Bonhoeffer in Prison
Fourth Draft
(11/11/06)

A play in one act
by
Richard Mundy

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CHARACTERS

Dietrich Bonhoeffer  German theologian, involved in the plot to overthrow Adolf Hitler.  (b. 1906 – d. 1945)

Interviewer  A woman in her later 30s.

Maria von Wedemeyer  Bonhoeffer’s fiancé.  Twenty one years old at the time of his death.  (b. 1924 – d. 1977)

Karl Bonhoeffer  Bonhoeffer’s father, a respected psychiatrist.  (b. 1868 – d. 1948)

Paula Bonhoeffer  Bonhoeffer’s mother.  (b. 1876 – d. 1951)

Karl Friedrich Bonhoeffer  Bonhoeffer’s elder brother.  (b. 1899 – d. 1957)

Eberhard Bethge  Bonhoeffer’s nephew by marriage, and best friend.  (b. 1909 – d. 2000)

Dr. Manfred Roeder  Judge Advocate of the War Court.  Bonhoeffer’s Gestapo interrogator.

Hans von Dohnanyi  Bonhoeffer’s brother-in-law.  A co-conspirator.  Executed the same day as Bonhoeffer.  (b. 1902 – d. 1945)

Jean Lassarre  French pastor.  Classmate of Bonhoeffer’s at Union Theological Seminary in New York, 1930.

Corp. Knobloch  A guard who befriends Bonhoeffer.

Fabian von Schlabrendorff  Maria’s cousin, in his late 30s.  Arrested for his involvement in the attempt to assassinate Hitler.

Judge  Gestapo man who pronounces Bonhoeffer’s death sentence.
SETTING

This is a memory play. People and events from the years of Bonhoeffer’s imprisonment are recalled more than 30 years later. As such, they exist in the hazy world of memory. The details of environment are of little importance.

The set consists of several playing areas grouped around a central raised platform, which is Dietrich’s cell. The playing areas are defined by pools of light. There are few set pieces. Dietrich’s cell should have something to represent his cot, a small writing table and a chair. There should be several straight-backed chairs available to be used when Maria visits Dietrich in prison, and for interrogation scenes, etc. When reading letters, actors will often stand, or sit on stools. They will not mime the writing of the letters.

TIME

It is February 1976. Maria von Wedemeyer, once Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s fiancé, is attending an International Bonhoeffer Symposium in Geneva, commemorating the 70th anniversary of his birth. While attending the symposium, she has consented to an interview. Its the first time she has spoken publicly about Bonhoeffer. She recounts events which occurred largely between 1930 and 1945.
DIETRICH
(Speaking to the audience)
We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. How should the Christian church respond? There are three possible ways in which the church can act toward the state: ... First, it can challenge the state on the legitimacy of its actions. Secondly, it can aid the victims of state action. The church has an unconditional obligation to aid the victims of any ordering of society, even if they don’t belong to the Christian community. The third possibility is not just to bandage the victims under the wheel, but to jam a spoke into the wheel itself. To stop the machine of state.

INTERVIEWER
Okay, are you ready?

MARIA
I suppose so.

INTERVIEWER
Are you sure you want to do this?

MARIA
Honestly? No. I’m a little nervous. I’ve never been interviewed before.

INTERVIEWER
Really? That surprises me. Well, take a deep breath. You’ll be fine.
(Pause)
Mind if I turn the tape recorder on now?
(She pushes the record button)
Okay. We’re rolling. Interview with Maria von Wedemeyer. February 4th, 1976. Tape one.
(Pause)
We’ll just chit chat first, okay?

MARIA
Mind if I smoke?

INTERVIEWER
No, go ahead.
(MARIA tries unsuccessfully to light her cigarette with a Zippo lighter.)
INTERVIEWER [Continued]
Why haven’t you done an interview before?

MARIA
Do you have a match?

INTERVIEWER
Sorry.

MARIA
The time was never right.

INTERVIEWER
How do you mean?

MARIA
I wanted to get on with my life. I didn’t want to live in the shadow of 1945.

INTERVIEWER
So what did you do . . . after . . . ?

MARIA
After Dietrich died?

INTERVIEWER
Yes.

MARIA
I moved to America. I married. I raised a family. I had a career. I lived my life.

INTERVIEWER
So why talk now?

MARIA
It’s been 30 years. And I think Dietrich still has something to say.

INTERVIEWER
Tell me about meeting him.

MARIA
Alright. Well . . . we first met in my grandmother’s home.

INTERVIEWER
How did your grandmother know Dietrich Bonhoeffer?
MARIA
She attended church services at Finkenwalde, where Dietrich was a seminary professor. She liked Dietrich and asked him to give confirmation classes for my older brother and my two cousins, and I asked to be included too.

INTERVIEWER
How old were you?

MARIA
I’d have been . . . oh . . . maybe twelve years old at the time. The interview with Dietrich was held in my grandmother’s presence.

(Pause)
I flunked. I remember that it caused Dietrich considerable amusement.ii

INTERVIEWER
Was your grandmother also amused?

MARIA
Not at all.

INTERVIEWER
Tell me, was it love at first sight?

MARIA
Oh, no, no, no, no. Hardly. I was just a little girl! I had no such thoughts then. My grandmother had many conversations with Dietrich, and I’d listen. I developed an admiration for him. But romantic love? No.

INTERVIEWER
When did your relationship with Dietrich become serious?

MARIA
Many years later. I saw him again after I graduated from high school and the rapport was immediate. Dietrich had a great gift for putting a person completely at ease. He made me feel very comfortable.

INTERVIEWER
How old were you then?

MARIA
Um . . . perhaps eighteen.

INTERVIEWER
And Dietrich?
MARIA
He was thirty five or six.

INTERVIEWER
Really? What did you find to talk about?

MARIA
Nothing, really. Mathematics. Neither of us knew much about the subject, but somehow we managed to fill an evening with an animated discussion of it. I don’t really think it mattered what we talked about.

INTERVIEWER
And he began courting you after that?

MARIA
Yes. The next fall I was in Berlin taking care of my grandmother, and Dietrich frequently came by to visit. It made him laugh to take me to lunch at a small restaurant that was owned by Hitler’s brother.

INTERVIEWER
_Adolf_ Hitler’s brother?

MARIA
Um-hm. Dietrich said there was no safer place to talk.

INTERVIEWER
When did you become engaged?

MARIA
In January of ’42.

INTERVIEWER
And when was Dietrich arrested?

MARIA
The following April.

[SOUND Q3: Hitler speech]

[LIGHTS up on DIETRICH in his cell]

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DIETRICH

(To the audience)
The first night I was locked up, the blankets on the cot had such a foul smell that in spite of the cold it was impossible to use them. Breakfast the next morning was a piece of bread thrown onto the floor of my cell. The sound of the guard’s abuse of the prisoners flooded my cell for the first time; since then I’ve heard it every day from morning till night.

Some officers, who had heard that I was a pastor wanted to be able to have a few private words with me. They were told that no one was to talk to me. Once, while I was having a bath, an officer (I have no idea who he was) suddenly appeared and asked me whether I knew Pastor Martin Niemoller. Niemoller! When I told him that I did, he exclaimed, ‘He is a good friend of mine!’ and disappeared again.

I was put, alone, in the most isolated cell on the top floor. I was told that all my correspondence would be stopped until further notice, and that, unlike all the other prisoners, I wouldn’t be allowed any time to walk in the open courtyard.

I received neither newspapers, nor anything to smoke. After 48 hours my Bible finally was returned to me; it’d been searched to see whether I had smuggled a saw, or a razor inside it. In my Bible! For the next twelve days the cell door was opened only for bringing food in and putting the bucket out. No one said a word to me. I was told nothing about the reason for my imprisonment, or how long it would last. I learned that I was lodged in the section where the prisoners condemned to death were housed.

FATHER

Dear Dietrich,
I wanted to send you a greeting from us and to tell you that we’re always thinking of you. We know you, and so we’re confident that everything will turn out well – and, we hope, soon. I hope that we’ll be able to talk with you soon. After receiving permission we sent you on Wednesday the 7th a parcel with bread and other food, a blanket and a woolen vest. Loving greetings from mother, Renate and Eberhard, and your old Father.

DIETRICH

14 April 1943

Dear Mother and Father,

I want you to be quite sure that I’m all right. Strangely enough, the discomforts of prison life, the physical hardships, hardly bother me at all. I can even have enough to eat in the mornings with dry bread. The hard prison cot doesn’t worry me a bit, and I can get plenty of sleep between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. I’ve been particularly surprised that I’ve hardly felt any need at all for cigarettes since I came here.

A sudden arrest brings with it the need to come to terms with an entirely new situation. Physical things take a back seat and lose their importance, its something I find to be a real enrichment of my experience.

You can imagine that I’m anxious about my finance at the moment. It’s a great deal for her to bear. If only I could have a few words with her! Now you’ll have to do that for me.
DIETRICH [Continued]

Spring is really coming now. You'll have plenty to do in the garden. In the prison yard there's a thrush which sings beautifully in the morning, and now in the evening too. I'm grateful for the little things.

When you have a chance could you bring me slippers, boot laces, shoe polish, writing paper and envelopes, ink, matches, shaving cream, sewing things and a suit I can change into? Many thanks for everything. Good-bye for now.

Your Dietrich

ROEDER

To Dr. Karl Bonhoeffer

In the action against your son Dietrich Bonhoeffer, you are informed, in reply to your letter of 17 April 1943, that the application for permission to visit is refused.

Signed
Dr. Manfred Roeder
Judge Advocate of the War Court

DIETRICH

You want to know more about my life here? To picture a cell doesn't require much imagination. The less you use, the nearer the mark you'll be. Our day lasts fourteen hours, of which I spend about three walking up and down the cell – several kilometers a day, besides half an hour in the yard. I read, learn, and work.

The first night in my cell I couldn't sleep much, because in the next cell a prisoner wept for several hours on end; but no one took any notice.

Anyone detained for investigation is treated like a criminal, and it's impossible for a prisoner who is treated unjustly to get redress. I've often heard conversations in which guards said quite bluntly that if a prisoner complains of unjust treatment, the authorities will never believe the prisoner, but always the guard. I've known of cases where this evil practice was followed.

The tone is set by those guards who behave in the most evil and brutal way toward the prisoners. The whole building resounds with vile abuse. The quieter and more fair-minded guards are nauseated by it, too, but they have no influence. During months of detention for investigation, prisoners who are later acquitted have to suffer abuse like criminals, and are absolutely defenseless, since their right to complain exists only in theory.

After twelve days the authorities learned about my family connections. It was embarrassing to see how everything changed from that moment. I was put into a more spacious cell, which one of the men was forced to clean for me every day; I was offered larger rations, which I always refused, as they would have been at the expense of the other prisoners; the captain fetched me for a daily walk, with the result that the staff treated me with studied politeness – in fact, several of them came to apologize: ‘We didn't know,’ they'd say. It was painful.
KARL-FRIEDRICH

23 April 1943

Dear Dietrich,

I’ve only just learned in Berlin its possible to write you and let you know that people are thinking about you. Of course we all very much hope that you’ll soon have the time of testing behind you and will soon be released. I’ve often been to Berlin during the last two weeks. You need not worry about the parents; of course they’re very shaken, but full of confidence and trust that the matter will soon come out all right. Keep your spirits up. All the best.

Ever your Karl-Friedrich

DIETRICH

Easter Day, 25 April 1943

Dear parents,

At last the tenth day has come round, and I’m allowed to write to you again; I’m so glad to let you know that even here I’m having a happy Easter. Good Friday and Easter free me to think about things far beyond my own personal fate, and about the ultimate meaning of all life, suffering, and events; and I lay hold of a great hope.

Since yesterday it has been marvelously quiet here. I heard many people wishing each other a happy Easter, and I can’t begrudge it anyone who is on duty here – it’s a hard job.

I must thank you for all the things that you brought me. You can’t imagine what it means to be suddenly told: ‘Your mother and sister and brother have just been here, and they’ve left something for you.’ The mere fact that you have been near me, the tangible evidence that you’re still thinking and caring about me is enough to keep me happy for the rest of the day.

Things are still all right, and I’m well. I’m now allowed out of doors for half an hour every day, and now that I can smoke again, I even forget sometimes, for a little while, where I am! I read a good deal – newspapers, novels, and above all the Bible.

I have a couple of requests: I’d very much like the brown, or better still the black boots with laces. My heels are going. My suit is in need of cleaning; I’d like to give it to you and to have the other brown one instead. I also need lots of matches, a pipe with tobacco, and cigarettes. Books: Schilling, *Morals*, Volume II and a volume of Stifter. Excuse me for troubling you. Many thanks.

It’s surprising how quickly the days pass here. I can hardly believe I’ve been here three weeks. I like going to bed at eight o’clock (supper is at four), and I look forward to my dreams. I never knew what a source of pleasure dreams can be; I dream every day, and always about something pleasant. The day is over now, and I hope you’re feeling as peaceful as I am.

Good-bye for now, and excuse all the worry that I’m causing you.

Your Dietrich
MOTHER
Wednesday after Easter, 1943

My dear Dietrich,

I was outside yesterday with Susi and brought you the things. I hope I’ve sent roughly what you wanted. You must see that you keep your strength up, too. We’ve just had a letter from you, and are eagerly waiting for the next. It all happened too suddenly. Who would have thought it possible that such a thing could happen to you! We’re trying to get rid of our old idea that being in prison is a disgrace; it makes life unnecessarily difficult. We have to realize that in our difficult times a good deal of mistrust influences people’s opinions of a man: it may be very difficult to avoid it. But we’re convinced that when you hear the charges that are laid against you, you’ll be in a position to exonerate yourself.

May God continue to bless you in these hard times. Father joins me in sending his love.

Your Mother

MARIA

(to the Interviewer)
At least once a week we delivered books, laundry, and food, and picked up what he chose to return.

INTERVIEWER
So did things become rather routine?

MARIA
In some ways. Dietrich lived by church holidays, like Easter, and by seasons, rather than by the calendar month, and the dates on his letters were sometimes approximations at best. He told me he was disappointed that he had not received a letter from anyone expressly for Whit Sunday.

