



“Undisturbed and lovely” Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the theological education of the Confessing Church during the Zingsthoﬀ Period

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Abstract

While Bonhoeffer’s illegal theological training is inseparably and quite correctly located with the name Finkenwalde, the first weeks of the seminary at the Zingsthoﬀ deserve consideration. This article emphasizes the foundational and formative function of the improvised but notably successful beginning at the Baltic Sea and supports the assumption that Bonhoeffer knew what he was doing from the very start. Characteristics such as the contemplative time in the morning, the half-hour singing before noon, and the open discussions in the evenings originated there, as did the highly efficient communication methods of the seminary. Commenced lectures as well as accompanying practical exercises were continued in Finkenwalde with almost no delay. The Zingsthoﬀ had not been closed but was intended as an interim. Therefore, it was secondary where what had been established there was to be continued. Significantly, after Finkenwalde was sealed off by the state police, Bonhoeffer once again invited all seminarians to a final gathering at the Zingsthoﬀ in the late summer of 1938.

Keywords

Zingst; Finkenwalde; Confessing Church, Communication of the Gospel

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer describes the time of the Confessing Church seminary as “undisturbed and lovely.” At least to his parents, on a postcard dated June 29, 1938.¹ A few days earlier, from June 20 to 25, many former seminarians

1 DBW 15:41.

had convened once more at the Zingsthoﬀ at Bonhoeﬀer’s invitation. At the place where it all began a good three years earlier, on April 26, 1935. The Zingsthoﬀ is therefore of special signiﬁcance as the beginning and end of the seminary which Bonhoeﬀer led, or of – as the fourteenth volume of his collected works describes it – “theological education at Finkenwalde.”

Though the total time at the Zingsthoﬀ amounted to only eight weeks, it was a pioneering period and therefore crucial. Seeing how important it was for the orientation of the seminary, the shaping of the seminarians, and especially for Bonhoeﬀer himself, the literature has paid relatively little attention to this highly interesting time in Dietrich Bonhoeﬀer’s life. Seventy-five years after his execution and 85 years after the seminary commenced at the Zingsthoﬀ, it is certainly *not too early*, and hopefully *not too late*, to draw attention to this brief but critical episode.

What we think we know

In April 1935, the Zingsthoﬀ was a Baltic resort on the Darß for the Rhenish-Westphalian student Bible study groups – already an idyllic vacation spot at that time. It was first considered after a long search and literally at the very last minute. A permit to use the premises was only received on April 25, 1935. Bonhoeﬀer received the first students the very next day.² And there was no time to lose. The Confessing Church had recently established seminaries in Wuppertal-Elberfeld (Hermann Albert Hesse), Bielefeld-Sieker (Otto Schmitz) and Naumburg am Queis (Gerhard Gloege) as well as the foreign seminary in Ilsenburg im Harz (Hermann Schlingensiepen)³ had already commenced their work. Bloestau (Hans-Joachim Iwand)⁴ followed in October.⁵

The Zingsthoﬀ, on the other hand, was a temporary solution from the start, which was given preference due to a lack of more suitable alternatives and ultimately only because time was of the essence, the accommodation was far away and only available as an interim facility until the bathing

2 Bethge (2000:480). Cf. DBW 14:45n2.

3 Schlingensiepen (2018:59).

4 For the special relationship between Bonhoeﬀer and Iwand, see Neddens (2017:13–37).

5 DBW 14:4; Bethge (2000:484).

season would begin on June 14, 1935. The fact that Bonhoeffer knew from the time he stepped into the Zingsthoﬀ that it would not be the long-term location of his seminary did not deter him and the students from starting immediately. The young seminary director, who was but a little older than his students, was well prepared and excited about his new role. Despite this or exactly because of this, he had once again asked for a delay in order to visit Anglican monasteries and Christian communities in England before commencing the semester. However, he abandoned a long-planned trip to Gandhi in India.

