999.³ They were born into a prominent and very close-knit upper-class family, the sixth and seventh of eight children, all born in Breslau in the decade from 1899-1909. Six years later in 1912, the family left Breslau for Berlin, where the father, Karl Bonhöffer became one of the most distinguished neurologists in Germany, employed as the professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Berlin and the director of the psychiatric clinic at Charité Hospital in Berlin, posts which he held until his death in 1948. Their mother, Paula née von Hase was a daughter of Clara von Hase, born Countess Kalkreuth, and her father Karl had for two years been a chaplain in the court of Kaiser Wilhelm II,⁴ who led Germany into the First World War.

Karl’s appointment could have lasted far longer, if not for Karl’s non-compliant and belligerent nature. Karl resisted the inclination of the Kaiser to have his chaplains preach the way he dictated. Things came to a head when Karl dared to contradict the Kaiser, referring to the proletariat as “rabble.”⁵ When one considers Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s brave and dangerously belligerent attitude towards the Nazis decades later, one can assume he inherited it, at least in part, from his maternal grandfather.

Upon departure from the Kaiser’s court in Potsdam, Karl von Hase became an official in the consistory (church council) in the church province of Silesia, and an honorary professor in the theological faculty of the University of Breslau. Clara made their home a regular meeting place for scholars and artists. A junior doctor named Karl Bonhoeffer visited their home one day, and saw their daughter Paula for the first time. The young physician later said that he knew he would marry her.⁶

However, in spite of the impressive pastoral credentials of Paula’s father, and her giving each of her eight children three years of serious religious instruction,⁷ the Bonhoeffer family was not notably devout; Sunday church going was not practised.⁸ Paula was a college graduate and trained teacher, and home-schooled the five eldest of her children in their early years, as well as some of the neighbours’ children. The children’s education hardly suffered, as they performed brilliantly in final yearly examinations and even ended up skipping years. In this multi-talented family, Dietrich, played the piano from the age of twelve, with Mozart sonatas among his repertoire; later he played the guitar on family hikes. He played diverse games such as tennis and chess with like fervour. Sadly, during the First World War, the second eldest, Walter, an officer cadet, was severely wounded during an advance on April 23 1918, and died five days later. His death utterly devastated his mother.⁹

In 1920, when Dietrich turned fourteen, he announced to his family that his ambition was to become a theologian. While not openly hostile to the idea, his parents were not convinced this was the path for their youngest son, given his musical ability. His siblings expressed feelings bordering on shock, most of all the eldest, Karl-Friedrich, by now acknowledged as a brilliant physical chemist.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the cocky younger sibling would not be intimidated by his elders. When brother Klaus, destined to become a top lawyer at Lufthansa, told him not to waste his life in such a “poor, feeble, boring, petty bourgeois institution as the Church,” fourteen-year-old Dietrich retorted: “If what you say is true, I shall reform it!”¹¹ What Dietrich was implying in this defiant rebuff to his elder sibling was a clear assertion of his independence. When Dietrich was confirmed in March of the following year, his mother gave him the bible of her deceased son Walter. For the rest of his life, Dietrich used it for his daily devotions.¹²

As you might expect, chaos and political assassination were both part of the Weimar political landscape during the years of hyper-inflation in the early 1920s, preceding the Golden Age of Weimar from 1924 until the Wall Street crash of October 1929. The assassination of Walthau Rathenau on June 24 1922 deeply disturbed Dietrich; he and his classmates, from their classroom on the *Königsallee*, heard the shots. One of Dietrich’s classmates recalled: “

I particularly remember Bonhoeffer on the day of Rathenau's murder. The average age in our class in the Grunewald high school was seventeen, but he and G.S., who ended up committing suicide in exile, were only sixteen. I remember the shots we heard during the lesson, and then, on the playground during the break, we heard what had happened... I still recall my friend Bonhoeffer's passionate indignation, his deep and spontaneous anger... I remember his asking what would become of Germany if its best leaders were killed. I remember it because I was surprised at the time someone could know so exactly where he stood."¹³

A niece of the victim, Ursula Andreae, who, like Dietrich was interested in theology, also attended that class, which included a number of children from prominent families, in the main, Jewish.¹⁴ A few days later, when Dietrich left on the train for his final school holiday, he wrote to his parents that while on the train he found himself sitting opposite "a man wearing a swastika." He spent the trip arguing with him, and described him as being bigoted and right-wing.¹⁵

