

Renate's Bethge's Book on Bonhoeffer – A Review

Colleagues: Here's a new Bonhoeffer book for summer reading—or for any other season.

Renate Bethge. DIETRICH BONHOEFFER. A BRIEF LIFE. Transl. K.C. Hanson. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004. 88 pp. Hardcover. \$12.00. [German original: Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Eine Skizze seines Lebens. Guetersloh Verlaghaus GmbH. 2004]

It's short. It's different. For one thing the author, Renate Bethge (nee Schleicher), is Dietrich Bonhoeffer's niece. Her mother was Dietrich's oldest sister Ursula, her father Ruediger Schleicher. In Hitler's purge at the very end of WWII her father too was executed, along with Uncle Dietrich, Uncle Klaus Bonhoeffer, and two other uncles married to Bonhoeffer sisters. The Schleicher home where Renate grew up was right next door to the Bonhoeffer family home. Both Dietrich and Klaus were arrested by the Gestapo in the Schleichers' house. She's an eye-witness—from the very center of the book she's written.

In these winsome 88 pages she exposes no family secrets, but takes us on a walk through Dietrich's life, nuancing the well-known biographical data as a family insider. It's only an hour's read. Sometimes there's only a paragraph or two of Renate's prose on a page, accompanied by texts from DB's own writings paralleling this stage on his life's way. The photo montages are deftly done, making it almost an art book. More about them below.

The German title uses the word "Skizze." It's a word from the world of graphic artists. A "Skizze" gives you the basic lines, often quickly sketched, yet sufficient for you to get a big

picture, and then—if you're a reflective type—to imagine or remember what might go into the still available open spaces.

Renate's "Brief Life" is like that. It invites reflection—maybe even meditation—especially as you link the text on many of the pages to the two visuals accompanying it. The two are always the same photo (!)—one smallish, crisp and clear with a cutline; the other enlarged, screened into shadow format, and drifting back into the very paper it's printed on. Fascinating technique. Is that a match for Bonhoeffer's own life? Seems so to me. There is nowadays Bonhoeffer's very public profile—crisp and visible—and then the deep interiority that shadowed his public self and continues to give the International Bonhoeffer Society an unfinished agenda.

No surprise, DB's public profile and his interior life were not always in synch. His classic poem "Who am I?" drives that home towards life's end as his prison term goes on and on. Its personal pathos is a classic "simul justus et peccator" self-portrayal. It begins with 12 lines of the public image of a Christian hero: "they often tell me I am . . . calm, cheerful, firm . . . free, friendly, clear, smiling. . ." Then follow 12 more lines of "what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage . . . struggling . . . yearning . . . thirsting . . . trembling . . . weary and empty." You need to read the entire poem (p. 72f.), of course. Even so, I'll copy out the final stanza here—with its faith-alone punchline.

"Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?

*Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others,
and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?*

*Or is something within me still like a beaten army,
fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved? Who am I?
They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.*

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine."

If you know Bonhoeffer—or if you don't—you'll cherish Renate's "Skizze."

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder