

The Bonhoeffer Family

Insights from the Autobiographic Records of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Youngest Sister Susanne

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1 Some Notes About the Author

Susanne Dreß is the sister of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, three years younger than him – the youngest of the eight children of Karl and Paula Bonhoeffer.¹ She was born in the city of Breslau on the 22nd of August 1908 and died on the 15th of January 1991 in Berlin. She spent nearly all of her life in Berlin – with the exception of one single year as a young woman when she stayed together with her husband Walter Dreß in Dorpat in the Republic of Estonia, which had just recently become independent.

Her life spanned most of the twentieth century and reflects the enormous changes during this time. When she was born, the German Empire still existed; she then witnessed WWI and the fall of emperor Wilhelm II, the revolution in Germany and the subsequent Weimar Republic. In the elaborate memoirs which she left behind, she writes about the hardships of hyperinflation, life in the capital of Berlin during the ›Golden Twenties‹, about the holiday refuge of her family in the tiny village of Friedrichsbrunn in the Harz mountains, about her formation as ›höhere Tochter‹ in the bourgeois Bonhoeffer family, about the journeys she undertook and the numerous friendships she maintained. She describes the beginnings of the Nazi regime and the expanding activities of her family in resistance to Adolf Hitler. We learn how her brother-in-law, Hans von Dohnanyi, was arrested together with her siblings Christine and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, later also her brother KLAUS and her brother-in-law Rüdiger Schleicher. She re-

¹ The following text is partly an English translation of the detailed introductory chapter of: JUTTA KOSLOWSKI, ed., *Aus dem Leben der Familie Bonhoeffer. Die Aufzeichnungen von Dietrich Bonhoeffers jüngster Schwester Susanne Dreß*, Gütersloh 2018, XI–LVI.

members how the relatives cared for the imprisoned, reveals the distress of the bombing during WWII and finally how all four men were sentenced to death.

She vividly describes how she witnessed the invasion of the Red Army and the first days after the war in the former capital of the Third Reich – and how she was actively engaged in the task of reconstruction. Since her husband was a pastor, the commitment in his Protestant parish in Berlin-Dahlem was an important part of her life. Together with other volunteers she founded the ›Dahlem Relief Organization‹, dedicated to care for war victims and refugees. She describes the terrible *Hungerwinter* of 1945/46 with severe shortage of food and fuel, followed by the blockade of Berlin – and afterwards once more inflation and currency reform. She writes about the separation between East and West Berlin and how life slowly returned to normal. Her memoirs come to an end with the death of her father in 1948 and the passing away of her mother in 1951.

Susanne Dreß was the offspring of a bourgeois family with a widespread network of relatives and friends. They were in contact with the highest ranks in social and political life. For this reason, a large number of renowned people are mentioned in her memoirs; personalities and events which are known from history books may be discovered from a private perspective in Susanne's narration. For example, she tells the story of how her grandparents fell into disgrace with the German emperor Wilhelm II and his spouse.² As a young child, she visited the studio of Marie von Olfers and browsed through the unpublished manuscripts of her world famous children's books.³ She chatted and had lunch with Wolfgang Kapp, the day before he was killed in a major coup in the Weimar Republic.⁴ She played with the children of Thomas Mann during their summer vacation at the exclusive beaches of Sylt and was disgusted by their arrogant behaviour.⁵ The well-known artist Emil Orlik tried to seduce her (without success) in his studio in Berlin.⁶ And when the shots of the Röhm-coup were banging, she was an eyewitness while she spent some time with her nephews and nieces in an amusement park nearby; afterwards, she comforted the mother of one of the SA-victims, regardless of ›political correctness‹.⁷

² Ibid., 11–12.

³ Ibid., 13.

⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁵ Ibid., 370.

⁶ Ibid., 476f.

⁷ Ibid., 483–485.

While studying her memoirs, the reader learns how the world of Susanne's childhood (which she describes in the first part of her autobiography) disappears for good – and yet continues to exist (as may be discovered in the second part). On the day of her confirmation, Susanne's father claimed in his speech that among all of his children, Susanne is the one who comes closest to her mother.⁸ She *carries on* her family's heritage and at the same time *leaves it behind*. This becomes evident, for example, when one compares the lavish parties which were celebrated in her parents' house (primarily organized by her mother Paula⁹) with those she made common as pastor's wife in her husband's parish in Berlin-Dahlem: Despite of all scarcity after the war, she worked relentlessly to fill the rectory with life and to make merry with masked balls, dancing and cultural events.¹⁰ This world of the post-war era in some ways displays striking similarities to what had existed before – while it is far away from our present reality.