The political party that Dietrich's father Karl supported was the moderate, left-leaning Social Democrats, who had come to power following the November 1918 revolution in the wake of the war's end. The violent, extreme left-wing Spartacists were never going to gain the support of Karl or any of his family. The following letter, written by Dietrich to his Oma¹⁶ in Tübingen before his thirteenth birthday in January 1919, makes this clear. It describes the fighting between government troops and radical left-wing Spartacists, after the latter had made two night-time attacks on the Halensee station: "

Early today we heard gunfire. There are some bangs going on now. Karl-Friedrich [the eldest of the Bonhoeffer siblings — he was wounded but survived both wars] has at last been discharged from the Charité [the hospital where father Karl worked]. He would like to be part of this somehow, but Mama and Papa do not yet agree. At present, thank heaven, the government troops are getting the better of it. Our holidays have been extended to 17 January. Either because of the unrest or because of the coal shortage [...or perhaps due to both]."¹⁷

Italy had long been a much-desired holiday destination for the Bonhoeffer family, and indeed, Great Grandfather Hase had visited it twenty times in his lifetime.¹⁸ Dietrich loved Italy and its people; he had a great command of languages, and his elementary Italian improved dramatically over the months of this trip, unlike his brother. By chance they would meet Walther Kranz, their old history teacher from the Grunewald Gymnasium (High School) in Berlin on a trip to the top of Mount Vesuvius, but it was Rome that most captured Dietrich's heart.

More than anything else, it was Catholic Rome with its magnificent Saint Peter's Basilica which kept drawing him back, compelling him to attend every service of the Holy week. He found that these services, in particular the Palm Sunday service of 1924, with its *Sanctorum Communio* (Communion of Saints), marvellously illustrated the universality of the church,¹⁹ with the gathering of races from all over the world. While he thought that it would, in all probability, be impossible for Catholicism and Protestantism to ever unite, at the same time he thought it would benefit both parties. That said, having witnessed Catholicism first-hand in its heartland and the devotion of its worshippers, he also said that Catholicism can exist for a long time without Protestantism, and that in comparison to the church of Rome, Protestantism seemed like just a small sect.²⁰

Yet four centuries earlier, in the spring of 1511, when the young and utterly devout Catholic and Augustinian monk Martin Luther visited Rome for the first time,ⁱ he expressed his disillusionment with the Eternal City and its Vatican, with its overt cynicism and rampant corruption, manifested more than anything by the dubious practice of the sale of indulgences.²¹ If someone was of sufficient financial and earthly means, they could purchase absolution for almost all manner of sin and debauchery. In 1567, the devout and reformist Pope Pius V, in the period that would become known as the "Counter Reformation," abolished this practice.²²

Dietrich, during his time in Rome, met the royal family, Mussolini, and even Pope Pius XI. However, he did not regard these meetings as the highlight of his visit to the Eternal city.²³ Rather, it was Saint Peter's that held that distinction. This is reflected in the title of his brilliant and ground-breaking doctoral thesis,

ⁱ As a young monk Luther was obsessed with atoning for his sins and went to ridiculous lengths to punish himself. This ranged from extreme self denial and physical and mental tests to self flagellation. One such punishment consisted of lying in the snow, through the night at the height of winter until he would have to be carried back inside. See the *10 things you didn't know about Martin Luther* PBS web page at <https://www.pbs.org/empires/martinluther/cheats.html>.

Sanctorum Communio (Communion of Saints) when he graduated from the University of Berlin in 1927. On his return from Italy, he enrolled there at the last moment for the 1924 summer semester in mid-June. At that time, Berlin's university was a centre of liberal theology under such distinguished church historians as Adolf von Harnack, who would become one of the many teachers to witness the great promise of the young Dietrich. No doubt, Harnack's discussions with Dietrich on the tram to the university gave him notice of this promise.

By February, Dietrich received an official copy of his order dispatching him to Barcelona. From the Pyrenees border, Dietrich boarded a train for Barcelona; the train journey hugged the Mediterranean coast through the beautiful Catalan countryside, where, upon his arrival at the station, he was greeted by his new mentor, Pastor Olbricht. Dietrich's relationship to his new mentor was cordial, but they never became friends. Privately, Dietrich stated that Pastor Olbricht preferred a good glass of wine and a good cigar to a bad sermon, and did not have a dynamic pulpit presence.²⁴ However, Pastor Olbricht gave Dietrich virtually a free hand. This was exemplified in the way Dietrich implemented the Sunday school class, which soon grew to forty students from an initial number of one.