INTERVIEWER
What’s ‘Whit Sunday’?

MARIA
I’m not entirely sure.
(They laugh)

DIETRICH (Who stands fast?)
(To the audience)
The great masquerade of evil has played havoc with all our ethical concepts. For evil to appear disguised as light, charity, historical necessity, or social justice merely confirms our understanding of the fundamental wickedness of evil.

Here and there people hide from public violence in the sanctuary of their private virtue. But anyone who does this must shut his eyes to the injustice around him. Only at the cost of self-deception can he keep himself from responsible action. In spite of all that he does,
DIETRICH [Continued]
what he leaves undone will rob him of his peace of mind. He will either go to pieces
because of this disquiet, or become the most hypocritical of Pharisees.

So who stands fast? Only the man who is ready to sacrifice all when he is called to
responsible action in faith, and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who
tries to make his whole life an answer to the question and call of God. And where are
these responsible people?*

INTERVIEWER
You haven’t told me yet why he was arrested.

MARIA
Well, for a long time no one knew. We had suspicions but we didn’t speak openly about
them, not even to each other. And we certainly couldn’t ask Dietrich about it.

INTERVIEWER
What did you suspect?

MARIA
Dietrich had been the focus of Gestapo attention for a long time because of his
involvement in the Confessing church. After the Gestapo closed the Finkenwalde
seminary, and prohibited him from speaking or teaching, his brother-in-law Hans von
Dohnanyi secured for him a position in the Abwehr.

INTERVIEWER
What was that? The “Abwehr?”

MARIA
Abwehr. It was a Nazi military intelligence organization . . . it was also a secret hub of
anti-Nazi activity throughout the war. Many officers in the Abwehr were trying to
overthrow Hitler.

INTERVIEWER
What was Dietrich’s job?

MARIA
He was essentially a spy. Because of his credentials, Dietrich was allowed to travel
abroad, ostensibly to collect information, but he was making contact with old friends, and
getting information out of Germany about what was actually happening there.

INTERVIEWER
So he was a double agent.

MARIA
Just so. His position in the Abwehr made it possible for Dietrich to help Jews escape to
Switzerland. That’s what he and Hans did.
INTERVIEW
When he was arrested did you know this?

MARIA
No. And of course he could say nothing in his letters because they were all read by the Gestapo. He had to go through interrogations not knowing how much, if anything, the Gestapo knew. He had to feign innocence.

INTERVIEWER
It must’ve been torture for him. Was all your communication with him censored?

MARIA
Almost all.

INTERVIEWER
“Almost” all?

MARIA
(Hesitantly)
Dietrich, his brother Klaus, and two brothers-in-law, Hans and Rüdiger Schleicher, were all involved in the German resistance. They knew from the outset that it was a dangerous business. They understood that they could be arrested, and so they devised a way to communicate undetected if they were.

INTERVIEWER
What did they do?

MARIA
They used books. It was brilliant really. Let me show you. With every visit we would bring a book, and take one back. Sometimes there would be a message encoded in the book.

INTERVIEWER
How?

MARIA
Beginning on a random page somewhere near the back of the book, one letter on the page would have a small pencil mark next to it – a dot. Almost invisible. Two or three pages closer to the front another letter, another dot. The whole book would contain a very brief message, essentially written backwards one letter at a time.

INTERVIEWER
What became of Hans, and the others?
MARTHA
Hans was arrested at the same time as Dietrich, although they were held in different
prisons. They were all executed on the same day.

HANS
My dear Dietrich,
I don’t know whether I’ll be allowed to send you this letter, but I want to try. You can’t
know how it pains me that I am the cause of this suffering that you, Christel, the children,
and our parents now undergo; that because of me, my dear wife and you have been
deprived of freedom. Its an infinitely heavy burden. And that mistrustful question
‘Why?’ keeps forming itself on my lips. If I knew you were not thinking of me
reproachfully, a weight would be lifted from my spirit. What wouldn’t I give to know
that the two of you were free again; I’d take everything upon myself if you could be
spared this testing. You know me well. We are, I feel, more than ‘just’ relatives by
marriage.
I’m reading the Bible a good deal now; its the only book that doesn’t keep making my
thoughts stray. This morning I read in Matthew and Luke, and Psalms 68 and 70. How
much I’d like to talk them over with you.
I want you to know that I’m grateful to you for everything that you’ve been to my wife,
my children and myself.
So good-bye.
Your Hans

DIETRICH
My dear Hans,
Your letter so surprised and moved me that I had to try to get a letter to you. You must
know that there’s not even an atom of reproach or bitterness in me about what’s befallen
both of us. Such things come from God and from him alone, and I know that I am one
with you in believing that before him there can only be subjection, perseverance, patience
– and gratitude. So every question ‘Why?’ falls silent, because it has found its answer.
Until recently we’ve been able to enjoy so many good things together that it’d be almost
presumptuous were we not also ready to accept the hardship quietly, bravely – and also
gratefully.
I’m reading, learning and working a great deal and have a quiet time in the morning and
the evening to think of all the many people, at home and in the field, whom one would
and should commend each day to God. I need not say that now you and Christel have a
special place among them. No, you mustn’t and needn’t worry about us at all; another
has now taken this worry from you. What we can’t do, we must now simply let go of and
limit ourselves to what we can and should do, that is, be manly and strong in trust in God
in the midst of our suffering.
God bless you. I think of you faithfully each day.
Your Dietrich

INTERVIEWER
Why did Dietrich become involved with the resistance?
MARIA

Why?

INTERVIEWER

Yes, why?

MARIA

(Bewildered)
I’m not sure I understand your question.

INTERVIEWER

Well, he was a white man from a reasonably well-to-do German family. He was a Lutheran, not Jewish. He was well respected in his profession. He had a beautiful young fiancé. He had everything to live for. Why would he risk all that? Why not simply keep a low profile until the war ended?

MARIA

Because it wasn’t in his character to do nothing. His family was adamantly anti-Nazi. Moreover, the Nazi regime was infiltrating the German church. The Nazis wanted total control, not only of what we did, but what we thought – what we believed. They systematically repressed the Confessing church, closed the seminary in Finkenwalde where Dietrich taught, banned him from speaking in public . . .

INTERVIEWER

So his resistance was personal?

MARIA

No! It was more than that. He called it, ‘responsible action.’ He believed every committed Christian had the responsibility to actively resist evil, like the evil of the Nazi regime.

[SOUND Q4: Am Adolf Hitler Platz]

DIETRICH

If I see a madman driving a car into a group of innocent bystanders, then I can’t, as a Christian, simply wait for the catastrophe and then comfort the wounded and bury the dead. I must try to wrestle the steering wheel out of the hands of the driver.

MARIA

(Pause)
It started when Dietrich was in America . . .

INTERVIEWER

(Flipping through her notes)
Now, when was that?
MARIA
1930. He was attending Union Theological Seminary in New York, and he also taught
Sunday school classes at the Abyssinian Baptist church in Harlem.

INTERVIEWER
No! I mean, really?