2 Some Comments About the Book

The memoirs of Susanne Dreß are a primary source of great value for Bonhoeffer research. The author has lived during a time of fundamental change, which is formative for our contemporary culture and collective memory, and she is an eyewitness of both World Wars in the 20th century. And of course, her notes are of particular interest because they reveal lots of details about the famous family to which she belonged, and about her brother Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He was a courageous resistance activist in Nazi Germany and a theological mastermind, whose reputation is still growing even today and whom many Christians of our time regard as a pioneer. Indeed, it seems as though Dietrich was closest to Susanne among the large band of her siblings – more than her elder brothers and also more than one of her three sisters (including Dietrich's twin sister Sabine). He is the one with whom Susanne shared most of her time and whose name is mentioned most often – at least until the year 1929, when she left her parents' house (i. e. in the first part of her memoirs, titled ›My Ivory Tower‹). At this time, Susanne was 20 and Dietrich 23 years of age,

⁸ Ibid., 397.

⁹ Cf. chapter 3.5 ›Festivities and Parties«, *ibid.*, 305–334.

¹⁰ Cf. chapter 7.3 ›Susanne Dreß as Pastor's Wife«, *ibid.*, 661–698.

and he had already finished his theological studies, his PhD and his pastoral training in Barcelona. He had returned to Berlin, where he held the post of an assistant at the university and carried out his post-doctoral research. Dietrich was the one who played with Susanne when they were children;¹¹ Dietrich strolled with her every Sunday morning for hours through the vast *Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum* when she was fourteen;¹² and Dietrich requested and obtained support from the young adult Susanne to run Sunday school in the neighbourhood of Grunewald.¹³ Obviously, both of them got along with each other pretty well and were soul mates in many ways. For this reason, Susanne Dreß often refers in her memoirs to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and new light is shed on his personality. To a certain degree, her text may even be considered as a kind of replacement for the autobiography which Dietrich himself was unable to leave behind due to his untimely and violent death.¹⁴

Time and again, people express that the decisive moment in the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer is to be found not so much in his writings but rather in the course of his life. To put it simply: The writings of Bonhoeffer are of lasting significance, because they are *credible* – they have been validated by the exemplary life and death of its author. This is the reason why the interest in his *biography* is still strong. Though, to understand his biography, it is imperative to get to know his *family*, since the family was the most important factor in his life. This is true for himself as for all other family members: They were not just many (a ›large divisor‹, as the mother admonished when sweets had to be distributed), but they maintained strong inner coherence. And they were perfectly aware of the fact that it was – besides their specific practise of the Christian faith – this confidence of belonging together, based on their shared *values*, which gave them the power to withstand in times of utmost darkness.

So, the principles which guided Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his actions had been passed on to him through his relatives. For this reason it is so instructive to learn more about the life of the Bonhoeffer family. The memoirs of his sister Susanne are a unique contribution to meet this end. However,

¹¹ Ibid., 30–31.

¹² Ibid., 254–255.

¹³ Ibid., 400–404.

¹⁴ For more details about Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the memoirs of his sister Susanne see JUTTA KOSLOWSKI, *Erinnerungen an Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Entdeckungen in den Aufzeichnungen seiner Schwester Susanne*, Asslar 2020.

they are of great value in their own right. They do not just serve to complete or even confirm our knowledge about Dietrich Bonhoeffer. If the author had not been born a Bonhoeffer, but was just ›Susanne Schmidt‹, her accounts would equally deserve to be published. This is the reason why they appear as the records of ›Susanne Dreß‹ – this was her name at the time when she wrote this text. The construction of an artificial double name (as it was done with the books of her sister Sabine, which were published under the surname ›Leibholz-Bonhoeffer‹¹⁵) was renounced. May these pages open up to the reader a glance into this ›World of Yesterday‹¹⁶ which is now gone forever but still powerful in our memories.