His accommodation was spartan, in a house of three impoverished Spanish ladies who couldn't speak a word of German. The language barrier didn't concern Dietrich; with his gift for languages, he wished to learn Spanish as soon as possible. Dietrich soon struck a good rapport with his two fellow German boarders, and went with them on his first outings to the beautiful surrounding countryside of the Catalan.²⁵ He found the German expatriate congregation rather staid and conservative, and markedly different to the liberal and intellectually sophisticated world of Berlin.²⁶ Moreover, they seemed untouched by the dramatic events of the previous decade in Germany. That said, ever mindful that he had chosen the backwater of Barcelona for new experiences, he adapted to the local lifestyle and was committed to becoming effective in his role as pastor. One example of his adaptation to the local lifestyle was the appreciation he gained for bull fighting. Dietrich found Barcelona to be blessed with an unusual charm, exemplified in its beautiful harbour.²⁷

However, he was not blind to its poverty. Several times he asked his father for help for people in need, and around Christmas, he would arrange loans for his impoverished landladies. The German expatriate community was not immune to poverty either, as German businesses were having difficulty in competing with Western countries, even before the onset of the Great Depression.²⁸ In Pastor Olbricht's absence, he had to arrange the burial for a respected businessman who had committed suicide because of sudden financial ruin. Sometimes people would approach him for help; but he would often greet them rather coldly, as he had become aware that in many instances, they were not truly in need, and he had to be prudent in the granting of limited church funds.

In Barcelona, Dietrich conversed with characters such as vagrants, escaped criminals, deserting legionnaires and German gangster murderers on the run; they would tell him their life stories.²⁹ When food shortages in Germany had started to make themselves felt during the Great War, Dietrich's father Karl had praised his very young son's unexpected but most welcome ability as a "messenger" and "food scout," for he knew the black market prices for all the delicacies and the nature of the queues outside the shops. So, he was able to direct the servants to the least troublesome queues.³⁰

One year later in February 1929, Dietrich returned to Berlin; in his final report, Pastor Olbricht was unstinting in his praise of the young curate.³¹ From July that year to the same month of the following year, he was an academic assistant to Professor Wilhelm Lütgert, by which time he had completed his post-doctoral degree, in the midst of the Great Depression.³² While back in Berlin, he resumed his acquaintance with Franz Hildebrandt, whom he first met back in December 1927.³³ Franz, a fellow theological student, was three years Dietrich's junior, and like Dietrich's brother-in-law Gerhard Leibholz, was a baptised Christian of Jewish descent — albeit from his mother's side.³⁴ Like Dietrich, he was raised in Berlin's Grunewald district. They became lifelong friends, forever enjoying interminable arguments with each other.

Just three or so months later, still too young to be ordained, he commenced a one-year postgraduate study at the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, and youth work at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. There he taught Sunday school and formed a life-long love for African-American spiritual music, a collection of which he took back to Germany.³⁵ Dietrich had life-changing experiences, brought on in no small part by the deep friendships formed. One in particular was with fellow student Albert Franklin ("Frank") Fisher, raised in Alabama, who introduced him to the Abyssinian Baptist Church and the African American church experience. Another friendship was with the preacher at the Abyssinian church, Adam Clayton Powell Senior.³⁶

During his American experience, the idea that real piety and power only developed in churches where there was a present reality and history of suffering took hold.³⁷ The present reality was graphically illustrated with the infamous March 1931 case of the Scottsboro Boys, which Dietrich followed closely, indicating the interest he had in American racial issues in general. Put another way, he began to see things “from below,” from the perspective of those who suffer oppression. He observed, “Here one can truly speak and hear about sin and grace and the love of God... the Black Christ is preached with rapturous passion and vision.”³⁸ Years later, in a letter from prison in April 1944 to his dear friend and first biographer Eberhard Bethge, Dietrich would write that this was the critical point where “I turned from phraseology to reality.”³⁹ In his time in America, it was his experience of the “Black Christ” that made an indelible impression, contrasting radically with the “theological desert” of the Union Theological Seminary, where he could easily have been the teacher rather than the student. In describing his time at Union, he would state unequivocally, “There is no theology here.”⁴⁰