MARIA
(amused)
Yes. The services there were so . . . demonstrative.

INTERVIEWER
In what way?

MARIA
Very emotional. Very . . . full of life. Very expressive of the love of God. This affected
Dietrich deeply.

INTERVIEWER
It challenged his Germanic reserve?

MARIA
Exactly! He could never come to terms with the fact that his black friends, who were so
joyous and so loving, were not allowed to have a cup of coffee with him in a diner in a
their own country.

INTERVIEWER
I’m afraid I don’t see the connection to the German resistance.

MARIA
Dietrich was baffled that American Christians could tolerate the oppression of their own
people. It changed him. He came to believe that the oppression of any people was an
affront to God, because all people are God’s children.

INTERVIEWER
Even Jews?

MARIA
Of course the Jews.

INTERVIEWER
But don’t Christians consider Jews to be . . .
MARIA
As a man who loved God . . . not just as a theologian, but as a believing Christian . . . he believed it was his duty to fight the oppression of any people, to resist evil, even at the cost of his own life.

INTERVIEWER
Even if that meant becoming an accomplice to an assassin?

MARIA
Even so.

INTERVIEWER
So, why didn’t more German Christians resist the Nazis?

MARIA
The Nazis had the power! They had the armies. They had the guns. They had the laws. They had the courts. To publicly resist them was treason, and treason was punishable by death. It was the individual versus a powerful state. There was not much one person could do before they’d kill you. Most of us were too afraid. Afraid for our lives. I was afraid.

[SOUND Q5: Blind Barnabas]

(DIETRICH meets JEAN at a sidewalk café in New York City, 1930.)

DIETRICH
Jean? Jean! Good morning!

JEAN
Dietrich! What a pleasant surprise! Take a seat. Have a cup of coffee.

DIETRICH
Danka. Don’t you have a class?

JEAN
Not for a while. Plenty of time to sit, read the Times, and enjoy a lovely New York morning with a friend.

DIETRICH
Indeed.

(DIETRICH picks up a portion of the paper and reads. They sit for a moment.)
JEAN

What’s in the box?

DIETRICH


JEAN

I’d have thought that you preferred Wagner.

DIETRICH

(Amused)

Wagner!? No. Bach, maybe.

JEAN

Why the sudden interest in American music? When in Rome . . .?

DIETRICH

I don’t know. It . . . it captures something. I’m going to send these home. When I get back I’ll play them for my students . . . let them experience something alive in Christianity that the German church has lost. Something . . . vibrant and dynamic, immediate . . .

JEAN

Passionate?

DIETRICH

Exactly! Yes! Passionate!

JEAN

Are you quite sure you’re German?

(They laugh, and sip coffee.)

DIETRICH

What are you reading?

JEAN

I’m reading about the latest rumblings from your Monsieur Hitler.

DIETRICH

My Hitler? He’s not my Hitler. The man is a crack pot. No one takes him seriously.

JEAN

That’s not what I read in the Times.
What do you mean?

DIETRICH

It says here that almost half the students in your seminaries are pro-Hitler.

JEAN

That’s ridiculous!

DIETRICH

Is it? Dietrich, you’re German. I’m French. Just twelve years ago our people were killing each other in droves. Now here we sit, brothers in Christ, enjoying a cup of coffee together. But what if Hitler came to power, Dietrich? We could find ourselves in another Great War. You and I could be ordered by our governments to kill each other.

JEAN

You’re wrong. Did the Great War teach us nothing?

DIETRICH

You tell me. Would you obey such an order?

JEAN

It will never happen.

DIETRICH

How can you be so sure? It happened once.

JEAN

Things were different then.

DIETRICH

Were they? Were they really? Tell me, when push comes to shove, who will you obey, Dietrich?

JEAN

I see no point in this vain speculation about something that will never come to pass.

DIETRICH

Quit equivocating. Answer the question. Will you serve the state, or will you serve God?

JEAN

Both! St. Paul to the Romans. “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established . . . He who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves.”

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JEAN
Jesus Christ to all of mankind. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven.”

Dietrich, listen. If all men took Jesus’ teaching in the sermon on the mount seriously, there would be no more war. And as Christians we must take Christ’s words seriously.

(Pause)
I hope you’re right about Hitler, Dietrich. With all my heart. But are you prepared for what will happen if you’re wrong?

[SOUND Q6: My Soul is a Witness]

DIETRICH
You’re going to be late for class.

(DIETRICH moves to a different part of the stage.)

DIETRICH (on civil courage)
(To the audience)
In recent years we’ve seen a great deal of bravery and self-sacrifice, but civil courage hardly anywhere. In a long history, we Germans have learned the strength of obedience. In the subordination of our personal wishes to the tasks to which we’ve been called, we’ve found the meaning of our lives. We’ve looked upwards, not in fear, but in trust, seeing in our tasks a call. Who would deny that in obedience, in their task and calling, the Germans have again and again shown the utmost bravery and self-sacrifice?

But in this we’ve misjudged the world; we didn’t realize that our submissiveness and self-sacrifice could be exploited for evil ends. When that happened all the moral principles of the German people were bound to totter. The fact couldn’t be escaped that we Germans still lacked something fundamental: we couldn’t see the need for responsible action, in opposition to our tasks and calling. Only now are we Germans beginning to discover the meaning of civil responsibility. It depends on a God who demands responsible action in a bold venture of faith, and who promises forgiveness and consolation to the man who becomes a sinner in that venture.

FATHER
To the Judge Advocate of the War Court

In the preliminary enquiry against my son Dietrich Bonhoeffer I asked for permission to visit on 17 April 1943. My request was refused by the Judge Advocate on 20 April. I repeat this request for my wife and myself since my son has now been under investigation for five weeks. I would point out that for more than thirty years I’ve been a member of the Senate concerned with sanitary measures within the army. I believe that I can claim to be trustworthy enough to keep within the bounds of the regulations that are in force during a visit to my son. I can say the same of my wife.

Karl Bonhoeffer
To Professor Dr. Bonhoeffer

For the present you and your wife cannot yet be granted permission to visit as the investigations do not make this seem expedient.

Signed
Dr. Manfred Roeder
Judge Advocate of the War Court

INTERVIEWER
When were you first allowed to visit him?

MARIA
The 24th of June, 1943.

INTERVIEWER
You remember the exact day.

MARIA
It’s not the kind of thing that one forgets. Our first meeting took place in the Reich Military Court, and I found myself being used as a tool by the prosecutor Roeder. I was brought into the room with practically no forewarning, and Dietrich was visibly shaken.

[SOUND Q7: Gospel Train]

(MARIA is escorted by KNOBLOCH into the room where DIETRICH is being questioned by ROEDER.)

ROEDER
Herr Bonhoeffer, you have a visitor.

DIETRICH
Maria!

ROEDER
Fraulein, you sit here. Herr Bonhoeffer, you sit there. You may not make physical contact at any time. You must speak at an audible level at all times. Do you understand?

DIETRICH
May we have a moment of privacy?

ROEDER
Unfortunately, no.

(They sit awkwardly, self-conscious, afraid. ROEDER moves a few feet away, still conspicuously close.)
MARIA
Dietrich, you look well.