3 Some Passages from the Text

The memoirs of Susanne Dreß are extensive and only a small selection of passages may be quoted here – just to give a taste of the quality of the text and to encourage the reader to get more of it. In the first of the eight sections, where Susanne describes her childhood, she relates one of her earliest memories, from the summer vacation in the beloved family resort in the tiny village of Friedrichsbrunn:

When I was four years of age, one day in the morning I discover in the grass of the front yard, next to the arbour, the ›Blue Flower‹! Well, it is not blue but rather rosy – yet, never in my life, have I seen anything as stunning. I believe it is the miraculous flower from the fairy tale. It stands lonesome and glowing and has beautiful leaves with fine thorns. Carefully, I put away the surrounding grass and provide more space for it; then I fetch some stones to build a wall. Now the flower is mine. Then I call my older siblings, full of pride. ›Storchschnabel‹ is the flower's name, and it is not particularly rare; however it is generally considered to be precious. I love it throughout the whole summer, I water it – and look: More and more blossoms grow, and pointed spouts evolve from them. Everybody respects my flower; nobody would do it harm, and when I search for it next summer, it has become smaller, but it will flourish once more. So, I pamper and water it even in the second year with some suc-

¹⁵ SABINE LEIBHOLZ-BONHOEFFER, *Vergangen, erlebt, überwunden. Schicksale der Familie Bonhoeffer*, Gütersloh ¹⁰2005; SABINE LEIBHOLZ-BONHOEFFER, *Weihnachten im Hause Bonhoeffer* Gütersloh ¹⁴2013.

¹⁶ STEFAN ZWEIG, *The World of Yesterday. An Autobiography*, Lincoln/London 1964 (first published in 1942).

cess. In the third year it is gone. Maybe I would not have loved it as much anymore.¹⁷

When Susanne was a teenager of sixteen years of age, she still loved to come to Friedrichsbrunn for her holidays, and she kept memories of her complicated state of mind while she was infatuated with Grete von Dohnanyi (who was engaged many years later, on New Year's Eve 1929, to Susanne's eldest brother Karl-Friedrich, while Grete's brother Hans von Dohnanyi married Susanne's elder sister Christine):

Grete loves coconut macaroons and roll mops and candies with floral ornaments on it. Very early in the morning, I run through the village, the holiday savings in my pocket, all way long until the end of the street, to obtain the macaroons from Nikolei's shop, the roll mops from Schilling and the floral candy from Dippe's bakery. Then, the three of us lie on blue children's quilts in the furthest corner of the garden, next to the raspberry bushes – Grete, Sabine and myself. Three guitars, roll mops, macaroons and sweets are next to us. We sing. I fully enjoy this moment and my soul becomes soft and cheerful and grateful. Then, suddenly, some offending word is spoken. Maybe concerning a wrong sound in my singing or my fingernails – everything around me is dead. I know: I will never achieve it that they really like me. I will never achieve to be taken seriously. If they appear to be kind, this is nothing other than pity. Yet, I love all of them so much (even my siblings); but to no one else would they be so mean as to me. I take my guitar and put it on the wall in my room. »I can sing no more, my heart is so full ...« – see the song cycle of Müller.¹⁸ I go out into the forest. I literally hide in the jungle, like a sick animal. If I had spared some of the tears which I have shed so plentiful when I was a child, I would probably feel better. I take a seat on a rotten stub, surrounded by thick black spruce branches. I sit down, while they are pointing to me like weapons or fingers. How long will I have to stay here until I die? I never want to see Grete again – and to achieve this, I must not return home. I don't care whether I starve here or continue to live at some place where nobody knows me. I try to understand what has just happened. In fact, it was not so bad. But it was pointless. One is looking forward to something and

¹⁷ KOSLOWSKI, *Aus dem Leben der Familie Bonhoeffer*, 97–98.

¹⁸ This is a quotation from the song cycle *»Die schöne Müllerin«*, which was composed in 1823 by Franz Schubert to poems of WILHELM MÜLLER: »I have laid my lute aside to the wall / winding green ribbons around – / I can sing no more, my heart is so full, / I cannot put this in rhymes ...«.

preparing everything and thinks: Now I can cheer up with all my heart; but – bang – suddenly it is all over. Life is never as good as it could be. Maybe, it is not worth the effort. Yet they say, youth is the best time of all! And this is claimed by adults, who once have been young themselves. These must have been different times altogether.

However, if the bad stuff gets even more, I won't be joining them anymore. This is just a big deceit! One is gifted with so much ability to love, but nobody wants to receive it! What was this? Why did I run away? I don't know – but let them get worried about me. Now it is noon. From time to time, I have to change my hideout because of the insistent mosquitoes. But I do not leave the thicket. Are they looking for me? Do they know why I am gone? Hours trickle away. The sunrays sparkle reddish on the dark branches. My tummy begins to rumble. I had not known that starving comes about so quickly. You just have to wait until you faint away, and then you will starve unconsciously – that's it! My head is aching, my eyes are burning (even without shedding tears), there is a big lump in my throat and my arms and leg are full of mosquito bites.

