

Number 22, June 1982

MORE BONHOEFFER-BARTH CORRESPONDENCE

Translated by John D. Godsey

In June, 1981, the wife of Dr. Hinrich Stoevesandt, curator of the Karl Barth Archives in Basel, Switzerland, discovered six hitherto unknown letters of Dietrich Bonhoeffer while going through the literary remains of Fräulein Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Barth's long-time secretary and close colleague. The letters stem from the time of Bonhoeffer's three visits to Switzerland during the years 1941 and 1942 and are addressed to Barth or those close to Barth: Frl. von Kirschbaum or, in one instance, Frau Gerty Pestalozzi of Zurich. One letter of reply, written by Frl. von Kirschbaum on behalf of Barth, was also found.

Later, in the fall of 1981, two more letters belonging to the same series were discovered in Barth's own files in the Archives. One is the earliest letter of this period from Bonhoeffer to Barth, the other an excerpt from a letter written by Frl. von Kirschbaum to the Swiss pastor, Paul Vogt. Altogether, then, there are nine letters, seven from Bonhoeffer's own hand. Translated now into English, they are presented below in chronological order. Clarifying remarks in parentheses at the end of letters are by the translator or Dr. Eberhard Bethge. The German text of the letters, including sixteen pages of notes and commentary by Bethge, was published by Chr. Kaiser as its Christmas greeting in December, 1981. Special thanks are due those colleagues who reviewed the initial translation and made valuable suggestions for improvement, in particular to Professors Martin Rumscheidt and Clifford Green.

Letter No. 1. Written from Berlin by Bonhoeffer to Karl Barth in Basel after Bonhoeffer's first trip to Switzerland; hand-delivered through diplomatic channels.

May 30, 1941

Dear Professor,

Just now I have a good chance to send a letter with someone, and above all I want to thank you very much for the

copy of the Dogmatics which has come into my possession. It arrived in good shape, and it was a really great joy to receive it. I am well into it by now and am pleased every day to be reading real theology again.

The days with you were particularly enjoyable. The friends here have taken a strong interest in everything that I could report to them and return your greetings in old and genuinely unchanged loyalty. They envied me these hours very much and yet were happy that at least one of us was able to speak with you once again.

Many brothers are once more back in Berlin and have spent many weeks and months there on account of examinations. Like others, I too have been prohibited from publishing. There is a good chance I can come to your country again for a few weeks in late summer in order to work and write. Lately I have made good progress in my work, stimulated particularly by my trip. But it is often difficult for me to concentrate, and I would like very much to discuss certain concerns of my work with you at length. You certainly would allow me to give your name at the consulate as recommendation for a visa, wouldn't you?

If you would be good enough to greet the Vischers and the Thurneysens for me when you have a chance, I would be most grateful. I cannot give my friend any additional letters. I think of Basel with much appreciation.

I greet you with all good wishes and am thankfully

Yours

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(The reference is to Church Dogmatics II/1, "The Doctrine of God." Wilhelm Vischer and Eduard Thurneysen were Barth's close friends and theological colleagues in Basel.)

Letter No. 2. Written from Berlin by Bonhoeffer to Frau Gerty Pestalozzi in Zurich after Bonhoeffer's first trip to Switzerland; probably hand-delivered through diplomatic channels.

June 10, 1941

Dear Mrs. Pestalozzi,

Because the possibility has just arisen to send you a greeting, I grasp this opportunity with great joy in order-- finally!--to thank you from my heart for all you did to make the days in Zurich pleasant for me. I remember everything vividly and fondly--from the conversations on the balcony to the evening events. How good it would be if we could continue our conversation about the discipline of Christian life at some other time! I hope very much, by the way, that this might be in late summer.

I would like very much to come over again and will try everything here to make it possible.

The wonderful coffee arrived the other day, and it made others happy as well as me. Your greetings brought great joy to your friends here. I had much to tell. At the border everything went well, by the way--though the man next to me had to give up his second bar of chocolate. Again I want to thank you for your book on Portugal. I have enjoyed it immensely.

For four weeks now we have been greatly concerned about Günter. We hope he gets through everything all right.\* Fortunately he is not alone but several friends are there with him. Being with him was always particularly enjoyable. He feels so very close to you and your friends--and he's not the only one. There are, after all, many just like him. That is a great joy and will be important for you to hear.

This letter must go! I think of you and yours with deep gratitude and send you my greetings.

Sincerely

Your devoted

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

\*Just now I have heard that the matter will most likely take a long time. One must have patience. Anyway, I am able to tell you for sure that you would make his wife very happy with some coffee. I have also experienced this with the others. They are grateful for the smallest things.

(The "Günter" referred to was Günter Dehn, who, together with twenty-two other members of the Confessing Church's Commission on Examinations, had been arrested on May 6, 1941. He was tried in December, 1941.)