DIETRICH
Do I?

ROEDER
Speak up!

DIETRICH
Do I? Thank you. You look well as . . . as well.

MARIA
Your mother gave me some photos of you – eight little photos. They’re always in front of me as I write you. I look at them, and you seem so close – you and your books, the days we spent together, and I dream of the days when we’ll be together again. And here you are, close enough to touch.

I doubt there’s an hour in the day when my thoughts don’t turn to you. When I walk through the garden in the morning, I know that you’re awake too, and that you may be looking up at the same sky.

DIETRICH
Maria, I’m so sorry to put you through this . . .

MARIA
Shhh. Hush. None of that.

(Changing the subject)
I’m living in Berlin now. I’ve been here for nine days. I’m often at your parent’s place, and they’re kind to me. I’d really prefer to spend the whole time sitting by myself in your room. I know everything in it. Every book on your shelf tells me a little about you.

At night I always dip into one of the books you’ve written. A lot of things escape me, and I look forward to asking you about them. My favorite is Creation and Fall. I must confess that, although the beginning of a sentence often interests me a great deal, I fall asleep before I reach the end, and next day I have to begin again because I’ve lost the thread.

DIETRICH
And then the same thing happens again?

MARIA
Yes. But I look forward all day long to reading your words at night. I already know all your letters by heart.

DIETRICH
Someday I’ll read my books aloud to you, and you’ll fall asleep even more quickly.
MARIA
Would you like to hear some wedding plans? I’ve got more than enough.

DIETRICH
Nothing could please me more.

MARIA
I’d like to get married in the summer when the village looks its best. I’ve always looked forward to showing it to you in August especially. What you’ve seen of it up to now doesn’t count. I’ve pictured that August in every detail. How I’ll meet your train, how we’ll go for a walk and I’ll show you all of my favorite places, views, trees and animals, and how much you’ll like them too, and then we’ll have a home there.

DIETRICH
I’m sure it will be lovely.

MARIA
Try not to be depressed and miserable, Dietrich. Think how happy we’ll be later on, and tell yourself that perhaps all this had to happen for us to realize how lovely our life will be and how grateful for it we must be. Think how wonderful it will be when you’re free again.

ROEDER
This is all very moving I’m sure, but it’s time for you to go.

MARIA
(Urgently, to Roeder.)
I’ve brought him a book. May I give it to him?

(ROEDER takes the book, and rifles through it. He looks intently at the binding, the endpapers, the spine, searching for a tool of some kind. Satisfied that it has nothing hidden in it, he gives it to DIETRICH.)

DIETRICH
What is it?

MARIA
Rilke. From your bookshelf.

DIETRICH
Ah. Yes. Rilke. Thank you.
MARIA
I’d like to read it when you’re finished. May I collect it from you next time?

DIETRICH
Of course.

ROEDER
Now, if we’re finished with the lending library . . .

MARIA
Five more minutes!

ROEDER
No, frauline. Another day.

(KNOBLOCH escorts DIETRICH in one direction, and ROEDER escorts MARIA in the other. Suddenly MARIA breaks and runs to DIETRICH and holds him close. ROEDER and KNOBLOCH pull them apart and drive them in opposite directions.)

[SOUND Q8: Joe Turner whistle]

DIETRICH
Dear Parents,

I’ve just come back from having seen Maria – what an indescribable surprise and joy! It’s still like a dream. What will we think of it one day? What one can say at such a time is so trivial, but that’s not the main thing. It was so brave of her to come; I wouldn’t have dared to suggest it to her. It’s so much more difficult for her than for me. I know where I am, but for her its all unimaginable, mysterious, terrifying. Think how wonderful things will be when this nightmare is over! I’m looking forward to that very much. Much love to all the family and friends. I’m always thinking of you.

Ever your grateful Dietrich

MARIA
(To the interviewer)
His emotions showed only in the pressure with which he held my hand.

INTERVIEWER
How often did you see him after that?

MARIA
At least once a month. He was given permission to write a one-page letter every four days, and he alternated between his parents and me. Eventually, though, he found a friendly guard who smuggled letters in both directions.
(KNOBLOCH enters DIETRICH’s cell.)

KNOBLOCH
Good afternoon, prisoner Bonhoeffer.

DIETRICH
Walter! How good of you to stop by.

KNOBLOCH
Well, I was in the neighborhood . . .

(He hands DIETRICH a parcel.)

KNOBLOCH [Continued]
This came for you. Clean shirts, tobacco, writing paper.

DIETRICH
Matches?

KNOBLOCH
Matches.

DIETRICH
Splendid. Thank you.

KNOBLOCH
Shall I set up the chess board?

DIETRICH
If you must. You won’t win.

KNOBLOCH
I’ll take my chances.

(KNOBLOCH sets up a small chess board on DIETRICH’s writing table. They play as they speak.)

DIETRICH
How long have you been doing this Walter?

KNOBLOCH
Playing chess?

DIETRICH
Guarding prisoners.
Ten years.

DIETRICH
Ten years? That’s a long time in anyone’s life. Time is the most valuable thing that we have, Walter, because it can’t be replaced. The thought of any time lost troubles me whenever I look back.

KNOBLOCH
Then don’t look back.

DIETRICH
That’s not so easy in here. So much time has been lost. It’s time that hasn’t been filled up, but left empty. Time in which I’ve failed to live a full human life, learn, create, enjoy, and even suffer. xxiv

KNOBLOCH
I should think that you’ve had enough suffering, pastor.

DIETRICH
Ah, but Walter, suffering is a way to freedom. In suffering, deliverance comes by putting matters into God’s hands.

KNOBLOCH
In here suffering is only the prelude to death.

DIETRICH
Death is the beginning of human freedom. I find that comforting.xxxv

KNOBLOCH
You’re an odd man, Bonhoeffer. You’re too smart for your own good. But you’re a good man. I pray for you.

(He reaches into his jacket and withdraws a letter.)

Here.

(DIETRICH takes the letter. He places it under his pillow, and withdraws another letter which he gives quickly to KNOBLOCH.)

DIETRICH
Thank you, Walter. I pray for you, too.

KNOBLOCH
She’s worth living for, Herr doctor. But I don’t know what she sees in you when she could have me.
DIETRICH

Frankly, I don’t know either.

KNOBLOCH

I’ll see she gets this.  No one else will read it.  But be careful.  “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.”  That’s from the Gospel of Matthew.xxvi

(KNOBLOCH leaves DIETRICH alone in his cell.)

DIETRICH

My dear, dear Maria,

It’s no use.  I have to talk to you with no one else listening.  I have to let you see into my heart without someone else looking on.  I have to talk to you about that which belongs to no one in the world but us.  I refuse to let anyone else share what belongs to you alone.  The thing that binds me to you in my unspoken thoughts and dreams can’t be revealed, dearest Maria, until I’m able to fold you in my arms.  That time will come, and it will be all the more blissful and genuine.

When you were here the time before last, and I saw you for only a minute and lost you again, I thought I couldn’t endure it any more, but there were other people present.  Do you think it was easy for me?

