Bonhoeffer in Love

Letters from 1943 to 1945 between the theologian and his fiancée reveal the other half of a costly discipleship

**Wendy Murray Zoba/ FEBRUARY 1, 2001**

Love Letters From Cell 92, edited by Ruth-Alice von Bismarck and Ulrich Kabitz (Abingdon, 368 pp.; $24.95, hardcover.

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.No this is not an excerpt from a Harlequin romance. These are the impassioned longings of the champion of radical discipleship himself, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as he wrote from a Nazi prison camp to his young fiancee, Maria von Wedemeycr.

These sentiments—and more like them—written during his imprisonment from 1943 to 1945 present a new aspect of Bonhoeffer, showing him to be surprisingly amorous, but in a way altogether consistent with his theology of costly grace. Such love for Maria was "costly" because Bonhoeffer was forced to relinquish it; it was "grace," because after 37 years of heady bachelorhood, he tasted of the wellspring of romantic possibility.

Maria von Wedemeyer has been duly acknowledged as the true love of the gifted German theologian. But never before have Bonhoeffer's devotees been given such a glimpse of the force of this relationship and the passion this man felt, and sublimated, during his hard years in prison.

He loved her, longed for her, and she for him. And the tenderness and optimism behind this collection of letters is what drives the book. The reader languishes with them as week after week, unto months, unto years, the couple anticipates the time when they will sit together on the couch at Patzig (Maria's family estate) and hold hands. The reader also knows the tragic ending to this tale, while the writers themselves do not. A constant theme echoes throughout: "Don't get tired and depressed, my dearest Dietrich, it won't be much longer now."

Maria entrusted this collection of letters to her sister, Ruth-Alice von Bismarck, just prior to her death in 1977. For years before that, Maria would not allow the letters to be published. Eberhard Bethge, 13onhoeffer's close friend and biographer, writes in the postscript: "I had resigned myself to never seeing this correspondence."

It took the subsequent 15 years for von Bismarck to complete the task of sequentially collating the correspondence (and supplemental diary entries), with the aid of Ulrich Kabitz, who added the necessary footnotes and historical data. Consolidating such fragmented, at times incomplete, material into a coherent narrative was no simple task. But, overall, it works: the reader is pulled right into the drama and tedium that these two lovers experienced during their years of waiting and hoping.

One of the most refreshing dimensions of this book is the marvelous picture it paints of Maria, a personality quite distinct and in many ways contradictory to Bonhoeffer's. She took great interest in the minutiae of bourgeois trivialities—"I hate sideboards, and really decent cupboards arc quite unobtainable"—while church missionary meetings bored her to tears. For that matter, she had little patience for theology: "Theology strikes me as an incomprehensible discipline. … I always get the feeling that it's seeking an intellectual explanation for what is quite simply a question of faith." (She adds at the end of that letter: "you mustn't think I disapprove of your work.") One is tempted to wonder how the champion of single-minded obedience could have fallen for a woman whose priorities are so different from his own.

But the reader is stopped short. Woven into the narrative are glimpses of Maria that betray an extraordinary resolve, discipline, and effervescence. Within the course of only a few months in 1942, Maria lost both her father and her brother in the war. Still, she kept her spirits up for Bonhoeffer's sake. For his first Christmas in prison, she brought a formidable Christmas tree for his cell, creating "great hilarity with the guards and Dietrich." She tirelessly addressed Bonhoeffcr's every conceivable want or need: "In front of me, lit by your candles," he wrote to her, "stands the little Madonna you gave me. … Behind it arc the open texts with the praying hands' [you gave me] … on their right, your photos lying open in the case you made for me. Just above them hangs your Advent wreath, and behind me on the edge of the bed I've laid out the gloves you made for me, the books you chose for me. … On my wrist is the watch [your] Father was wearing when he died, which you gave me, brought me, and strapped on my wrist yourself. You're all around me' Maria."

Over time, their correspondence became more tortured. Hope faded. But a fellow prisoner recalled that Bonhoeffer "never tired of repeating that 'no battle is lost until it has been given up for lost."'

After his death, Maria moved to the United States, where she carved out a successful career in mathematics and computer technology. She also married and divorced, twice. One wonders what would have become of her marriage to Bonhoeffer.

But it is a moot point. This book is about a love that was never to be fulfilled, adding color and depth to our picture of Bonhoeffer. Maria's hand, like everything else in his short life, remained just beyond his reach. Even so, he could write to her: "Above all let us be careful not to feel sorry for ourselves; to do so would truly be a blasphemy on God, who means us well. For all our difficulties, let us say with Isaiah: 'Do not destroy it, for there is blessing in it.'"

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