Bonhoeffer did not intend to copy any style, but rather to observe as many perspectives as possible – down to the details – on a shared spirituality. “In England” writes Eberhard Bethge “Bonhoeffer had been struck by the pledge given by Baptist students before entering seminary, in which they affirmed their intention to become a preacher and undertook to conduct themselves accordingly.”⁶

In the Anglican monasteries, he is fascinated not only by the fixed times for prayer and silence, but also by the monks’ exuberant tennis and soccer games. The passionate smoker is amused by the supposed regulations on tobacco consumption, which is strictly forbidden in Oxford, tolerated in Mirfield, and virtually expected in Kelham.⁷

The daily routine which Bonhoeffer planned for the seminary at Zingsthoﬀ included communal morning and evening devotions. The liturgy consisted of psalm prayer, sung hymns, scripture readings, fixed sung stanzas, free prayer, and the joint recital of Our Father. The morning prayer was followed by a period of personal stillness. The practice was followed from the beginning and though it proved difficult for the seminarians⁹ it was kept up during the move to Finkenwalde, amidst moving boxes and youth hostel beds in Greifswald. Only then did the lessons begin, which, when the weather permitted, sometimes took place outside in the dunes.¹⁰ The

6 Bethge (2000:429).

7 DBW 14:11; Schlingensiepen (2017:193).

8 DBW 5:35–64.

9 Zimmerling (2006:71).

10 Bethge (2000:488, 491). For an overview of the courses, see DBW 14:1054.

sand was everywhere anyway. Gerhard Vibrans writes to his family: “Every morning half the beach lies in front of my bed. Watches quickly stop running. Bonhoeffer took his with him to the beach – it is no longer working. I grate my teeth when I brush. Every hour I take off my shoes and shake them out. But all of that is quite alright.”¹¹

Singing together was also an integral part of the morning, enriching the manageable repertoire of most seminarians many times over, and everyone was allowed to contribute. Eberhard Bethge reports: “I noticed for the first time at a musical event that he thought I was fun. In May 1935, I had to lead the half-hour singing of the seminarians in the morning in Zingst, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer participated. I practiced the canon ‘Agnus Dei’ by Josquin des Prés and shared a saying I had just learned: Luther said that with normal composers the notes must do what notes should, but with Josquin the notes must go as Josquin pleases. Then he spoke to me afterwards and thought it was very nice, and I was incredibly proud.” It was also Eberhard Bethge who introduced Bonhoeffer to the compositions of Heinrich Schütz – a discovery for which he was grateful to his friend for life.¹²

It soon became clear that Bonhoeffer also saw himself as a learner towards the students and liked to lead by example. When the kitchen asked for help with doing the dishes on the second day at the Zingst, Bonhoeffer did not wait for the request to be repeated and locked the kitchen door behind him so that no one else could respond to the request. A situation that can be seen as exemplary of the character education of the seminary: it did not consist in merely following rules but was grounded in the experience of fellowship.¹³

Despite a strictly organized daily routine and demanding lectures, Bonhoeffer made sure that the seminarians had enough time for rest and recreation. In that spirit, he took the seminary on an extensive bicycle tour in gorgeous weather on Pentecost Sunday 1936, across the Darß, past Hermann Göring’s hunting lodge, to the lido at Ahrenshoop, where

11 Vibrans (1995:144); Seehaber (2016:87).

12 Seehaber (2016, 99, 103).

13 Bethge (2000:492). Cf. Vibrans (1995:143), and Seehaber (2016:90).

they stopped for coffee and cake at Bonhoeffer's expense. In this context, Gerhard Vibrans reports of an "underwater synod" while bathing in the Baltic Sea, an allusion to the Reich Confession Synod in Augsburg, which took place immediately before Pentecost and to which Karl Barth had been officially disinvented.¹⁴

Though the seminary was very remote, the students followed what was going on in the world. And that included more than just ecclesiastical matters. Bonhoeffer provided time for and established regular discussion evenings on current affairs. The coming into force of the new military law on May 1, 1935, affected the seminarians existentially. They sat in front of the radio at the Zingsthoof and listened intently to Hitler's speech at Tempelhofer Feld. As they listened and "the resurgence of national defence" was mentioned, Bonhoeffer interrupted the broadcast to pose a question, making it clear that the topic could be seen in a quite different light, and that conscientious objection and being a Christian were not mutually exclusive – a big topic and only one of the many questions that came up during the discussion evenings.¹⁵