How utterly impossible it is for me, to speak at the required volume and sit at the required distance from you, to tell you what I should only whisper to you at very private, precious, heaven-sent moments: that I love you as you are and for what you are – young, happy, strong, good, proud – and that I love you as my very own.  That I yearn for you and our future together.  Don’t hear these words, Maria, hear only what underlies them.  Don’t look at this sterile handwriting, look beyond it – I beg you – and see a heart that’s often selfish, inept and weak, but which believes that it can only find peace on earth if your own heart opens for it.

MARIA

Dearest Maria, I’ll give this letter to our friend.  Then the waiting will begin again.  Wait with me, I beg you!  Let me embrace you long and tenderly, let me kiss you and love you and stroke the sorrow from your brow.  The thought that you’re waiting with me, lovingly and patiently, is my daily consolation.  All will come right at the time appointed by God.  Join me in looking forward to that time, Maria!

DIETRICH

Always and ever your Dietrichxxvii

[SOUND Q9: I’m Going To Hold On]

MOTHER

Dear Dietrich,

We were very glad that you were able to see Maria again and to talk with her.  We were told by Captain Maetz that we would have a chance to see you at the beginning of next week.  Maria was quite thrilled at the reunion and of course she had to tell us all about it.
MOTHER [Continued]

Perhaps your absence will now really not last much longer. One finishes each week in
disappointment with the thought ‘and again not,’ and who knows at our time in life how
many weeks one still has left? They say that war years count double. I have the feeling
that they count fourfold.

With much love,
Your Mother

KARL-FRIEDRICH

Dear Dietrich,

Hope refuses to be put to shame! Every time I sit down to write to you, I hope that
you’ll not get the letter but will have come out in the meanwhile.

With every attack on Berlin swarms of planes fly over so that the whole sky roars. I
feel guilty about every hour that I have forgotten the suffering of all those many
thousands, and I have the feeling that I ought to go off straightaway and try to help. But
the hard thing about the present time is that there’s hardly anything I can do to help. A
few hours of freedom from work are enough, of course, to think of other people, but not
to give them any real help.

Grete went off to Tempelburg with the children the day before yesterday. I’m enjoying
the complete quietness and lack of interruptions and have spent the day working over my
lecture again and ‘modernizing’ it.

Tomorrow I expect a call from Maria. I’m eager to see if she has any news. If nothing
gets in the way I want to go to Berlin early the day after tomorrow.

All the best. Here’s to a speedy release!

Your brother Karl-Friedrich

DIETRICH (on Christian Action)

(To the audience)

Most people learn wisdom only by personal experience. This explains their insensibility
to the suffering of others; sympathy grows in proportion to the fear of approaching
disaster.

No one is responsible for all the injustice and suffering in the world, and no one wants
to set himself up as the judge of the world. But from a Christian point of view, none of
these excuses can obscure the fact that the most important factor, compassion, is lacking.
Christ bore the sufferings of all humanity in his own body as if they were his own,
accepting them of his own free will.

We’re certainly not Christ; we’re not called upon to redeem the world by our own deeds
and sufferings, and we need not try to assume such an impossible burden. We’re not
lords, but instruments in the hand of the Lord of history; and we can share in other
people’s suffering only to a very limited degree. We’re not Christ, but if we want to be
Christians, we must have some share in Christ’s compassion by acting with responsibility
when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from
fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer. Mere
waiting and looking on is not Christian behavior. The Christian is called to compassion
and action, not . . . by his own sufferings, but by [responding to] the sufferings of his
brethren, for whose sake Christ suffered.
EBERHARD

Dear Dietrich,

Greetings from Italy! I’ve just been seeing the eternal city again. I used what time I had, not for the Forum or the Pantheon, but for St. Peter’s. I managed to get in with a guided tour. Otherwise there were barriers up. This time Michelangelo’s Pieta made a great impression on me. It’s really quite small. It’s certainly the work of a young Michelangelo. I now feel that I’d like to see the church again and again. The tour ended with an audience with the Pope, and so I saw him too. There were about forty officers and four hundred men. He spoke a few words with each of them. He looked older than I expected from the pictures.

This letter must go, and I have to be on guard duty in five minutes.

Your Eberhard

DIETRICH

Dear Eberhard,

It was an indescribable joy to hear from you! Recently I’ve felt like Job -- that Satan had received permission from the Lord to separate me from my friends – but that he was not going to succeed.

I read about your audience in the Vatican and am now curious to hear more about it. I assume that some pig-headed Lutherans will put it down as a blot in your biography, and for that very reason I’m glad that you’ve done it.

I’d be behaving like a shy boy if I hid from you the fact that I’m making some attempts to write poetry. Up to now I’ve been keeping it in the dark from everyone, even Maria, because I didn’t know whether it wouldn’t frighten her more than please her. You’re the friend to whom I can talk with a certain matter-of-factness; I hope that if need be you’ll tell me clearly not to meddle with it. So today I’m sending you a sample.

In faithfulness and gratitude.

Your Dietrich

EBERHARD

“Who am I?” ?? Huh.

Who am I? They often tell me I step out of my cell, composed, contented and sure, like a lord from his manor.

Who am I? They often tell me, I speak with jailers, frankly, familiar and firm, as though I was in command.

Who am I? They also tell me, I bear the days of hardship, unconcerned, amused and proud, like one who usually wins.

DIETRICH

Am I really what others tell me? Or am I only what I myself know of me? Troubled, homesick, ill, like a bird in a cage, gasping for breath, as though one strangled me, hungering for colors, for flowers, for songs of birds, thirsting for kind words, for human company, quivering with anger at despotism and petty insults, anxiously waiting for great events, helplessly worrying about friends far away, empty and tired of praying, of thinking, or working, exhausted and ready to bid farewell to it all.
DIETRICH [Continued]

Who am I? This or the other? Am I then, this today and the other tomorrow? Am I both at the same time? In public, a hypocrite and by myself, a contemptible, whining weakling? Or am I to myself, like a beaten army, flying in disorder from a victory already won?

Who am I? Lonely questions mock me. Who I really am, you know me, I am thine, O God! xxxvi

INTERVIEWER

You’ve said that Dietrich made a friend among the guards?

MARIA

Yes. Several.

INTERVIEWER

Could one of them have helped him to escape?

MARIA

Oh yes. It was more than a possibility, there was a plan in place. A date had been set.

INTERVIEWER

What happened?

MARIA

There was an attempt on Hitler’s life. A bomb in a briefcase. Hitler survived. The would-be assassin was a Nazi staff officer. The Gestapo went berserk. Hundreds were arrested. The offices of the Abwehr were ransacked. They found documents which Hans had hidden there.

INTERVIEWER

What kind of documents?

MARIA

Incriminating ones. When the war started going badly, Hans was ordered to secretly put together a dossier on the conspirators, to protect them from prosecution by the Allies.

INTERVIEWER

Dietrich was named in those documents?

MARIA

And Klaus, and Rüdiger. That’s when they were arrested.

INTERVIEWER

Why didn’t Dietrich escape?
MARI

With the information the Gestapo had, Dietrich knew that if he escaped, they’d execute Hans and Klaus and Rüdiger. He feared they would go after the rest of his family, and mine.