At the beginning of December 1930, on a visit to Washington DC with Frank Fisher, a white student and another black student, he would write to his parents of experiencing the segregation at first hand, in a way hardly any whites would experience, when he and his companions were refused service in a restaurant just south of the national capital.⁴¹ In letters to his eldest brother Karl-Friedrich, Dietrich lamented the racism inherent in American society, to which, it seems, he found no analogous situation in Germany. Karl-Friedrich, having already witnessing it first hand on his earlier visit there, wrote back to Dietrich on January 24 1931: “

I am delighted you have the opportunity of studying the Negro question so thoroughly. I had the impression when I was over there that it is really the problem, at any rate for people with a conscience and, when I was offered an appointment at Harvard, [as a physical chemist] it was the very basic reason for my disinclination to go to America for good, because I did not want either to take on that legacy myself or to pass it on to my hypothetical children. It seems impossible to see the right way to tackle the problem.”⁴²

But Karl-Friedrich did not dream that such a dubious legacy would ever affect his country: “In any case, our Jewish question is a joke by comparison; there won’t be many people who claim they are oppressed here. At any rate, not in Frankfurt.”⁴³

With present-day hindsight into Nazi atrocities, in particular with regard to the Jews, this statement by Dietrich’s brother seems naive. However, this letter was written in late January 1931, just over two years before Hitler’s ascent to power in late January 1933. Moreover, Karl-Friedrich and Dietrich grew up in the affluent Berlin neighbourhood of Grunewald, dominated by academics and cultural elites, of which a third were Jewish. In general, Jews had economic parity with the Gentile population.⁴⁴

Before returning to New York, just south of Mexico City, Dietrich and Lasserre visited Aztec ruins. Atop one of the pyramids, Dietrich talked at length with an indigenous shepherd boy who could neither read nor write, but had a great deal to tell. He wrote of how poor but friendly the people were, and the beauty of the scenery atop the two thousand metre elevation, sparing one from the heat at sea-level. On their return journey, they were refused entry at the US border. Only after telegrams were sent by Paul Lehmann and the German ambassador to Mexico, with tickets waiting in New York for their passage to Bremen Germany, were the immigration officials convinced they would not be a burden on the American labour market.⁴⁵

By June 17, 1931, Dietrich and Lasserre arrived back in the sweltering summer heat of New York, and three days later, with many a fond memory, minus the tedious farce of Prohibition,^{ii 46} Dietrich boarded a ship back home to Germany. Almost immediately upon arrival in his homeland, Dietrich, with powers of perception beyond that of many of his fellows, could sense the ominous clouds on the horizon of the Weimar political landscape.