The lively correspondences of the seminarians with their families, the many visitors to the Zingsthoof, and repeatedly Bonhoeffer himself, ensured that they kept the pulse of the times. Another vital factor was the fact that Bonhoeffer continued to lecture regularly at Berlin University well into the Finkenwalde period – his teaching licence was only revoked on August 5, 1936 – and he combined these trips with visits to his well-connected family and the Brethren Council of the Confessing Church. Whenever Bonhoeffer could not be present, Wilhelm Rott, who had been assigned to him as a reliable study inspector, substituted for him.¹⁶

So far this is all familiar. And it would be no trouble to continue recounting the experiences from the Zingsthoof period of the seminary. In fact nearly everything that constitutes the so-called "Finkenwalde style" (the daily routine with the morning and evening devotions, the time of personal quietude, the communal singing, the discussion evenings, the excursions,

14 DBW 14:17. Cf. Vibrans (1995:164).

15 Bethge (2000:494).

16 Schlingensiepen (2017:201); DBW 14:1050f.: Wilhelm Rott remained until the end of the fourth course. Then Fritz Onasch took over as study inspector.

the beach trips, teaching in the dunes, the confession practice, even parts of the lectures) can already be found in the Zingsthoﬀ period, which speaks for Bonhoeﬀer’s clear vision, foresight, and in particular his immense educational discipline.

Even the supposedly hardest rule, not to speak about others in their absence, was in force from the beginning. Whoever trespassed this rule was called upon to put it right. “In breaking this simple rule,” writes Eberhard Bethge, “and in its renewed observance, we learned nearly as much as from exegesis and sermons”¹⁷ – a rule that certainly did not become easier when the seminarians were alone. Albrecht Schönherr reports to his fiancée: “When Bonhoeﬀer is away, there is not too much going on. The lessons are rather dull. One could fall asleep.”¹⁸

What we think we have

The documents that have been preserved from the time of the preacher’s seminary at the Zingsthoﬀ or that have emerged from it can be divided into seven groups.

The correspondence already mentioned makes up not an inconsiderable part. Those who work theologically are practiced in reading other people’s mail. These are mostly private letters from the seminarians to their parents and friends. They provide a detailed insight into the community and work in the seminary. Bonhoeﬀer’s correspondence, however, can be divided into private letters¹⁹ and business matters. In addition to letters and postcards to family, there are letters declining preaching invitations, expense accounts for flight tickets and translation work, as well as drafts on how to build up the ecumenical work of the Confessing Church.²⁰

Another extant document is Bonhoeﬀer’s sermon on Psalm 42. The manuscript contains the completely formulated sermon, which Bonhoeﬀer

17 Bethge (2000:491).

18 Seehaber (2016:96).

19 Cf. Bonhoeﬀer’s letters to Ernst Cromwell and his parents, June 8, 1935.

20 DBW 14:41–44.

preached in the Zingst church on June 2, 1935, along with the stanzas sung during the service.²¹

In connection with this, there is a police interrogation protocol from June 6, 1935, in which Bonhoeffer comments on this worship service. His demeanour before the authorities is extremely factual, his choice of words polished and without any thoughtless expression.²²

The next group of extant documents are the extensive lecture manuscripts and notes from the Zingst period from the end of April 1935. Compared to the lecture transcripts from the later Finkenwalde classes, they attest that essential course contents were already been part of the lectures from the start. Furthermore, they show where and to what extent Bonhoeffer made changes and additions.²³

Connected to these manuscripts, but introducing a fifth group of documents, is Bonhoeffer's New Testament lecture, which was published in a revised form in his 1937 book *Discipleship*. Bonhoeffer wrote to the seminarians: "I would have liked to give each of you a copy of my book for Christmas. When it was published, I often dedicated it in spirit to you all. [...] The thought of giving the book to each of you for Christmas unfortunately had to be dropped due to finances. Anyway, you know what is in the book."²⁴