But all of a sudden, the deadlock is overcome. I feel namelessly good and light and I think: Here I could stay forever. The solitude has captured me. I do not ask myself anymore: What are the others about to do? I save myself in seclusion, and it begins to play with me. Are all the others existing at all? Is there really anything else besides me? Maybe, all this is just a dream? Is it possible that the living Self which I experience, is existing once more? Nobody can prove to me that they really exist. No tree, no stone, no Earth, no Sun is there without myself. I am just inventing them. God and myself – we are alone on this earth. I am created by God, my Self is created – and I create the world for myself while I am thinking it. So, everything exists just in my mind. Nothing is as real as myself. Not Grete, not my family ... So, nothing can bother me. I am all alone. Alone with the power which has called me to be – and that is very far away. It is good to be so lonesome. Everything becomes insignificant. Now I comprehend that the whole world is like a picture book for me – a book that is meant for me to read in it, to react to it. All right, I do not mind having to imagine my surroundings with a certain inevitability. But from now on if anything is trying to torment me, I will know: It is not real, it can be thought away. It is just there for me to practise or not to be bored. I just dream all that I live. Who knows – maybe I live my dreams? Maybe I will just start living when I wake up from life – when I am dead? Now that I have found out, life is not as bad anymore, for I can tell myself: It is just a dream. My untouchable, personal reality is all apart, and everything is nothing but shadow, mirror and dream.

Why God has arranged all this in such a way, I don't know. But I did not know either why he has arranged all that I had believed before. I lean on the solitude and I draw power from it. But suddenly I am startled: Where to go with all my love? I want to love living beings, not shadows! Love, help, action will be senseless if I am all alone. So, I have to forget as quickly as possible what I understood here in seclusion.

When I returned in the dawn, everybody pretended that things were normal. So normal that I understood the arrangement. That is: I understood that I allowed the shadows which I created (by thinking them) to hurt me through their carelessness. So, I was not hurt, but (to the surprise of the family-shadows), I also pretended that everything was normal; I ate the blueberries which I imagined and observed everything like through reversed opera glasses. I exhibited distance and arrogance. Whatever they tried – their shadow-life existed only with reference to me; if I stopped looking at them, they became invisible. But this was precisely what I wanted to forget; I wanted to betray myself in my solitude. I wanted to be able to love.

Now, a time of condescending goodness and arrogant sacrifice began. I am not yet prepared to wake up; I enjoy to play around with everything – even more since I know that this is nothing but a game of my thoughts. Let them carry on all around me. Enough if I know that I am alone with God. I want to do Him a favour and pretend taking all this seriously. Like the author of a book who cannot be honoured more than by forgetting the whole world out there to live in the characters he portrays. To please God, I wanted to do as best as I could and to ignore my knowledge.

This worked better than expected. Grete only had to stretch out her arm to me or look at me while singing a love song, all loneliness and arrogance went to hell (where they belonged to). Since human beings actually no longer existed, they showed much more awareness and affection to me. Maybe, they noticed my change of mind and tried to cheer me up, or maybe I was less touchy than before – I vividly enjoyed the harmony of these holidays although that my surroundings were dead. Or did they take care of me because lots of gross teasing provoked conflicts among the elders (which I hardly noticed)? However, Karl-Friedrich suddenly departed, and the shamefaced silence which he left behind was hard to overcome. Understandably, Grete now had more time for me, and she tried to console herself with my affection. I cannot say how long I was obsessed with the crazy idea of absolute solitude. It was finally overcome only when my children were born.¹⁹

¹⁹ KOSŁOWSKI, *Aus dem Leben der Familie Bonhoeffer*, 115–119.

To give a third (and, again, quite different) example of the autobiography of Susanne Dreß, let us jump to the second part of her memoirs, headlined ›My Proper Building‹ (*Mein Eigenbau*) – in contrast to the family's ›Ivory Tower‹ of her childhood. In the sixth section, she relates her personal memories of the moment when the death sentences on the imprisoned members of her family were spelled out by Roland Freisler, the infamous criminal judge of the Nazi dictatorship, in February 1945. Since Freisler is a character of public interest and the circumstances of his death are still under debate, this passage shows that the work of Susanne Dreß represents an important new primary source not only for theologians and the Bonhoeffer-community, but for historians, as well.