- 1 Position 35.5 in the ebook *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy A righteous Gentile vs, the Third Reich*, by Eric Metaxas, published by Thomas Nelson Nashville Tennessee, 2010, ISBN 9781595551382, 9781595553188(IE), 9781595552464(TP).
- 2 Position 52.9 of the ebook *Dietrich Bonhoeffer 1906-1945: Martyr, Thinker, Man of Resistance* by Ferdinand Schlingensiepen, translated by Isabel Best, first published in 2010 by Continuum, but since 2011, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, ePub-ISBN 9780567217554, ePDF-ISBN 9780567357755.
- 3 Position 1100.0 in “Appendix 6: Bonhoeffer Family Tree” of Schlingensiepen.
- 4 Position 45.3 of Schlingensiepen.
- 5 Position 45.4 of Schlingensiepen.
- 6 Position 45.6 of Schlingensiepen
- 7 Position 77.4 of Schlingensiepen.
- 8 Position 65.2 of Schlingensiepen.
- 9 Position 71.8 of Schlingensiepen.
- 10 Google Book review at <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=fjBtDwAAQBAJ&dq>, of the book *The Scientific World of Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer* — Palgrave studies in the history of science and technology, by Kathleen L. Housley, published by Springer, 2018, ISBN 3319958011, 9783319958019 accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 11 Page 36 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* by Eberhard Bethge, edited by Victoria J. Barnett, published by Fortress Press, 2000, ISBN 0800628446, 9780800628444.
- 12 Page 28 of Bethge.
- 13 Pages 33 and 34 of Bethge’s biography of Dietrich.
- 14 Page 34 of Bethge’s biography of Dietrich.
- 15 Page 33 of Bethge’s biography of Dietrich.
- 16 Error: Reference source not found Oma is the German diminutive of grandmother and it will not be the last time it is used in this book.
- 17 Error: Reference source not found Page 30 of Bethge’s biography of Dietrich. See also endnotes Error: Reference source not found, Error: Reference source not found and Error: Reference source not found for the Preface “Birth and Memory upon the Lesser Known Fault Line of History.”
- 18 Position 85.2 of Schlingensiepen.
- 19 The *About Catholics* and *Merriam-Webster dictionary* web sites at <http://www.aboutcatholics.com/beliefs/meaning-of-the-term-catholic/> and <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/catholic>, concerning the meaning of “Catholic.” Both links accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 20 Position 95.9 of Schlingensiepen.
- 21 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* at <https://library.eb.com.au/levels/adults/article/Martin-Luther/108504> and the Martin Luther portal on the Christ and the Church websites at <http://martinluther.ccws.org/journey/index.html>. Both links accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 22 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* on indulgences at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/indulgence#ref176957>. Accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 23 Position 93.0 of Schlingensiepen.
- 24 Position 140.0 of Schlingensiepen and position 199.3 of Metaxas. Also pages 77 and 123 of the book *Barcelona, Berlin, New York, 1928-1931, Volume 10 of Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, editor Clifford J. Green, translated by Douglas W. Stott, published by Fortress Press, 2008, ISBN 0800683307, 9780800683306.
- 25 Position 197.3 of Metaxas.
- 26 Position 187.3 of Metaxas.
- 27 Position 191.7 of Metaxas and page 100 of Bethge.
- 28 Position 150.1 of Schlingensiepen. Position 1087.0 documents his time in Barcelona as a pastoral assistant from February 1928 to February 1929. Position 907.7 of *Microcosm* gives the approximate time of the Wall Street crash in October 1929.
- 29 Position 151.5 of Schlingensiepen.
- 30 Page 26 of Bethge.
- 31 Position 154.9 of Schlingensiepen.
- 32 The timeline from position 1087.0 of Schlingensiepen.
- 33 Error: Reference source not found Page 138 of Bethge and position 226.0 of Metaxas.
- 34 Page 138 of Bethge.
- 35 Error: Reference source not found See page 150 of Bethge, position 1380.3 of Metaxas in the Reading Group Guide for Chapters 7 to 9 and the timeline for Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the *US Public Broadcasting* web site at <http://www.pbs.org/bonhoeffer/timeline.html>. Accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 36 Timeline for Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the *US Public Broadcasting* web site at <http://www.pbs.org/bonhoeffer/timeline.html>, positions 265.8 and position 1380.1 of Metaxas, and page 150 of Bethge. Accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020.
- 37 A perfect case in point being Poland’s deep and resilient Catholic faith, withstanding centuries of oppression in both its distant and not so distant history. In Radom for example, where I taught English for 10 months from early September 2004 to late June 2005, churches in this city of 300,000, about 90Km south of Warsaw, would hold about seven services a day, with nearly all, filled at least to near capacity.

- 38 The online article at <https://ous.wisc.edu/2016/02/04/the-search-for-truth/>, dated the 4th of February 2016 entitled *The Search for Truth* on the University of Wisconsin website. Accessed on Saturday July 25, 2020. Also positions 259.5 and 265.2 of Metaxas.
- 39 Pages 202 to 203 of Bethge.
- 40 Position 246.8 of Metaxas. See also page 157 of Bethge which states how Dietrich was forever irritated by the American lack of concern for the genuine problems of theology.
- 41 Page 94 of *The Scientific World of Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer — Palgrave studies in the history of science and technology*, by Kathleen L. Housley, published by Springer, 2018, ISBN 3319958011, 9783319958019. See also position 267.5 of Metaxas.
- 42 Page 96 of Kathleen L. Housley, page 151 of Bethge, and a condensed text at position 268.9 of Metaxas.
- 43 Page 96 of Kathleen L. Housley, page 151 of Bethge, and a condensed text at position 268.9 of Metaxas.
- 44 Position 269.2 of Metaxas.
- 45 Page 152 of Bethge.
- 46 See position 279.5 of Metaxas.

Chapter 2 - Ominous Clouds on the Horizon