INTERVIEWER

So he chose to stay behind, knowing what it would cost him? And you?

(MARIA simply nods her head.)

DIETRICH

My dearest Maria,

It would be better if I could write to you and express nothing but my gratitude, my joy and my happiness in having you in my heart, without conveying any hint of the stress and impatience occasioned by my cell-bound existence. But that would not be truthful. You must know how I really feel and must not take me as a saint. I can’t imagine that you would want to marry one in the first place -- and I’d also advise against it from my knowledge of church history.

So, to set the scene for you, I’ve just had some hot gruel for supper, and I’m sitting at the desk with my sleeves rolled up and my collar open, thinking longingly of you.xxxvii

Both of us have lost infinitely much during the past months; time today is a costly commodity, for who knows how much more time is given to us? And yet I dare not think that it was lost time for either of us. We’ve grown together in a different way than we’ve thought and wished, but these are unusual times. Your life would have been quite different had our paths not crossed.xxxviii

The writer Stifter once said that “pain is a holy angel, who shows treasures to men which would otherwise remain forever hidden. Through pain men have become greater than through all joys of the world.” It must be so, and I tell this to myself over and over again – the pain of longing must be there, and we can’t talk it away. But it needs to be overcome every time, and thus there’s an even holier angel than the one of pain, and that is the angel of joy in God.

Take a kiss from

Your Dietrichxxxix

EBERHARD

Dear Dietrich,

Believe it or not, I really write to you much more often than I manage to get words down on paper. Intrigued by your thoughts, I’m reading Proverbs, The Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes with new delight. I can understand the complexity much better. You’re right, Proverbs 25:2 is remarkable and really quite comforting.

With many affectionate greetings

Your Eberhardxl
Dear Eberhard,.

During the last year or so I’ve come to understand more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. The Christian is not a religious man (“homo religiosus”), but simply a man, as Jesus was a man. I don’t mean the shallow this-worldliness of the busy, the comfortable, or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness characterized by the constant knowledge of death and resurrection.

I remember a conversation that I had in America thirteen years ago with a young French pastor, named Jean. We were asking ourselves quite simply what we wanted to do with our lives. He said he would like to become a saint (and I think it’s quite likely that he did become one). At the time I was very impressed, but I disagreed with him, and said, in effect, that I’d like to learn to have faith. For a long time I didn’t realize the depth of the contrast. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life.

I discovered later, and I’m still discovering, that its only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman, a righteous man, or an unrighteous one, a sick man or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life’s problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In so doing we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world – watching with Christ in Gethsemane. That, I think, is faith; and that is how one becomes a man and a Christian.

May God in his mercy lead us through these times; but above all, may he lead us to himself.

Your Dietrich

INTERVIEWER

When was Dietrich taken away from Tegel Prison?

MARIA

In October of ’44, as part of a purge following the assassination attempt.

INTERVIEWER

Did you know where he had been taken?

MARIA

I knew he wasn’t at Tegel any more. I later learned that he’d been taken to the Gestapo Prison in the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse. But it was impossible to obtain visitation permits, and it’s unlikely that any of my letters reached him there.

(Pause)

My cousin Fabian was arrested for his part in the plot, and he was in prison with Dietrich there.
FABIAN

My dear cousin,

Dietrich was always cheerful, always friendly and obliging, with the result that – to my
surprise – it didn’t take him long to captivate the guards, who were far from all brimming
with the milk of human kindness. It was typical of our own relationship that he always
tended to be the optimist, whereas I suffered from bouts of depression. It was always
Dietrich who gave us encouragement and hope, and who never tired of repeating that no
battle is lost until it has been given up for lost.

He passed me countless slips of paper bearing words of consolation and good cheer
taken from the Bible and written in his own hand.

When Hans von Dohnanyi was brought to Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse, Dietrich managed to
get in touch with him. Hans was lying in his cell, with the door open, because he was
paralyzed in both legs. We were returning from a concrete shelter after an air-raid alert.
Suddenly Dietrich darted into Dohnanyi’s cell. By some miracle none of the guards
spotted him. He accomplished his mission, then left Dohnanyi’s cell to rejoin the column
of prisoners unobserved. He told me that evening that he and Hans had agreed on all the
important points to be made in their future statements.

The few things we possessed, and which our relations were allowed to bring to the
prison, we exchanged as our mutual needs dictated. Dietrich’s eyes shone whenever he
told me of the letters he received from you. He felt surrounded and cherished by your
love, even in a Gestapo prison.

Your Fabian

INTERVIEWER

When did you hear from him next?

MARIA

In December he was finally allowed to write me. For Christmas. It was the last letter I
received from him.

19 December 1944

DIETRICH

My dearest Maria,

I’m so glad to be able to write you a Christmas letter, and to be able, through you, to
convey my love to my parents and my brothers and sisters, and to thank you all. Our
homes will be very quiet at this time. But I’ve often found that the quieter my
surroundings, the more vividly I sense my connection with you all. So I haven’t for an
instant felt lonely and forlorn. You, my parents – all of you including my friends and
students – are my constant companions. Your prayers and kind thoughts, passages from
the Bible, long-forgotten conversations, pieces of music, books – all are invested with life
as never before. I live in a great, unseen realm of whose real existence I’m in no doubt.
So you mustn’t think I’m unhappy. Anyway, what do happiness and unhappiness mean?
They depend so little on circumstances and so much more on what goes on inside us. I’m
thankful every day to have you – you and all of you – and that makes me happy and
cheerful.

Bonhoeffer in Prison, draft 4    (11/11/06)    © 2006 Richard Mundy
MARIA
On February 3rd of ‘45, the Allies bombed Berlin. It was the worst bombing of the war. There was rubble everywhere. The so-called “People’s Court,” where hundreds of Germans were sentenced to death, collapsed after taking a direct hit. I’m glad to say the presiding judge was killed just as he was about to pronounce a death sentence on my cousin. The judge’s body was found with Fabian’s file still clutched in his hand.

INTERVIEWER
Did your cousin survive the war?

MARIA
Oh, yes. He was liberated from a concentration camp by the Allies. He’s still alive. He’s a judge.

DIETRICH
Superficially, there’s little difference between here and Tegel. The daily routine is the same, the midday meal is better, breakfast and supper are more meager. The place is well heated. I’m being treated well and by the book.

We’ve now been waiting for each other for almost two years, dearest Maria. Don’t lose heart!

In great love and gratitude.
I embrace you.
Yours, Dietrich

MARIA
Because of the intensity of the bombing, Dietrich and nineteen other political prisoners were hurried out of Berlin. They were taken to a shelter near the concentration camp at Buchenwald. No one told us.

KARL-FRIEDRICH
June 1945

My dear children,

Things are bad in Berlin. I want to tell you all about it. My thoughts are there now, there in the ruins from which no news comes to us, where I visited uncle Klaus, condemned to death, in prison three months ago.