Letter No. 3. Written from Zurich by Bonhoeffer to Charlotte von Kirschbaum in Basel during Bonhoeffer's second trip to Switzerland. Bonhoeffer was registered in Zurich as a guest of Otto Salomon, publisher, from September 15 to 24, 1941.

September 20, 1941

Dear Fräulein von Kirschbaum,

I am really delighted about the proposal. It would in fact be a beautiful solution beyond all expectations. Whether de Quervain's name is necessary and advisable must still be considered. But under no circumstances should the Hilfswerk be mentioned. We thought that perhaps about ten copies could be sent to the people whose names you and Vogt have. We would then take care of the distribution. The pamphlet would cross

the border as a scholarly work. One could certainly still find a good title. If each of the separate works could somehow have Christmas as its theme, we wouldn't need to mention that in the title.

I will stay here until early Wednesday. Many thanks, and please tell Karl Barth once again how happy I am about the conversations with him.

With cordial greetings and all good wishes,

Your

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

My address in Schlawe is still good:  
Schlawe/Pommern  
Koppelstrasse 9

(The "Hilfswerk" was a German organization for works of charity. Alfred de Quervain was a Swiss theologian and ethicist.)

Letter No. 4. The following is an excerpt from a letter written from Basel by Charlotte von Kirschbaum to Pastor Paul Vogt on September 22, 1941. Vogt was a Swiss Reformed pastor who was a supporter of the German Confessing Church and a worker on behalf of refugees.

[September 22, 1941]

. . . There is one other matter: Pastor Bonhoeffer has discussed with us as apparently also with you the question of a Christmas pamphlet for Bekennende Kirche [a series of occasional papers published by Chr. Kaiser during that period]. Bonhoeffer considered it important that Karl Barth write a contribution. But Barth would lend support and participate in the venture only if the pamphlet had a certain theological unity. The initial suggestion was that the three theologians who had worked in Germany for years should deal with the suggested topics. Bonhoeffer suggested Wilhelm Vischer, Pastor de Quervain, and Karl Barth. He proposed the following topics as being most pertinent at the present time: "History and Eschatology" (W. Vischer); "Christian Responsibility" (K. Barth); and "Forgiveness of Sins" (Pastor de Quervain). Thurneysen, who was also asked to participate, considered it better that the choice of contributors be limited to those who had actually worked over there, so that it would not look like a project of the "Basel people."

What do you think? The pamphlet would probably be about sixty pages long, as was "And Praise God." How we would distribute it remains an open question. When I inquired at the main German customs office whether books could still be imported, I was told that scholarly books and pure fiction could still

be brought in. . . .

(For some reason the proposed pamphlet was never produced.)

Letter No. 5. Written from Zurich by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Karl Barth in Basel during Bonhoeffer's third trip to Switzerland.

May 13, 1942

Dear Professor,

I have been in Zurich for a few days, staying with the Pestalozzis since yesterday. I'm on my way to Geneva, but will spend about eight days at an inn on Lake Geneva recommended by the Pestalozzis; there, in complete peace and quiet, I will work on the galleys of your new volume of the Dogmatics which Mr. Frey got for me. I will try to work through at least the second part of your volume, and besides that to read something in Vischer's second volume. On the way back I would very much like to visit you. Meanwhile I send you many greetings from the Berliners and especially from your friends and students in Pomerania, who have to do their work in really great loneliness and solitude, waiting anxiously for the new volume. However, the prospect of getting it through is probably not very good. It was too bad that nothing came of the little volume we planned for Christmas. For us, the last theological happening was Bultmann's pamphlet, over which a passionate controversy has broken out between Asmussen and Wolf--and beyond them. I myself--in spite of everything--was delighted by the essays. Asmussen is infuriated. More about that when next we meet. II/2

With many greetings and in the hope of seeing you soon,

Your thankful and devoted

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(The reference is to Church Dogmatics II/2, "The Doctrine of God," and the second part of it, "The Command of God," therefore ethics. This appeared at Pentecost 1942. The book by Wilhelm Vischer was Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments Volume II: "Die Propheten . . . Josua bis Elisa," which appeared in 1942. The pamphlet by Rudolf Bultmann was his "New Testament and Mythology," the one that set off the controversy about demythologizing the New Testament. Hans Asmussen and Ernst Wolf were theologians and leaders in the German Confessing Church.)

Letter No. 6. Written from Geneva by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Karl Barth in Basel during Bonhoeffer's third trip to Switzerland.

