

PREFACE



A great deal that is worth thinking about has been written about truth and fiction in biographies, and in autobiographies especially. Who knows anyone else? And who can know himself? But I shall dispense with these reflections and in this preface shall only say why I have written this story of my life.

To put it simply: I enjoy telling, and I want to thank—which is why I am thinking back.

The fearful question ‘Who am I really?’ has never tormented me since I was young. It is a lonely question. That question has left me since I experienced the love of a beloved person: ‘*Wie sie sich mir zugewendet, / bin ich mir ein werttes Ich,*’ wrote Goethe in his *Westöstlichen Diwan*—‘In that she turned to me, I became for myself a valued I.’ And so I have found it down to the present day.

For the most part I have been able to answer with gratitude the question about divine guidance in my own life, even though so much was at the time incomprehensible and remained obscure. But what I have been sure of ever since my early experiences of death in the firestorm in Hamburg in 1943 was, and still is, the need to find an answer to the question, Why am I alive, and not dead like the others? Everything I have begun in my life was an attempt to answer this question.

What finally impelled me to write this autobiography was not the wish to draw up a balance sheet of my life—what was positive, what negative; what were the gains and the losses. No one is bound to be his own judge, even if his own accuser is still his own defender. That we can confidently

leave to the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who awaits us with love. But as I wrote, I went through my life with increasing gratitude. After those early experiences of death, life has for me always been a wonderful alternative, and every morning a surprise to be welcomed.

But I have not only lived myself; I have also been given life, and 'by goodly powers wondrously safeguarded', as Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his poem. The people to whom I owe my life are unforgotten. They are present to me, because in their love I became free and can breathe in wide spaces. Unforgotten for me are people to whom I am bound in affection and respect. They have entered into my life, and I perhaps a little into theirs. Unforgotten for me are the dead whom I miss. They are always especially present to me. Nothing that has been, is no more; everything that has happened remains. We cannot make anything undone, not the ill, but not the good either. What was lovely and successful, and the happiness we have experienced, no one can take from us, neither transitory time nor death.

I have written this story of my life for all those to whom I am bound in life's closer circles and its less close ones: for Elisabeth, with whom I have shared life for 54 years, for our children and grandchildren, for those who have accompanied me on the path I have travelled, those who have shared its pains and have been my neighbours in my joys in theology and church, in the faculties here and in seminaries and universities all over the world, for the students who listened to me assentingly or with a frown, who read my books or had to read them, for my more than 200 doctoral candidates who were supposed to solve the riddles in my theology and explain its obscurities, and not least for the unknown readers who take up this book. But in the end I have to admit that in writing I simply had delight in the telling, and pleasure in the writing.