The Berlin prisons! What did I know of them a few years ago, and with what different eyes I’ve looked upon them since! Charlottenburg; Tegel; Moabit; the SS Prison in the Prinz-Albrecht-Strasse; the prison in the Lehrter Strasse. I waited in front of the harsh iron doors of all these prisons while I was in Berlin in the last years. I’ve accompanied aunt Ursel and aunt Christel, aunt Emmi and Maria there. They often went daily to bring things or take them away. They often went in vain; suffering the taunts of supercilious guards; but sometimes they also found a friendly one who showed some humanity and accepted something outside the prescribed time or gave the prisoners something to eat against the rules.
MARIA

I searched for him for a month. I went to three concentration camps; Dachau, Buchenwald, and Flossenbürg. Terrible places. But he was nowhere to be found. On April 3rd again unknown to us, he was taken to Schönberg in the Bavarian Forest.

KARL-FRIEDRICH

The last time I was in Berlin was at the end of March. Uncle Klaus and uncle Rüdiger were still alive; uncle Hans gave news through the doctor which was not completely hopeless; there was no trace of uncle Dietrich, who had been taken away by the SS at the beginning of February. I think that was on April 8th.

And what’s happened since the capture of Berlin by the Russians? I met a man from there who said that the Nazis had executed 4000 political prisoners before abandoning Berlin. Is everyone still alive? Uncle Dietrich spoke to someone at length on April 5th, in the neighborhood of Passau. From there he is said to have gone to the concentration camp at Flossenbürg. Why isn’t he here yet?

MARIA

On April 7th Dietrich conducted morning prayers for his companions. He was then taken by the Gestapo to Flossenbürg. I’d already been there a month earlier. But I’d gotten there too soon. A summary court was convened on April 8th. Ordered by Hitler personally. There was no trial, no witnesses, no appeal. Just a death sentence.

ROEDER

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, by the authority of the Third Reich under the supreme command of the Führer Adolf Hitler, as ordered by SS Leader Heinrich Himmler, I do hereby find you guilty of the charge of high treason against the state, and for conspiracy to assassinate a government leader. The penalty for such offenses, as mandated by German law is death by hanging. Sentence is to be carried out at once.

Dr. Manfred Roeder
Judge Advocate of the War Court

DIETRICH (On death)

(To the audience)

In recent years I’ve become increasingly familiar with the thought of death. I surprise myself by the calmness with which I hear of the death of one of my contemporaries. I can’t hate death as I used to, for I’ve discovered some good in it, and have almost come to terms with it. Fundamentally I feel that I really belong to death already, and that every new day is a miracle. It’d not be true to say that I welcome death, I’d like to see something more of the meaning of my life. Nor do I try to romanticize death, for life is too great and too precious. I still love life, but I don’t think that death can take me by surprise now. After what I’ve been through during the war, I hardly dare admit that I’d like death to come to me, not accidentally and suddenly through some trivial cause, but in the fullness of life and with everything at stake. It is I myself, and not outward circumstances, who makes death what it can be, a death freely and voluntarily accepted. Not an end, but a beginning.
[SOUND Q10: Death March]

MARIA
Dietrich was hanged at Flossenbürg on April 9th, 1945. They made him strip naked to humiliate him before he walked up the stairs to the gallows. The same day they also executed Hans, Klaus and Rüdiger, and several officers involved in the July 20th Plot. They didn’t bother to tell us.

(Pause)
Three weeks later, on April 30th, Hitler himself was dead. The Nazis surrendered to the Allies on May 8th.

INTERVIEWER
When did you learn of Dietrich’s death?

MARIA
In June.

INTERVIEWER
Two months? Why so long?

MARIA
With the surrender, all communication in Germany was broken off. I was in West Germany at the time.

INTERVIEWER
That’s terrible!

MARIA
Dietrich’s parents in Berlin didn’t find out until the end of July. They tuned in to a BBC broadcast from England. A church service. For encouragement. It was a memorial service for Dietrich. That was how they learned of his death.

(Pause)
Dietrich almost survived to the end of the war. Another month and everything would have been alright. Everything would have been . . .

(Pause)
Would you? Please? (Turn off that machine.)

(The INTERVIEWER turns off the tape recorder with an audible click. Lights fade everywhere except on DIETRICH in his cell.)
DIETRICH

(To the audience)
We have been the silent witnesses of evil deeds. We’ve been drenched by many storms. We’ve learned the arts of equivocation and pretense. Experience has made us suspicious of others and kept us from being truthful and open. Intolerable conflicts have worn us down and even made us cynical. Are we still of any use? What we need is not geniuses, or cynics, or misanthropes, or clever tacticians, but plain honest, straightforward men. xlvii

So who stands fast? Only the man who is ready to sacrifice all when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God – the responsible man, who tries to make his whole life an answer to the call of God.xlviii

[SOUND Q11: J-E-S-U-S spells Jesus]
NOTES

One of the challenges of a play based on letters and other writings is that it is, in essence, a collection of monologues. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a deep thinker and didn’t express himself in short sound bites. To reduce him to such would do him an injustice. So the challenge is to infuse those monologues with passion, to let us see inside the hearts and minds of these people.

Another challenge is to clearly distinguish these characters when they are, for the most part, identified only at the end of their letters.

Music, especially American Gospel music, was an integral part of Bonhoeffer’s life, and should be a part of the play. It would also be interesting to use German martial music to contrast the opposing forces in the play. Recordings of Adolf Hitler’s speeches could be used to aid in some transitions, and to keep the play grounded in an historical context. How and where these used as left to the director to decide. Some suggestions are included in the text.

PRONUNCIATION

Bonhoeffer           BON*hawfer
Wedemeyer           VEEEdah*maya
Eberhard            EEber*ard
Bethge              BET*gee ("g" as in “goat” not jee)
Roeder              ROOdah
Dohnanyi            DOUGH*nanny
Lasserre            le*SAIR
Tegel Prison        TAY*gel ("g” as in “goat” not jee)

DOUBLING

Actor 1: Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Actor 2: Maria von Wedemeyer
Actor 3: Interviewer, Mother
Actor 4: Dr. Roeder, Jean Lasserre, Eberhard Bethge
Actor 5: Father, Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, 
Hans von Dohnanyi, Corporal Knobloch, 
Fabian von Schlabrendorff
PROPS

All
2 or 3 letters to have in your pocket for reading

Maria
Cigarettes
Zippo Lighter
Tea Pot and Cups
Books

Interviewer
70s era cassette recorder

Dietrich (cell)
Books
Papers
Pencil/ Fountain Pen
Chess Set (matches and buttons)
Letter to exchange

Dietrich
Package of phonograph records

Jean
Newspaper

Knobloch
Letter to exchange
Package
SOURCES


i NRS 225 ff.
ii Much of Maria’s material is taken from EB 412 ff.
iii EB 21
iv EB 21
v EB 23
vi EB 29
vii EB 249
viii EB 23
ix EB 25
x EB 4
xi EB 24
xii EB 31
xiii Romans 13:1-2
xiv Matthew 5:9-12
xv EB 5
xvi EB 36
xvii EB 36
xviii LL 22
xix LL 36
xx LL 30
xxi LL 33
xxii EB 71
xxiii EB 414
xxiv EB 3
xxv EB 375
xxvi Matthew 10:16

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