In this respect, Bonhoeffer's book *Life Together* also belongs to the group of extant writings that can be traced to the Zingst period.²⁵ As is well known, he wrote the approximately one-hundred-page manuscript in four weeks in September/October 1938 while he stayed in his emigrated sister's home in Göttingen. The telling title reflects the two-and-a-half years of communal life in the seminary.²⁶

The Bible studies form the sixth group. Of these only Bonhoeffer's Bible study on temptation can be dated with accuracy, namely to the abovementioned

21 DBW 14:851–860. Cf. Vibrans (1995:159).

22 DBW 14:44. Cf. the interrogation by prosecuting attorney Manfred Roeder.

23 DBW 14:22, 307, 478, 1054. Cf. Zimmerling (2006:77ff).

24 *DBWE* 15:15.

25 DBW 5:164.

26 Tietz (2019:80–82).

last vacation at the Zingsthoﬀ, June 20–25, 1938.²⁷ The other documents remain without a precise date, e.g. sermon sketches on Proverbs 3:27,²⁸ a draft on confession in reference to Proverbs 28:13,²⁹ as well as the morning devotionals.³⁰

The seventh and last group are the newsletters. These comprise letters from the seminarians to a larger group of recipients and personal letters from Bonhoeﬀer to the seminarians, but not the letters that were first sent in November 1935 and onwards and can clearly be assigned to the Finkenwalde letters. Some letters that can be mentioned are a letter from the Pomeranian class participants to the brotherhood of Pomeranian auxiliary preachers and vicars, dated August 5, 1935, which contains detailed information about the Zingst period and the continuation in Finkenwalde, and a report from a student, dated July 18, 1938, about the last convention of the seminarians at the Zingsthoﬀ. In the latter, Bonhoeﬀer sends a personal greeting to those who attended. A distinct document in this group is the card from Christoph Harhausen to Gerritdina Stokmann with a Zingst postmark dated June 23, 1938. She was the fiancée of Werner Koch, an imprisoned brother from the second course. The card bears the signature of forty-four other former and current students and assures her of the communion and intercessory prayers of the seminarians. Another special feature in these newsletters, albeit of a more performative nature, is an appeal for donations to the seminary. It is a poem written by the seminarian Winfried Maechler and was sent out from the Zingsthoﬀ in early June:

A preachers' seminary was recently
 established on the isle of Zingst,
 where the Confessing candidates
 now prepare for new action.
 Yet only for a few weeks
 did we have a home on the Baltic beach;

27 DBW 15:371–406; Schlingensiepen (2018:45).

28 DBW 14:867.

29 DBW 14:869.

30 DBW 14:871.

now we intend to move “for good”
to Finkenwalde near Stettin.

An old estate house stands empty there
to be the dwelling for us all.
But it is completely empty, just imagine:
only a few beds and cabinets to be
found in the house’s halls.

Hence it would please us greatly
and is our great desire
to see the furniture there multiply,
and for us to get a bit of help,
for most people know
that in this world our church
sorely lacks money.

If we may suggest just one thing to you,
please become a godparent to our house!
Certainly the best way
is if the district and city undertake
to furnish just one room in a worthy fashion,
and to that end to reimburse us
the appropriate amount of money.
(Of course, do not forget
not to set the sum too low,
then you may count on our gratitude,
which will be visibly demonstrated
in engraving the name of your town
quite nicely on the room
which you so cordially furnished.)

Yet a not-inconsiderable joy for us
would be simple items in good condition
such as tables, chairs, and shelves,
also lamps to work by for us all,
bedcovers, which during retreats
might also give joy to guests;
mattresses, which may serve as couches,

would certainly please us as well.
 In short, we would gratefully accept anything
 we might use in this house,
 and anything, you can imagine, dear friends,
 that might please our old Adam.

Two things in the meantime
 we beg you certainly not to forget:
 Please send these things with freight prepaid,
 as soon as possible and we will be delighted.

And so we hope, dear ones,
 that we have not written you in vain.
 And when everything is tip-top and fine
 you can certainly then be our guests!
 Hence resolve to perform good deeds!
 Greetings from the candidates.³¹

The reaction was not long in coming, as can be seen from the replies and thank-you letters that have been preserved.³² The last document belonging to the seventh category is a personal greeting from Bonhoeffer to the seminarians he had commenced the seminary within April 1935 at the Zingsthof. He writes: “The summer of 1935 was, I believe, the most fulfilling period in my entire life thus far both professionally and personally [...] by living together with all of you I learned more than ever in both respects.”³³

What awaits further research

Possibly it is this retrospective of Bonhoeffer on the first course of the preacher’s seminary that gives an idea of the difference between Zingst and Finkenwalde. The preacher’s seminary at the Zingsthof was not closed. The seminary moved and it was secondary where the work, which had been started at the Zingsthof, would be continued. Nobody disputes the importance of the time in Finkenwalde, which gained special quality not

31 *DBWE* 14:56-57.

32 *DBW* 14:49, 52f.

33 *DBWE* 14:119.

least through the establishment of the *house of brethren*, and with the accompanying regular publication of the *Finkenwalde letters* produced immense sustainability.

There were a couple of factors that resulted in the seminary's considerable stability: the willingness of eight seminarians from the first class (Eberhard Bethge, Wolfgang Dell, Richard Grunow, Joachim Kanitz, Horst Lekszas, Winfried Maechler, Fritz Onasch and Albrecht Schönherr) to build up the brethren house, and Bonhoeffer's presence throughout the five classes, as well as that of Wilhelm Rott (study inspector until the end of the fourth course), Eberhard Bethge, Friedrich Onasch, and Horst Lekszas.³⁴ Concrete preparations for the *house of brethren*, however, were already made at the Zingsthoof. On May 27, 1935, less than five weeks after the start of the seminary in Zingst, Gerhard Vibrans wrote in a letter to his sister that Bonhoeffer planned to establish a *house of brethren*.³⁵ Already in London, Bonhoeffer had mentioned to a friend that he envisioned an institution in which he would take care of the training of vicars together with a number of pastors released for this purpose.³⁶

While it was not possible to perceive the importance of the *Finkenwalde letters* in the beginning, it was Bonhoeffer's effort from the onset to establish, maintain, and expand the seminary's network of contacts. The prime concern of the newsletters was to stay in touch with former seminarians which of course could only begin after the first course. In addition to current information and prayers, they contained the upcoming meditation texts. This invited the brethren, each in his own place, to maintain the praxis of meditating on the Word daily as they had learned and thus to feel connected to the other ones. Thanks to the diligent work of Albrecht Schönherr (until the sixth newsletter, March 15, 1936) and Eberhard Bethge, who were both graduates from the first class, the newsletter did not only appear regularly, but a circle wider than the former seminarians read and enjoyed it as serious writings.³⁷

34 DBW 14:1050f.

35 DBW 14:12. Cf. Vibrans (1995:154).

36 Schlingensiepen (2017:192); Nauerth (2018).

37 DBW 14:97n1; DBW Ergänzungsband Finkenwalder Rundbriefe.

It cannot be the goal to devalue the Finkenwalde period nor to overvalue the Zingst period. However, the fact remains that the beginning and the end at the Zingst – both in 1935 and 1938 – were formative for the yield of the seminary of the Confessing Church, the development of the seminarians, and not least for Bonhoeffer himself, and that this fact has so far rather been omitted than adequately treated – a desideratum that needs to be addressed.

Finally, once more, the postcard mentioned in the beginning, which Bonhoeffer wrote on June 29, 1938, looking back at the last meeting of the seminarians at the Zingst. They had gathered together like every previous year, without knowing that for many of them this would be their last meeting. Bonhoeffer had chosen the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer as the Bible study for these days.³⁸ To his parents he wrote: "My dear [...] The days in Zingst, where I was together with all the former Finkenwalde brethren, were undisturbed and lovely. Now we are spending a few days vacation here before the work goes on."³⁹

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38 DBW 15:369.

39 DBWE 15:44.

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