May 17, 1942

Dear Professor,

Forgive me if what I have to write now turns out to be

foolish and not worth talking about. But I still have to bring it up because the matter bothers me a great deal. Last week in Zurich I learned for the first time that, because of my assignments, there is something uncanny for you ["wegen der Aufträge unheimlich"] about my stay here. When I first heard that I just laughed. Shortly thereafter, again in Zurich, I heard of this alleged utterance of yours a second time; at that point I thought it best not to pursue the matter at all. Now I have already heard the same thing twice here in Geneva; having thought it over for a few days, I simply want to tell you that. I know that in circles as close as this there is often silly talk and quite possibly we are dealing with something blown out of all proportion. However, if this is not so, then I am really quite at a loss for words. In a time when so much must rest simply on personal trust, then everything is really over when distrust arises. I can indeed understand that this curse of distrust gradually befalls all of us, but it is difficult to bear when it strikes one personally for the first time. But now it must be terrible for you--perhaps even worse than for me--suddenly to be forced to be suspicious. In that case, our conversations must have been quite unbearable for you. But I did not sense that. Nor can I imagine it now. I was so glad during our last conversation that I could tell you everything in answer to your question. I thought that everything was now clear.

Let me just add this: it would be unbearably painful for me if the admittedly difficult effort to continue our solidarity were to end in inner alienation. And why should I conceal my belief that, at least in the eastern part of Germany, there are few who have declared their loyalty to you as often as I have tried in recent years. On the other hand I would like to save us both from the agony of a conversation undermined by distrust. In that case I would rather not come at all, even though in all my trips to Switzerland I have looked forward to nothing so much as my visits with you. I also have a lot of news and greetings for you. But, after all this, Basel has now become somewhat "uncanny" for me, and I do not know what to do. Otherwise I would like to have asked whether the Monday or Tuesday after Pentecost would suit you. On Thursday my visa expires. So please send me some word; the address of Otto Salomon would be best. What's more, this business throws me into a turmoil vis-à-vis Thurneysen and Vischer.

Let me assure you again that there is no reason at all for you to be suspicious. And, bitter as it is, this whole business can still make me laugh. However, I do need a word from you as to whether I should come.

Forgive this lengthy letter which interrupts you in your work and prevents me from reading your Dogmatics.

I greet you with sincere respect.

Your thankful and devoted

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(The concern in this letter is about Bonhoeffer's ability to travel freely outside Nazi Germany on an official pass and ostensibly on official business. What had been reported to Bonhoeffer was that this freedom seemed to Barth to be "unheimlich," that is, something "uncanny" which made him feel uncomfortable. Bonhoeffer was able to travel to Switzerland, of course, because of his work with the resistance movement as an employee of German military intelligence.

Letter No. 7. Written from Basel by Fräulein Charlotte von Kirschbaum, Barth's assistant, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Zurich.

Basel, May 17, 1942

Dear Mr. Bonhoeffer,

Oh what a mess! Believe us, we too laugh about this business, though with tears in our eyes. That such an uproar could arise at all is enough reason to be distressed, and needs to be taken seriously, in its own way, as a "sign of the times." So: Karl Barth has never distrusted you for a moment; or, to be precise: whenever he had a question concerning the occasion for your travels, he immediately and directly asked you about it. The question why you have this freedom has been put to us again and again. If we talked about it with any of our friends recently--Barth does not recall doing so, and I have not heard anything about it either--the possible foundation for the alleged comment (your presence here is "uncanny to him on account of your assignments") can only be that question they were raising. Since his conversation with you answered that question for him, he affirmed your coming to everybody. The fact that we have to do this again and again shows you how nervous and distrustful people here are even towards "us."

Some weeks ago someone from the Foreign Office inquired of Karl Barth whether he would vouch for your entry into the country. He did so without hesitation, and on the strength of that the permission was granted. So you see that the whole business is without any foundation. Some time ago among our close friends (Thurneysen, Vischer) there was some surprise about the ease with which you can move, but after Karl's conversation with you the matter was completely dropped. And when we told those two the other day the news that you were here, they were plainly delighted to hear it. So there is no reason for you to have any doubts or sadness about them

The matter is more difficult with respect to Karl Ludwig Schmidt. He has shown particularly strong interest in your coming, and he is also suspicious; this can probably be explained only by his own severe injury at the hands of the Third Reich (loss of his citizenship). He is equally suspicious about the "Reich-Germans" who are in Geneva, Dr. Schönfeld and Dr. Freudenberg. So far no persuasion has been able to prevent him from

raising very weighty reproaches--unfortunately not only in private--that you are at best being "co-opted." So far we have not discussed this with others, because we really regard it more as a "case of illness." Perhaps you can visit him and straighten this matter out--he is still upset that you "passed him over" last time. It may not work, however; the case is quite complicated.

That is where it stands. But when all is said and done, there actually is something "uncanny" for Karl Barth, namely all the attempts to save Germany from the evident misery into which it has now been plunged by still more "national" undertakings. This includes those that the generals might venture. He has told you so himself and is ready to talk to you about it. In this regard Barth may occasionally have spoken openly about this, and may have even mentioned your name, sighing: "Oh, if also people like . . . would see that. . . ."

Dear Mr. Bonhoeffer, do not take it amiss that I write to you. Karl Barth himself is breathlessly at work on his lectures on creation, and you would have had to wait two days for his first free time to write. But that wouldn't be good. We will be delighted if you come. The Monday after Pentecost would be much better for us; on Tuesday he has no free time until after five o'clock. On Pentecost, however, we have planned an enjoyable evening with the most beautiful Mozart records. Sharing in this will be a very interesting Jesuit Father with whom Karl Barth now carries on a continuing dialogue. If that tempts you then you should arrive in the late afternoon of Sunday! You would certainly find overnight accommodations at the Thurneysens or Vischers--unfortunately we have no guest bed available.

Have some relaxing days and accept our best greetings.

Your

L[ollo] v[on] K[irschbaum]

(Karl Ludwig Schmidt was Professor of New Testament at the University of Basel. "Reich-Germans" were German-speaking people from the "Greater Germany," the regions annexed by the Nazis. The Jesuit Father was Hans Urs von Balthazar. Fr. von Kirschbaum's nickname was "Lollo.")

Letter No. 8. Written from Zurich by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Fr. von Kirschbaum in Basel during Bonhoeffer's third trip to Switzerland.

May 20, 1942

Dear Fräulein von Kirschbaum,

I am very happy about your letter. Thank God everything

is as you have written.

I am sorry about Karl Ludwig Schmidt. I did not visit him the first time, because he lay dangerously ill in the hospital. The second time I was only four hours in Basel, and I have no special relationships with him from former times. Now this time it will have to be a short visit again. I am also supposed to see de Quervain, to whom I would like to go on Monday evening. So I will take a noon train to Basel and hope then to be able to spend the afternoon with you. My time is terribly divided, because I have found an endless amount to read and to work through. With greatest pleasure I read Eric Knight's This Above All. Do you know it?

Again, many thanks. I look forward to Monday. With cordial greetings,

Sincerely

Your devoted

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Letter No. 9. Written from Zurich by Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Fräulein von Kirschbaum in Basel during Bonhoeffer's third trip to Switzerland.

May 25, 1942

Dear Fräulein von Kirschbaum,

I forgot to tell you that Dr. Gisevius (Zurich, Nüscherstrasse 24, Muralto Apartments) would be prepared to bring books to Germany for me when he has the opportunity. Therefore, if one could collect [some of the works of] B[arth], V[ischer], and Th[urneysen], there would be a definite possibility to bring these things over safely. Naturally I would regard myself as a lending library for others who are interested. It would indeed be wonderful if this were possible. The books would then simply have to be sent to Dr. G[isevius]. Therefore, many thanks.

By the way, G[isevius] would very much like to visit B[arth] again. I have told him, however, that Barth has so much work to do at present that he should wait at least a few weeks. He completely agreed with that.

Again, many thanks for everything. Every good wish for all of you.

Your devoted

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

(Gisevius was at the time the German vice-consul in Zurich. He was a close confidant of Admiral Canaris and General Oster and thus involved in the German Military Intelligence Service (Abwehr) and the conspiracy against Hitler.)

BONHOEFFER TRAVEL SEMINAR, August 15-31, 1982 in Germany and Rome. This repeat of a successful study tour will visit several cities important in Bonhoeffer's life; meet with members of his family, students, and resistance partners; and study his writings. Cost \$1950, academic credit available. For details contact immediately the Travel Director, Dr. F. Burton Nelson, North Park Theological Seminary, 5125 N. Spaulding Ave., Chicago, IL 60625; phone 312 583 2700 (office) or 312 539 7334 (home).

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER: MEMORIES AND PERSPECTIVES Trinity Films premiered this feature length documentary in Minneapolis on May 15. Eberhard and Renate Bethge travelled from Germany for the occasion. Society members and friends will receive details in a future mailing from the company's directors, Bainbridge Boehlke and Gerald Drake.

ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY: BONHOEFFER'S LEGACY TO THE CHURCHES This collection of addresses and essays from the international Bonhoeffer conference in Oxford in 1980, edited by John Godsey and Geoffrey Kelly, has now been published by the Edwin Mellen Press and distributed free to all Society members who have paid their dues for 1981-82. Copies are available for those who join the Society or for the tardy who bring their dues up to date by sending \$15 to the Treasurer, Ronald Christian, 5114 Twinbrook Rd., Fairfax, VA 22030. The treasury needs your help and you need the book! (The list of recent new members will be published in the next Newsletter.)

Clifford Green  
Bonhoeffer Society  
Hartford Seminary  
77 Sherman Street  
Hartford, CT 06105