On the 2nd of February 1945, Klaus and Rüdiger were sentenced to death at the Volksgerichtshof under the presidency of Freisler; in the same proceedings together with them Justus Perels (lawyer for the Confessing Church) and the brother of Otto John, who was also employed by Lufthansa. Klaus rejected the farce of an appointed attorney and defended himself – this means, as we know from his guard, he openly attacked not only the entire Nazi regime but also the unlawful behaviour of Freisler – since he knew that he would anyway lose his head. Rüdiger's guard came to Ursel with tears in his eyes to pass on to her the bad news of his condemnation to death. Rüdiger had asked him to pass by the same evening and to remind Ursel, as a farewell, of the Bible verse chosen for his confirmation: ›Bless the Lord, o my soul, and forget not all his benefits!‹ (Psalm 103:2) The guard did not know at which time the sentence should be executed – maybe in the early morning hours, but it could as well take some more days.

The next morning, after I had taken care of the children, I wanted to cycle to the parents. But a severe air raid on Berlin had been announced, so I stayed at home and started later. From the city centre, ceaseless detonations could be heard. When I finally arrived at the Marienburger Allee, neither the parents nor Ursel were there. The parents had gone out to deliver a parcel for Dietrich's birthday on the next day. Ursel visited a lawyer whom she knew from previous times to submit an application for mercy and to ask what else she could do. At the very moment when the air-raid started, she left the Volksgericht and went to the nearby Institute for Aviation Law where her husband had been professor once before.

I took my bicycle and cycled up and down between the train stations Westkreuz and Heerstraße, hoping to meet either the parents or Ursel. Finally, I met Ursel at her home, lying on a couchette. I sat down at the foot of it and she began to talk. Not only about the inner city of Berlin, which now was

completely destroyed, but also of her encounter: ›When the announcement of the bombing came in, I was in the Volksgerichtshof. I said that I would not sit in a bunker with the same people who had sentenced my husband to death. Just when I left, I added: You have condemned innocent people. But I tell you: ›Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap.‹ (Gal 6:7) I know that this kind of behaviour is not quite common among us. But in that same moment, the door opened and Rüdiger's brother Rolf came in, shouting: ›The wretch is dead! Right now, I have signed the death certificate of Freisler.‹ Then I understood that clear words can at times be appropriate. Rolf had been sitting in the bomb shelter, and since he was a physician, he was called in. He had come to intervene for his brother and arrived just as the air-raid began.‹

Whatever has been told soon afterwards and later on about Freisler's death: Rolf has diagnosed internal rupture caused by an aerial mine; this is what he had told us. My father commented: ›The devil has taken him.‹ But also: ›He got away too easily.‹ I never forgot this, because my father may have displayed anger, but no hatred. How much I would have loved to believe what has been told about Freisler being killed by his officers and the like! Today, Rolf is dead. Did he have to sign something which was not according to truth? In any case, he immediately went to the Minister of Justice and said to him: ›Here, I am bringing you the death certificate of the man who yesterday sentenced my innocent brother to death.‹ This somewhat unsettled officer had to promise that the execution of the penalties for this last group which had been condemned by Freisler would be delayed, so that applications for mercy might be submitted or the resumption of the proceedings could be initiated. With this hopeful news he returned to Ursel. When Christel came into the room, we told her everything – even what Ursel had claimed about God who is not mocked. This is how Christel reacted: ›Why did the US forces not carry out this air-raid yesterday? Then, the sentences would not have been passed, and eventually they would have been able to escape!‹²⁰

²⁰ Ibid., 605–607. Christel is the younger sister of Ursel and was married to Hans von Dohnanyi, who was also in prison at that time. Unlike Ursel and the author Susanne, who were religious women, Ursel was rather sceptical from her early childhood. In fact, all captured family members – Rüdiger Schleicher, Hans von Dohnanyi, Klaus Bonhoeffer and Dietrich Bonhoeffer – were killed during the last days of the Nazi regime.

And finally, just to give one more glimpse of how vividly Susanne Dreß is able to relate history by painting graphic miniatures, here is a little scene from the invasion of the Red Army in Berlin:

Despite of the frightened flock in the air-raid shelter, which now withdrew into the inner part of the bunker that was still propped up, the housekeeper did not abandon his belief in the final victory. For some reason, I had to return once more into our apartment (probably to grab something of the cans which we had discovered there in the morning), and Mr. W. joined me – partly to protect me, partly because of curiosity. There was a window in the direction of Pücklerstraße, and there we could see how a German soldier was marching amidst two Russians. ›Look‹, W. called out enthusiastically, ›this is the way of our German boys: An unarmed soldier is leading off two heavily armed Russian warriors!‹²¹

²¹ KOSLOWSKI, *Aus dem Leben der Familie Bonhoeffer*, 611.